A TALE OF THE 885th BOMBARDMENT SQUADRON

Ralph Cavaliere

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SUMMARY

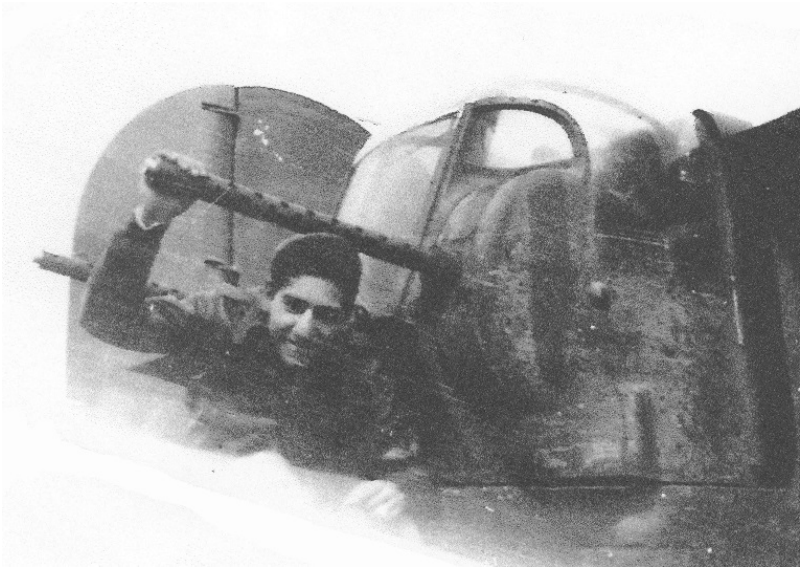
Ralph (Raffaele) Cavaliere was born in Italy in 1925. When he was only three-years-old he departed from Naples with his mother, to reach the United States.

When he was 18, he served in the USAAF during World War II. He was a Sergeant and B-24 tail-gunner at first with the 464th Bombardment Group and then with the 885th Bombardment Squadron (Special), 15th Air Force.

He lives in Massapequa, New York.

November 1944: The Beginnings

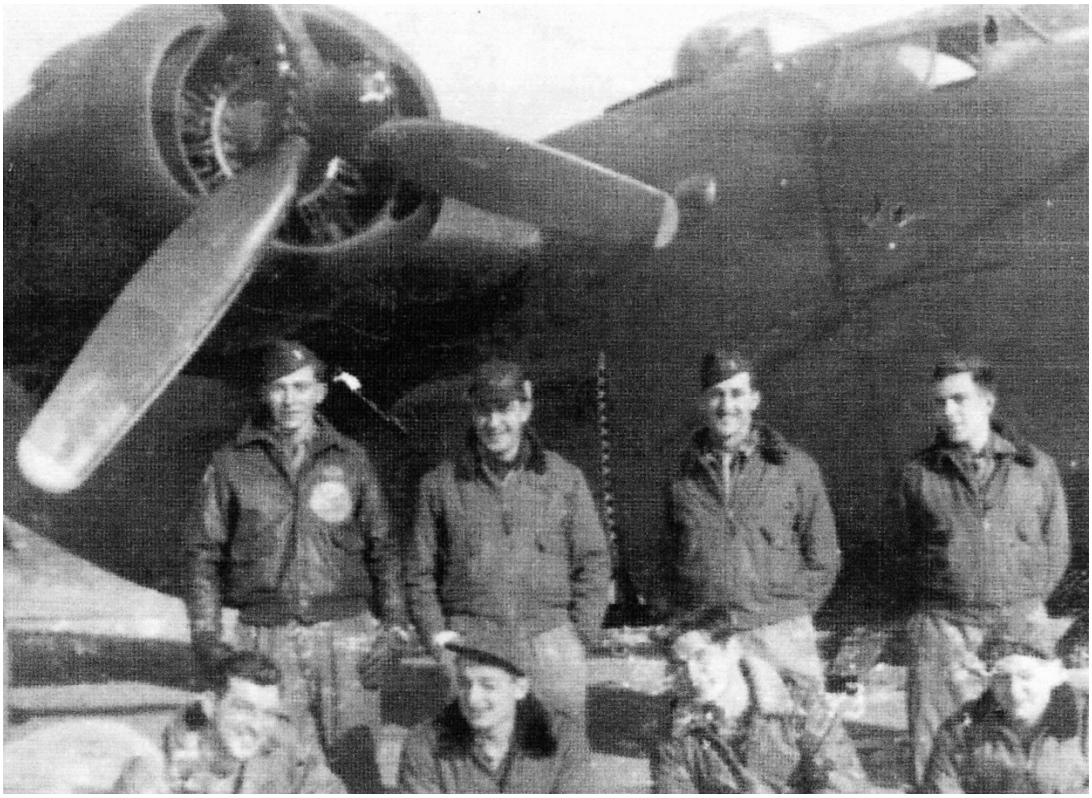
I was home! When we landed at Gioia del Colle, Italy in late October of 1944, I made sure I was the first one out of our plane and then I sprawled myself on the ground, kissing the grass and the dirt, and saying "I'm home... I'm home!" My crew just let me be and waited until I got up and then they just patted me on the back and smiled. It was a homecoming for me and I wanted to see my family again... what was left of them. On the night before I left for overseas, I was given a teething ring as a lucky charm from a friend of my family… I never did know why? It started to work its magic when I landed in the Country of my birth.



Sgt. Ralph Cavaliere with his B-24 tail turret.

On a trip to Cerignola, I went there expressly to buy a guitar and a mandolin, both of which I had played at home along with my violin. On a day in late November, in the town square, I saw what we call in America a "flea market" where stalls, carts, wagons, formed a horseshoe curve with the cathedral as the focal point overlooking the square. At the far end, and at the center of the curve of this horseshoe, was a large cart with musical instruments for sale. I approached the seller and tried to haggle with the price for both instruments, but he was adamant. This was his price, take it or leave it and he offered me to play the instruments for proof of their value: 2,000 lire (20 dollars), for the mandolin and 3,000 lire (30 dollars), for the guitar. I took him up on it and we played the afternoon away to the pleasure of the crowd which

assembled there to hear us. We played American “cowboy songs” as they were called at the time, moving on to Italian melodies and patriotic Italian music and even playing Italian waltzes and polkas. Here the crowd joined in, dancing along with our playing. Me, on the mandolin and the seller, on guitar. After a while, we exchanged instruments and continued our playing for a while longer. Finally, it came time for me to decide on whether to buy at his price or go back to my base empty-handed. I had to agree with him, they were worth the money and so I shelled out the 50 dollars he had asked for. Mention must be made here; the people who had gathered to hear us play never flinched nor walked away when we played music that was not “politically correct”, to use today’s jargon. When I returned to camp and told of my day at Cerignola Lt. Loser, my pilot, sent me back to get him a mandolin, also. Now he too, had his mandolin, which he played most proficiently, I must add.



Brindisi, Italy, December 1944. Picture of the Lt. Loser’s first crew, taken at their B-24 Liberator’s hardstand.
Top row, left to right: 2nd Lt. Jim (Harvey) L’Hommedieu, bombardier; 2nd Lt. Thomas Bonna, navigator;
2nd Lt. Paul Le Sieur, co-pilot; 2nd Lt. Henry Loser, pilot. Bottom row, left to right: Sgt. Benjamin Montgomery, waist gunner;
S/Sgt. Clarence Block, waist gunner; Sgt. Andrew Babich, radio operator;
S/Sgt. Leonard Schiller, engineer. The waist gunners had also the role of dispatchers.
Sgt. Ralph Cavaliere, tail gunner is missing, as he was away on a pass visiting his family in Calabria.

December 1944: Christmas in Italy

General Orders were issued to us and we transferred out of Pantanella Air Base, from the 464th Bomb Group, on December 10th, 1944 to continue our "adventures" with our new Squadron, the 885th, part of the OSS (Office of Strategic Services), and based at the outskirts of Brindisi. We were ordered to report to the Commanding Officer and be introduced to him upon arrival. We left sometime in the afternoon in two command cars, which were needed to transport nine men and their luggage. The tail-gunner himself needed plenty of room, with his B-4 bag, plus two duffle bags to carry his two musical instruments; the guitar and mandolin, a baseball bat and glove, a shoe box with a radio (which he built) in it, and didn't work, a hoard of cigarettes, a box camera, Hershey Bars and Wrigley's chewing gum, sheet music and, among his clothing, two bottles of wine inside his uniforms, which protected his stash, but not the nose-gunner, Sgt. Jim Malcolm. He was not among us. His duties were to be taken over by the bombardier, Lt. Harvey (Jim) L'Hommedieu.

The ride took about six hours and we didn't arrive at the Commander's villa until dark. He had requisitioned it for his headquarters and it was right by the roadside leading to the base camp. We left our belongings in the vehicles and filed into a very large dining room, filled with heavy chairs all around an ornate table, large enough for a castle banquet hall… with the Commanding Officer at the head. There was no protocol here; there was no saluting and he simply said, "Gentlemen, please sit down". He introduced himself, "I'm Colonel Monro MacCloskey, a West Point man myself". Those were his exact words! No fanfare. "We fight a different kind of war here. We don't drop bombs". And then, he went on to say what the 885th was all about. He mentioned agents. In the vernacular of the Squadron, "Joes and Janes". Even Italian women were involved and American GIs. It was a brief lecture, and very informal. He then asked about us. He wanted to know about our educational background, our hobbies, our likes and dislikes, our background and marital status.

When it came to the tail-gunner's turn to speak, he made sure he told the Colonel he was born in Italy, not far from the base (a hint of sorts). He was a High School Graduate, enjoyed baseball, was into classical music and also the Big Bands. He was raised in an Italian home speaking mostly in Italian. He lived in Astoria, Queens, New York City. And he mentioned he always wanted to fly. I can't remember what his other crewmen answered except, from whence they came.

We had 2nd Lt. Henry Loser, pilot, from Haverton, Pennsylvania; 2nd Lt. Paul LeSieur, co-pilot, from Saco, Maine; 2nd Lt. Thomas Bonna, navigator, from Brooklyn; 2nd Lt. Jim (Harvey) L'Hommedieu, bombardier, from Great Neck, Long Island; S/Sgt. Leonard Schiller, flight engineer and top-turret gunner, from Chicago; Sgt. Andrew Babich, radio operator and gunner, from Boundbrook, New Jersey; S/Sgt. Clarence Block, waist gunner, armorer-gunner and dispatcher from Windom, Minnesota; Sgt. Benjamin Montgomery, waist gunner, dispatcher and assistant radio operator from Fayette, Mississippi; and the tail gunner and

assistant armorer-gunner, Sgt. Ralph Cavaliere (*Gabe*, to his crew). Our nose-gunner, Sgt. Jim Malcolm, from Michigan, was left behind since the bombardier would fill in, until he was needed to visually guide the plane over the target area and drop the payload at that time. The Colonel then closed the interview with: "Welcome, gentlemen, to the 885th Squadron". Again, no saluting! But I was looking for a parting glass of wine. It didn't happen.

Colonel Monro MacCloskey, Commanding Officer of the 885th BS, at his desk in Castiglioncello, Italy. May 1945.

He was self-effacing but had the demeanor of a firm and considerate leader. We all loved and respected him. He rose to Brigadier General and wrote many books on military subjects. He was part of the Joint Chiefs of Staff after the war when the Air Corps became a full-fledged Cabinet Office under its own Four Star General. It was no longer the Army Air Forces, but, the United States Air Force. The OSS changed its nomenclature and became the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), about the same time or a little earlier.

After we filed out (it might have been close to midnight), we went to our vehicles to pick up our personal effects and were assigned to a tent, not far from the Colonel's quarters. The tent was a few hundred yards to the air strip, which bordered the grounds of a mediaeval church a hundred feet beyond the chain link fence, separating a hard stand for one of our B-24s. It was *Smokey*, aka *Queenie*! We weren't to fly until after New Year's because of continuing bad weather throughout the month of December. It was at this time when Lt. Loser, Captain Stone and the Colonel set up the tail-gunner for his reunion with his family on the Christmas week-end. Thanks to those three Officers, he was given two passes totaling five days, a five-day pass was verboten, but by breaking it up in two, they circumvented the rules a bit.

Brindisi, 1944. Left: Sgt. Ralph Cavaliere on his guitar and Sgt. Andrew Babich at the entrance of their tent. They inherited the wooden door. In the tail gunner's memories, no other tent had a similar one. Right: Sgt. Andrew Babich in front of Italian built barracks.

On my way to my home town of Mendicino, in the province of Cosenza, I met an Italian ex-soldier who was on his way home from the wars. Sorry to say, I have forgotten his name, but we met at the Brindisi railroad station in one of the compartments with other Italians going home for the holidays. It was about 4 a.m. on December 23rd and the train was slow getting started. The soldier and I were the only two who had bought train tickets. As the train finally started to roll...the passengers in the compartment, one by one, including the soldier, began singing Neapolitan songs, starting with "*Torna a Surriento"*. They continued singing well into the morning until we reached Taranto. The waiting train was overcrowded. My soldier friend stayed with me as the other "singing passengers" went their separate ways. Finally, we were on our way once again. We had to get off just past Metaponto where the railroad tracks were destroyed. We walked seven miles, crossing four streams to get to the other tracks where another train was waiting for us. We continued on to Sibari, stopping there at night for a short while. At this point my friend, with his *borraccia*, said for me to stay put while he went inside the railroad station to buy and fill his canteen with wine, which he shared with me when he came back. It was a beautiful gesture on his part. Arriving at Cosenza, we went to a *pensione* near the station, which cost us 25 cents each. He told me that at around 6 a.m. a rooster would wake us up. Sure enough, there was that rooster "singing his morning song" and flitting about but my friend, the Italian soldier, had already left.

As I was looking for a *cocchiere* (coachman) to take me to Cerisano, a friend of my parents approached me and asked in the Calabrese dialect, if I was "*Raffaele, 'u figlio de Carolina 'e Marco*", that is "Raffaele, the son of Carolina De Marco" (in southern Italy, the wives kept their maiden names). How he recognized me, I'll never know. He just said he'd know me anywhere, even though he saw me for the last time 16 years earlier when I had left for America as a three-year-old. His name was Battista and was carrying a dead *tacchino* (turkey) in his hands. I was taken to see my maternal aunt Carolina with my cousin, Nicola, of the American 5th Army, visiting his parents for Christmas, also. That Christmas Eve in Cerisano, was a night to remember. Out came the violin and guitar and my cousin Nicola and I played up a storm. It seemed every home had a musical instrument or two. I went to visit the Cavaliere side of my family in Rovito on the other side of Cosenza, on Monday, the 26th with my paternal grandmother and my uncle and family. It seemed like old times to me... and the war was so far away… There seemed to be plenty of food wherever I went. Even in Mendicino. Here, I saw the house in which I was born.

In the meantime, friendships were formed with other crews and two Italian boys, the older one, named Salvatore, the other, his name now forgotten, were from the countryside. With the tail-gunner's machete from the survival kit, they chopped down a small pine tree which they helped decorate with packs of cigarettes, nut shells, sprigs, Hershey Bars and even the Wrigley's that came south with the crew. We had tinsel for the finishing touches (no lights). These were used on bombing missions to break up the radar on the ground which would home in at the bombers' altitude, speed and direction. It was coated with aluminum on one side of the strip and on the other side, cardboard backing. The Italian boys never saw a tree decorated like this… It was their first look at a Christmas Tree. The Italian gift-giving Christmas was January 6th, the feast of the Epiphany, when the Good Witch, *la Befana*, did her Santa Claus thing.

When New Year's came, the men began shooting their Colt .45s in the air to usher in 1945. It was noisy, but, a safe display of hope and happiness among all of us. It sounded more like a 4th of July celebration. In the third week of December, the 859th Squadron (all B-24s, nicknamed, *the Carpetbaggers*, from England) joined the fleet of our Squadron aircraft and we became, however temporarily, the 15th Special Group, with Colonel Monro MacCloskey still in Command, and the RAF working along-side with their OSS equivalent, SOE (Special Operations Executive).

January 1945: The First OSS Missions

The month of January started out full of promise on the war, but the weather was still bad for flying out of Brindisi and beyond. The American troops under Patton had raised the siege at Bastogne and the 8th Air Force, along with other components, started flying in support of the armies when the skies opened up to show their true color… Blue! Meanwhile, the 885th Squadron, even with bad weather (plenty of rain, high winds, but no snow), were flying sorties, but Lt. Loser and his crew had only two missions for the entire month.

Our camp was very close to the airstrip and also to the taxi stand for our *"Smokey"*, and when we weren't flying and neither was our aircraft, we took turns standing guard duty over her, but almost after every mission, she was laid up for repairs. There were other times when she was "borrowed" by other crews and we just prayed, in our own way, she would get back home safely… *Smokey* had 63 missions to her credit while flying with the 34th Bomb. Group for the 8th AF out of England, and it showed. She was assigned to us when we got to Brindisi on December 10th and few 31 more sorties. She had arrived a few days earlier, on December 3rd.

Brindisi, Italy. B-24H 42-94919 Q "Smokey". The nickname can clearly be distinguished on the nose.

Our aircraft call letters were painted yellow. The only distinguishing mark. These were secret air missions and there were no group markings of any kind except for the serial number of our airplanes, which obviously, were to identify the aircraft if and when they were needed.

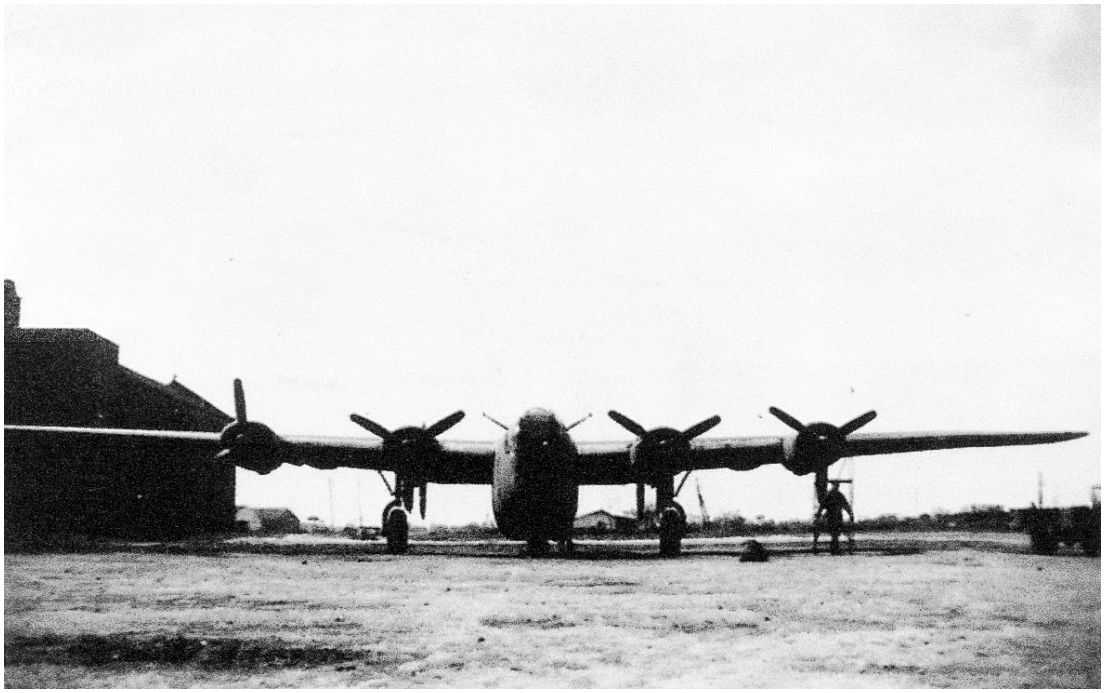
The first mission was on January 19th, minus the tail-gunner, for which he has no explanation. He has never recalled it until he saw both the waist-gunner's log and his co-pilot, Lt. LeSieur's. According to Lt. LeSieur's log, it was a five-hour day mission to Yugoslavia and all went well. From time to time, there were many partisan groups fighting with each other for supplies and equipment as long as there were no enemy activities within sight, especially among the Italian and Yugoslav partisans. He will never know why he was not on that flight, nor who his replacement was, if any. It's not possible he forgot to mark it down; he is officially credited with the same number of missions as listed in his log.

Sgt. Ralph Cavaliere standing in front of his B-24 tail turret.

We were always on call, day or night. Most of our missions were at night to make it easier for the partisans to operate. At camp, the enlisted men were alerted about our missions informally, either by bulletin board and always, by one of our officers coming by to tell us. As a rule, it was early in the afternoon for night flights and the night before, for day sorties.

Next flight was on January 29th, a night sortie to the Piedmont region in Northwestern Italy. It was a successful mission, clear all the way (for a change), and there was no enemy gunfire in the air or on the ground. It finally was the first mission for the tail-gunner. There was an emergency landing at Naples due to weather, and the aircraft took off the following night. They would be heading back to their home base at Brindisi. Meanwhile, other crews were active during the month, although many sorties were aborted because of inclement weather.

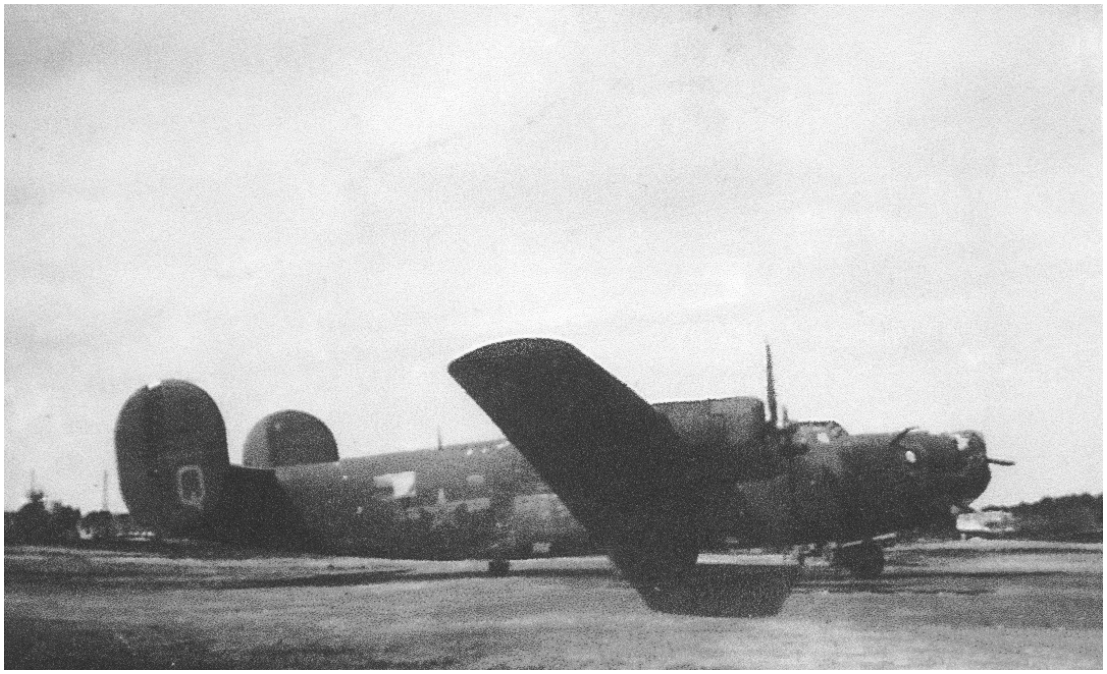
I'm sure the reason why Lt. Loser and his crew were not flying more often is that the officers were being briefed at this new kind of warfare and with the bad weather settling in, it was a good time to lecture them on the importance on navigation in the valleys of the mountain ranges and the exceptional skills needed from both the pilot and co-pilot. There was also the matter of learning coded communications with the partisans below. There was to be no air to ground and ground to air communications. Radio silence was to be maintained at all times! The OSS left nothing to chance and before the crews were ready for this type of combat, Intelligence and Operations had to instill this kind of discipline. And with the beginning of February, things got a little busier. Lt. Loser and his crew were ready and able, and willing. It was around this time when Lt. Loser and his crew got their own aircraft: the B-24H 42-94919, "Q", *Smokey*, lovingly called *Queenie*. She "answered" to other nicknames, but unfortunately they are not appropriate for this narrative, even if affectionately. On the ground, the aircrews kept themselves busy with letters, making friends and going into town.



B-24H 42-94919 Q "Smokey" pictured in Brindisi, Italy, near the "Santa Maria del Casale" church.

As for our tail-gunner, his pleasures were the sights, window shopping, hanging out in a photography shop in Brindisi and going to church. No… not to pray, but to admire the architecture, the sculptures, the frescoes and find the history of the church. It was called *Santa Maria del Casale* (St. Mary of the Hamlet), a mediaeval edifice built over an older antique church from the Dark Ages. This church was across from the taxi stand of *Smokey* (*Queenie*), at the air base and a few hundred yards from the camp. It was the last stop for the Crusaders and the Knights Templars of olden days on their way to Jerusalem. He took a picture of *Queenie*, with the side of the Church as a backdrop and it's still framed at his home today.

The living quarters for officers and men were separated and mess was at different times, using the same mess hall. As far as can be recalled, there was no church as such. I seem to remember a tabernacle with a Cross and a Chaplain celebrating Mass and Communion in the open air; rain or shine. Each Faith was represented by a Chaplain. Only the officers were at briefings, we were told about the mission as we walked to our aircraft. The important job was to be done by the officers. We knew ours and that was all that was needed. Our life and safety were strictly in the hands of the pilots, co-pilots and navigators. Let's never forget the ground crews! We swore by all of them! I also noticed by Lt. LeSieur's log that he flew the B-24 as pilot many a time during combat missions. The Lieutenant's log was meticulously kept. He was very thorough, as was our pilot, Lt. Loser! God Bless them. Maybe they're comparing notes up in that Blue of Heaven.



B-24H 42-94919 "Smokey" pictured in Brindisi, Italy at her hard stand. Note the "Q" letter on the tail.

Mention must be made about our flying "habits". We flew mostly at about 10,000 feet and even less when the targets (drop zones) were close by. Except for four day missions, all the others were flown at all hours of the night. Even though oxygen masks were not needed at that altitude, we still wore them. Pure oxygen gave us better vision at night, which was obviously, necessary, but it saved the life of our waist-gunner, Montgomery. Toward the end of April, unknown to him or anyone else, he developed walking pneumonia. He became too weak to walk and was sent to the American hospital in Leghorn and there he was told he was lucky to have had use of the oxygen supply in the aircraft, otherwise, they felt his lungs would have collapsed. We were not allowed to visit him. The city was off-limits and was declared a red light district.

Another paragraph should be devoted to "protocol", as applied particularly to our Squadron. We were like family; all our crews. Our officers were gentlemen, considerate and honest and they treated us with respect as we did them. There was no saluting unless it was official business and we spoke to them conversationally... very informally. Rank was all that was necessary in addressing them. *Sir* was occasionally used... I mention this because it may be quite surprising to some. There was segregation of sorts. Their living quarters, (also tents), were in a different part of camp and their mess was at different hours from us. But all these little "annoyances" were not enforced and were thrown out the window, along with protocol. The officers visited us, asked about us and our families and shared stories and food with us... but one crew went even further. The enlisted men and their officers often played cards together at this tent next to ours. And as they played, rank was not in their vocabulary. The officers and the enlisted men spoke to each other, using only their names. This was one of the reasons why morale was so high in our Squadron. *We can't speak for any other outfit, but I would not be at all surprised if this were common in other units.*

Brindisi, Italy, 1944. Left: Sgt. Clarence Block, ball-turret gunner, pictured under the wing of "Smokey". Right: Sgt. Leonard Schiller, engineer, overseeing the gas-up.

And in the air, we had discipline. We were taught well and we performed even better. There are not enough words of gratitude for the ground crews, who serviced and took loving care of our aircraft. Our *Smokey* was a difficult plane to fly, as were all other B-24s, but especially this aircraft. She had a very slow rate of climb, much worse than the other B-24s and the mountains were always a danger, more so when flying at near stalling speeds in the valleys below. A co-pilot on these fickle aircraft would fly as pilot on any B-17. *Smokey* had arrived at Brindisi on December 3rd, 1944 from the 8th Air Force's 34th Bombardment Group, 7th

Squadron, flying a total of 63 missions out of England, and it showed. She was "scarred all over", her patched up fuselage told the tale and, she still flew. Her four engines smoked more than usual, hence her name, but she was a brave and gallant Lady whom we lovingly called, *Queenie*. Yellow "Q" was her Radio Call Letter.

Our own *Smokey* flew another 31 missions with the 885th, but was on loan to many crews when we were not scheduled to fly. We'd like to give the readers a list of the pilots who flew all of her 31 missions while at Brindisi:

Cpt.	*John Boyd*	*1 mission*
1st Lt.	*John Butts*	*3*
1st Lt.	*Lester Clark*	*6*
1st Lt.	*Wallace Coburn*	*1*
1st Lt.	*Jesse Haug*	*2*
1st Lt.	*Neal Hebinger*	*1*
1st Lt.	*Henry Loser*	*8*
1st Lt.	*Frank Matulonis*	*1*
1st Lt.	*Walter Porter*	*4*
2nd Lt.	*Frederick Schwarze*	*2*
1st Lt.	*William Simons*	*2*

I wrote a poem, of sorts, for her a few years ago at the suggestion of our historian and tower radio-operator, John Kenneth Mattison. He guided her home every time she flew, as he did all the others, but he claimed no one had ever written an "Ode" about the B-24s and it was high time someone did. I took him up on it:

ODE TO THE REGAL B-24

Her bombs catapulted
A maelstrom of destruction.
Her turrets... a torrent of fire...
A formidable armor in majestic flight!
She drew the enemy's ire,
Ennobling her crew with her might.
She was the B-24,
The Spirit and the Pride
Of the Army Air Corps!

Her engines sang
As Angels on high.
Her elegant silhouette... framed against the sky.
We dare say a Courier of Peace!
A beacon in the darkness...
As she guided the Unknowns,
Oe'r plains, in valleys, above mountain peaks.
She was the B-24,
The Spirit and the Pride
Of the Army Air Corps!

These were her missions, then;
Flying Freedom's call.
A journey with Fire and Lofty Ideals...
With her faithful Crew - and,
Her faceless, nameless Heroes whom,
We knew only as the OSS.
She was the B-24,
The Spirit and the Pride
Of the Army Air Corps!

February 1945: Uncle Vincenzo

February arrived and with it, many missions and many laughs. Except in one instance, Lt. Loser's crew flew intact on the twelve sorties to which they were assigned over Italy and Yugoslavia. Lt. LeSieur flew as pilot on another crew, February 1st to Northern Italy. We had seven successful drops and five were unsuccessful where weather was a factor. Drops were made in the Alps, Northern Yugoslavia and in the Po Valley. On one sortie, we were flying low enough to catch a bit of fighting at the front lines. It lit up the sky as we went over. Tracer bullets would do that. And there was one to Udine (the tail-gunner felt better on this one, Udine wasn't bombed. It was, when he had flown a bombing mission to the city's airport with the 464th BG), on November 18th. Our OSS mission was successful and still another, a daytime flight to Northern Yugoslavia, which was a bust.

Our Group, the 2641st, formerly the 15th Special Group, received a "Presidential Unit Citation", for the February 17th/18th sorties, when the combined 859th and 885th Squadrons sent up 26 airplanes into the mountains and delivered a punishing blow to the German Army with all types of armament and equipment to the Italian partisans waiting in the valleys below. All 26 aircraft were flying low enough to receive gunfire from the Germans but, luckily, they were not close enough to the drop zones to intercept any of the equipment and supplies. All our aircraft returned safely. The mountain terrain was difficult and dangerous for both sides to negotiate, but it would have been more of a problem for the Germans since they would have been a target for an ambush. All they could do was harmlessly fire away.

The weather and the mountains were the chief concerns of the OSS. At night, the navigators guided the planes by dead reckoning. There were no landmarks to be seen and all lights were out in the cities and countryside. When the moon shone brightly, it was fine to locate the targets, but it was a double-edged sword. The Germans below would have a good shot at us with their AA batteries (… no pun intended). The pilots guided the planes (with their guts, mental alertness and their dexterity) away from mountainsides and peaks, flying low enough, dangerously, at almost stalling speed, for a successful drop, while the bombardiers took over the flights over the targets, with only their eyes, with unerring accuracy, guiding the drops. The pilot had only a few seconds to make that pass and the bombardier had to make those seconds count. We flew as low as 900 feet to keep the supplies from scattering all over the valley. It was a little easier in the Po Valley, but also easier for the enemy to attack the partisans. The tail-gunner's log shows seven of those sorties were flown with under-cast skies, with five of them being unsuccessful (no agents were flown on these twelve missions).

SORTIE REPORT

FIFTEENTH SPECIAL GROUP (PROVISIONAL)
885TH BOMBARDMENT SQUADRON (H)

Completed.

From: O.S.S. Operation No. 757 Date: 17/18 February 1945.

Type Of Aircraft:	B-24
Aircraft No.	683
Aircraft Letter:	Y
Time Up.	16:23
Time Down.	01:52
Total Time.	9:29
Load: Loganberry	16 Cont. 4054 8 Pack. 960 Net 5014 Gross 6494
200 Lbs. Leaflets	

P	Loser, Henry L.	2nd. Lt.
CP	LeSieur, Paul E.	2nd.Lt.
N	Bonna, Thomas J.	2nd. Lt.
B	L' Hommedieu, Harvey J.	2nd. Lt.
E	Schiller, Leonard W.	S/Sgt.
R	Babich, Andrew	Sgt.
WG	Block, Clarence A.	S/Sgt.
WG	Montgomery, Benjamin	Sgt.
TG	Cavaliers, Ralph	Sgt.
D		

Airdrome: Brindisi

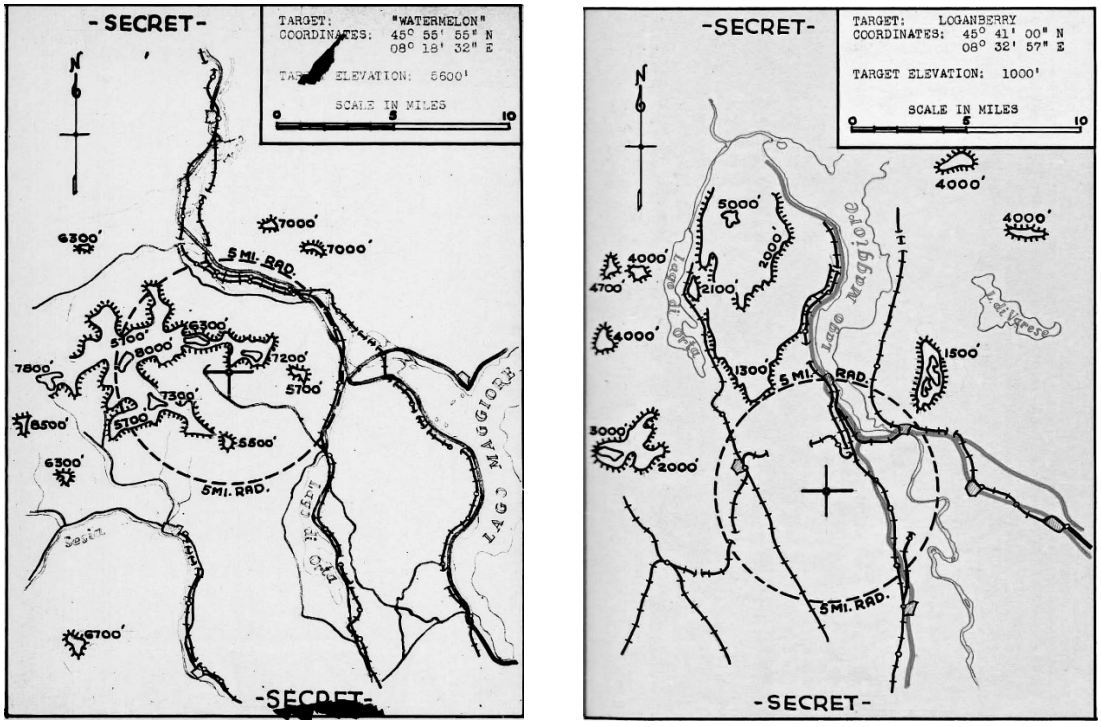
Target:	Watermelon	Loganberry
	45 55 55 N 08 18 32 E	45 41 00 N 08 32 57 E.

Time	Height	Place	
1950	11,000	44 05N, 08 15E.	Crossed Coast.
2017	11,000	Chivasso	Dropped Leaflets
2041	7,500	Watermelon	Improper reception; target would not give ground signal. Proceeded to alternate.
2115	7,500	Loganberry	Recognized target ("T" of 6 fires, flashing "L" located at Blueberry target site).
2145	3,100 (1000)	Loganberry	First drop. 16 Containers, 4 Packages IAS 130, Heading 090°.
2152	3,200 (1100)	Loganberry	Second drop. 4 Packages. IAS 135. Heading 090°. (Large flash of flame seen for an instant on this run on the target.
2241	12,000	44 04 N, 08 13 E	Crossed Coast.

Original log of the February 17, 1945 mission of Lt. Loser's crew. Together with 25 more crews from the 859th BS and 885th BS, they gained a Presidential Unit Citation. Note that the surname of Sgt. Cavaliere is misprinted.

When there is cloud cover, the pilots would circle the drop zones looking for an opening that might present itself, but circling for any length of time would give the enemy a chance to

determine where the drop is going to be and that would be the end of the partisans in that particular area. On one of these missions, Lt. Loser had to land at Foggia after an unsuccessful sortie to Northwestern Italy, near the Swiss border. The weather was closed in at both ends; which is a chronic problem, especially in mountain areas. We were in the air ten hours and were still about another hour from Brindisi, but due to weather conditions and low fuel, Lt. Loser decided on playing it safe.



Original secret maps of the targets of the February 17, 1945 mission of Lt. Loser's crew. The targets were the drop zones codenamed "Watermelon" and "Loganberry", both in the surroundings of the Lago Maggiore, Northern Italy.

In the meantime, all crews were flying full time in February, the highlight being that February 17th/18th mission; with March an even busier month. With the addition of the 859th Squadron in late December, we were flying under the command of the 15th Special Group at this time.

Just to give an idea on the air operations of the 885th, we can rely on the logs of some of the crewmen, as a guide to the Squadron's activities in the early winter months of 1945. During February, Lt. Loser's crew kept pace with the rest of the Squadron's ability to fly in dangerous weather conditions, mostly in the Italian Alps and in the Po Valley. Lt. Loser's men flew a total of twelve sorties to their targets in Yugoslavia, Northern Italy, Po Valley and the Piedmont Region for a total of 90 hours. The three logs show day missions to Northern Yugoslavia on February, 4th (unsuccessful) and Liguria, on February, 28th (successful), with no *flak* to speak of (*flak* stands for *FlugabwehrKanone*, the German anti-aircraft, or AA, artillery). The others were night missions over Northwestern Italy and the Piedmont Region, with eight sorties, of which five were successful and three drops failed because of either bad weather or

no receptions at the appointed drop zones. There was also a mission to Verona, February, 26th (unsuccessful), and another to Udine on February 6th (successful).

Most of the night flights were made with an under-cast, meaning, the targets were not visible and the navigator had to rely on his instruments to find the drop zones. Once they were found, it was up to the pilot and co-pilot to guide the aircraft down to about 900 feet through the cloud cover to make their drop, but only after the bombardier was sure the area was in partisan control. Lights from bonfires arranged in code would be the key to a successful drop, but there were times when the enemy would "drop in" on the partisans and we had to call it a day… or night.

In fact, Flight Officers, even behind a desk, flew their share of missions. Our Commanding Officer Colonel Monro MacCloskey flew over 50 in his B-17, *The Colonel's Lady* and Captain Robert Stone, our Chief Operations Officer, I believe also flew over 50 missions in the B-24.

The officers of the Loser's crew in full uniform. From left to right: Lt. Jim (Harvey) L'Hommedieu, bombardier; Lt. Henry L. Loser, pilot; Lt. Thomas Bonna, navigator; Lt. Paul Le Sieur, co-pilot. Great men. Great Officers.

We have to appreciate the job the pilot and co-pilot did on those passes in the mountain valleys. They had to use full flaps to reduce the speed to almost stall the aircraft, while avoiding the mountains on all sides of the valley. The plane would shudder and shake as if it were ready to fall apart until after the drop. As the pilot would increase speed, the B-24 would stabilize and climb out of danger, still needing flaps for airlift. But there were almost always, at least

two passes for all the equipment and supplies to be parachuted down. With agents, it was usually three or more passes. It was the coordinated efforts of all the officers to make these missions successful. Let's also take note of the bombardier's skills in making those drops. He had to be sure the drop zone was secured and, then, "guide" the B-24 unerringly to its target with only his eyes. In effect, he took control of the aircraft on its descent, timing the drop with such exactness, that a split-second difference could mean the failure of the mission. When the passes were completed, the plane would roar out of there making sure the mountains were tucked safely out of the way. The B-24 lived up to her task. And the officers lived up to theirs. Low-lying clouds, or fog, when present, was a danger, but we overcame it, thanks to our flying personnel. And, by the Good Lord above… And my teething ring.

Most of the nights, we encountered *flak*, but it was light and not accurate. There was none during the day, at least not on these flights. The night skies were owned by the RAF and our own 12th and 15th Air Forces. Some of the flights were low enough to be fired upon over front line activities and searchlights were everywhere when we were within the vicinity of cities or German military installations but the 885th carried on as did the 859th. During this month, we carried no agents, but other crews did. Our turn came next month when we were quite busy with this phase of operations. We were still flying out of Brindisi, but on our off days or nights, our tail-gunner made things interesting for himself and others.

Getting away from the missions for a while, the tail-gunner's uncle, Vincenzo Cavaliere, whom he saw during his Christmas leave, came to camp at Brindisi to visit him around the end of January and stayed about a month. The sentry at the entrance came by the tent that morning and said, in a matter-of-fact way: "Cav… your uncle wants to see you". And so he did. The base was never the same after this. At one point, both uncle and nephew were seen talking to some Italian laborers in an animated fashion, by a couple of crewmen, when one of them was overheard saying: "I think he's a spy". And the other countered with: "Yeah, but which side is he on?". We have to remember that *Cav's* uncle fought in Libya with the Italian army against the Brits… By the bye, "Cav" also answered to "Gabe". I had other visitors at my tent, including two cousins, who stayed for ten days, and other Italians I had befriended.

When his uncle came to visit, he brought a wooden valise with him, which he had carried since his Army days in Libya and Ethiopia during the 1930s. After Italy's surrender, the Italian army was in chaos. No leadership, even the King had left Rome just before the 5th Army entered the city in June of 1944. And so, the uncle, out of his uniform, came to camp with this valise filled with Italian goodies. Hot *soppressata*, all kinds of cheese, dried figs, black pudding and the ubiquitous bottles of wine. The officers never had a chance to taste these Italian delicacies; the food and the wine were devoured by the crew and those, who were lucky to pass by, smelled the cheese, and that was the end of the goodies.

It was now time to dress up *Signor Vincenzo*, but first there was the matter of where he was to sleep. Easy enough, thought his nephew and proceeded to the Quartermaster for a cot. The supply Sergeant was taken aback and asked the tail-gunner: "What for? What happened to the one you had?". The only answer he could give was it broke while he was celebrating New Year's (over a month ago), because he used it as a trampoline celebrating the New Year while others were shooting their firearms. The Sergeant shook his head in disbelief but gave him a new cot. When the nephew then asked for blankets, and was rebuffed, he went on to say they got ripped when the cot broke the first time and when it broke again after he had mended it, the

blankets ripped some more. He got his new blankets and his uncle was set with a cot in which to sleep.

But he wasn't finished, yet. Now, the uncle asked for new clothing; after all, the clothes he had on were torn and shabby. And so, back goes the nephew to the Quartermaster, this time asking for a new uniform. The Sergeant asked again: "What for? What happened to the other one?". The tail-gunner was ready for this one (he was dressed in his fatigues, one of the few times he did), and told him it was given to the laundress and she didn't show up and he needed a uniform. Luckily, the uncle was as thin as his nephew, but a little shorter. The Sergeant gave him what he wanted and just by looking at him, gave him the right size. Vincenzo was happy once again, but now, he needed underwear. Another trip for the tail-gunner and this time the supply Sergeant went ballistics. Same questions, and was given the same answers. The laundress hasn't shown up for a couple of days and all his dirty clothing is in a duffle bag. He also asked for socks and the poor Quartermaster was having fits. But, the worst was yet to come for the Sergeant. Uncle Vincenzo now needed shoes. They did have holes in both of them. Italian shoes were made with treated cardboard as a substitute for leather. This time the Sergeant turned on the tail-gunner when he asked for a new pair of boots, but not before he asked the usual questions: "What for? What happened? They broke?". It gave the nephew the answer he needed. He said, yeah, the boot tongue broke as he was putting them on. While all this was going on, the sergeant never once asked for proof or evidence to back up his claims... No broken cot. No ripped blankets, no ripped boots. No nothing.

The poor supply Sergeant now called for Captain Stone, who was just hanging around inside looking for some clothes for himself. When he heard the Sergeant's story and how he thought the tail-gunner was raiding "the pantry" for black market purposes, he confronted Cavaliere (as he was called by the Captain), to explain himself or face a court-martial, if he indeed was in the "black market" trade. The nephew finally admitted all these items were for his uncle visiting him at the camp. Without any further discussions, Captain Stone turned to the Quartermaster Sergeant and told him: "Give him what he wants!". The Sergeant complied and he and the tail-gunner later became fast friends. This was the same Captain Stone who helped the gunner get his leave for the Christmas holidays. It didn't hurt that the tail-gunner went into town to bring back some wine bottles as a thank you gift to the supply Sergeant, and it cost him just a couple of packs of cigarettes. In most cases the sellers would rather have cigarettes as the medium of exchange instead of money. At the Commissary, also called the PX (Post Exchange), various items such as cigarettes, beer and candy were available; the cigarettes packs were 10 cents each… the beer was 5 cents and the Hershey chocolate bars were 2 cents each, as was the Wrigley 5 stick packet of chewing gum; Coca-Cola was also 2 cents (no deposits for the bottles). A far cry from today's bloated price tags!

Everyone was happy and *Signor Vincenzo* "became a GI". But he caused another stir a few days later when the KP (Kitchen Police) saw him in an American uniform waiting to be served at breakfast.

This little bit of an episode happened during *lo zio Vincenzo*'s early weeks at the Brindisi Air Base. It may be humorous now, but at that time, it was quite a departure from a quiet day at camp. For the first three days, the tail-gunner's uncle ate with him and the crews at breakfast time. His nephew didn't usually have breakfast, but to please his uncle, who enjoyed eating American food, he went with him to allow him to eat with the crews.

While *lo zio* was dressed in his Italian clothes, all was fine, until he showed up dressed as a GI. Thanks to the efforts of the Quartermaster Sergeant and Captain Stone, he was given a uniform, complete with boots, blankets, mess kit and a cot and slept in his nephew's tent. But this day, they didn't reckon with the KP who was handing out the food. When he put his mess kit to receive that morning's bounty, the KP took umbrage and refused to serve uncle Vincenzo, to which, the nephew took exception. Harsh words were exchanged and the poor uncle, embarrassed, was trying to pacify his nephew telling him he would rather eat with the Italian laborers anyway, because he was surrounded by men with whom he could relate. He didn't understand English, but by the actions of the KP, he understood there would be no food for him unless he takes his place with the Italians who eat earlier in the morning. During the week, everything was fine until the GI saw this Italian dressed in an American uniform and took offense. Finally, the Officer of the day came over to placate both boys by asking the nephew that perhaps, the uncle would rather dine with the Italians, giving the same reason as his uncle's and, would he mind? Imagine!

Brindisi, February 1945. Zio Vincenzo *in GI uniform by his nephew's tent, No. 19.*

In the meantime, no one could be served; pots and pans were all over the floor (so was the breakfast). Everything was at a standstill until this argument was resolved. No one took

sides. They were just waiting for a ruling from the Officer of the Day, (who would later apologize to the nephew for the KP's behavior, which was odd). It was determined by all the interested parties, including his uncle Vincenzo, that he would eat with the Italian laborers. It must be mentioned, he was not refused food, merely to eat with his Italian friends. The uncle was happy because, as he told his nephew, he would rather be surrounded by 25 of his Italian friends with whom he could carry on a conversation than only one. He had thought he would be pleasing his nephew. Instead, he hadn't pleased the Kitchen Police.

The point of the story is the attitude of the soldiers who were waiting their turn to be served and not one of them complained. They just waited patiently until everything was taken care of and the floor cleaned up… with *lo zio Vincenzo* happily helping out. There was no animosity, especially toward the tail-gunner whom, I believe today, was in the wrong. Of course, that wasn't the case when the problem arose. After all, he was his uncle.

About three days later, when the nephew saw food to his liking (powdered scrambled eggs and hash), he was served by that same KP and to clear the air, the tail-gunner was told his uncle was gaining weight. This meaningless banter meant the KP carried no grudge and of course neither did the nephew nor anyone else who was inconvenienced by that little *tête-à-tête*. To show his gratitude, the tail-gunner then went into town and got a few bottles of wine for the Mess. After this, the KP told his new-found friend that the kitchen was at his disposal! The tail-gunner had conquered another world. He had won over the Motor Pool, then the Quartermaster and now the Kitchen. Winning over the motor pool was easy. He simply asked one of the drivers if it was hard to learn how to drive, to which he was answered: "If you can read, you can drive". And he did. A bond was formed when our tail-gunner showed his appreciation with bottles of home-made wine given to him by the neighborhood boys he had befriended. Not only that, but he was "Chauffeur" to many of his motor pool buddies, driving them at night to their trysts (when he wasn't flying, of course). All vehicles had to be accounted for by a certain hour and these boys were not coming back until the next day, when the base shuttle buses were now running.

The contents of this narrative shows the compassion and the greatness of our Army Air Corps. A defeated population was treated with respect. It didn't refuse food to a one-time enemy. The population was well fed and respected by our GIs. And in this particular case, after all, Vincenzo Cavaliere was a relative of a crewman! And, he was given "room and board with kitchen privileges", when another army certainly would not have permitted this.

Food was good, with coffee. Powdered eggs, de-hydrated potatoes, spam, hash, sos', salads and other canned meals and bread. We did have chicken, but never steak. There was only powdered milk or chlorinated water. The other drinks such as soda, Coca-Cola or beer could be bought at the PX. I had my hoard of wine, but drank it sparingly except on outings when we weren't flying. Many of us took our mess kits back to the tent to eat. Water was in lister-bags (a nickname used for our B-24s), made of canvas in olive drab color and located near the outdoor mess (much like the office water coolers). It was always chlorinated, which had a greenish tint to it and tasted almost like javelle water. The lister-bags were hanging from tripods and they were somehow always cold. The discarded food was placed in 50 gal. drums which were once filled with high octane gas. I don't remember which, but it could have been 110 Octane. I do remember its reddish color. The mess kits were dunked in water and cleaned in three tubs, the first one, with cold water and detergent to further clean the mess kits. The

second was also filled with cold water but for a first rinse with no soap and the third, for a final rinse.

Zio Vincenzo admired my .45 Colt pistol when I showed it to him in my tent one day, and asked if we could have target practice. We were going to make a picnic out of it, since I wasn't flying that night. The KP at mess was kind enough to give us food and we took along a bottle of the ever present wine. We walked toward the coast just outside our camp and we reached one of the bombed out coastal artillery batteries facing the Adriatic Sea, just north of Brindisi. At this point, I forgot about the target practice and thought about the Italian soldiers who were killed manning this outpost. Who knows how many were trapped inside and died? The bunker was almost buried underground among the rubble. But, this is what war is all about and my uncle considered himself lucky. His war was over, Italy was disarmed and now he was with his nephew on an outing. The problem with this arrangement was that my uncle Vincenzo wanted to do all the shooting and he spent all seven .45 caliber bullets my weapon would hold (there was one in the chamber and six in the clip). I looked around for cans or bottles or, whatever I could find to throw them in the air for him. After he was done firing, he marveled at the pistol; it was a model 1911A automatic, designed by Colt. The 1911 meant it was introduced that year and it was the Army Air Corps issue. It is still being manufactured today and used by the US Military.

We had a great time of it, but now I had no more rounds for my .45 and the next day, I went to Ordnance for another supply and here's where the fun started. I asked the S/Sgt. for seven rounds and he wanted to know why. When he asked me what I did with what I had, my mistake was in telling him the truth. I thought I had learned from Quartermaster earlier, when I asked for clothing for my uncle. I told him about my excursion with him and he was furious. The answer was a hefty: "No!". It was useless telling him I can't be flying without being armed, or even standing guard duty for our aircraft, but he would have none of it. I reminded him I didn't go around shooting at New Year's Eve and those men received new ammo. "It's not the same circumstances", said the S/Sgt. and if I didn't like it, I should "take a TS slip and go see the Chaplain". This was an allusion to anyone who complained and nothing could be done about it. It was a figure of speech; one that was used in the military for a hefty "No" answer. The TS slip was simply an imaginary scrap of paper on which to "write" an imaginary complaint and then bring the blank slip to the Chaplain who would then commiserate with you. In other words, the Sergeant was saying: "Tough! You're out of luck"; in our jargon, SOL. He had an ice-pick sitting upright on his desk, with blank scraps impaled on it and a sign reading *TS Slips*. This was his sense of humor.

And so, I spent the rest of the war carrying my pistol with an empty clip. I still took it on my missions and on guard duty but, as long as no one knew, who's going to argue with a pistol, even unloaded, pointing at them? Only my crew knew and my uncle. Imagine if I were ever shot down, armed only with an unloaded weapon? As for the Staff Sergeant, he was the only individual in the Air Corps to whom I lost my "battles." He was a career soldier and he went by the book.

To digress a bit on this subject of weapons, anyone caught pointing a weapon at anyone, even playfully and unloaded, would get twenty years at hard labor, no questions asked. Period! Forget about a court-martial. And he would receive a dishonorable discharge after his full twenty years, at hard labor in the stockade. This was Cardinal Rule # 1 in the Military!

Cardinal Rule # 2 was: *No aircraft shall break formation to the aid of another aircraft in distress, including the fighter escort. It will not compromise the safety of the formation*. Cardinal Rule # 3: *Never volunteer for work detail. You will be ostracized*. Shunned!

March 1945: To Rosignano

March was to be our last month at Brindisi, but before we left for the Rosignano Air Base, about 15 miles south of our camp at Castiglioncello, Lt. Loser's crew flew their share of missions into the Northwestern Alps and the Po Valley. There were no Luftwaffe encounters and very little *flak* from German guns below. P-61 Black Widows aircraft were patrolling the night skies. All our missions were flown at night and on most of these flights, the weather was contrary, in that there were many night flights through haze and cloud cover, especially in the mountain terrain. Our drops were about 50 % successful because of this. Reception was hard to decipher and we weren't even sure there was one. Better not to chance the equipment and agents falling in enemy hands. We carried American, British and Italian spies, including women, behind German lines and of these, only four were successful.

The American 5th Army and the British 8th had begun their spring offensive from the Northern Apennines and here we parachuted, with success, five Italians near Udine. There were two other sorties to Udine carrying Italian and American agents in which parachuting them had to be canceled because of the danger of imminent capture by the enemy. Bologna was a successful drop, but Padova was not.

In the end, Udine was our primary target, but we were busy in the Po River plains and Northwestern Italy, also. We flew a total of fifteen agents, but only nine were able to parachute down. The area was a hotbed of German activity trying to stall the Allied offensive and the risks were too great to have the spies surrounded by German troops. On the night of March 9th, we flew our beloved *Queenie* for the last time, over Udine, with one American agent on board. It was a clear night, but the reception party was in doubt and we didn't chance making the drop. Lt. Loser gave a list of malfunctions of the aircraft to the crew chief when we returned at Brindisi and the next time; to my knowledge, *Smokey* (*Queenie*) did not fly again until April 13th, a Friday, the day of her fatal flight.

On March 18th, Lt. Loser and his officers flew to Rosignano to set up operations for our flights, which began on March 21st. Rosignano, in Tuscany, was about 25 miles south of Leghorn, making our sorties into the drop zones half the distance in half the time. It was from Rosignano that we flew to the Po Valley and to the Udine drop zones. It was a move to my liking. Our base camp was situated in what once was a botanical garden at the turn of the Century, later, a park which became an estate, complete with a villa for a prominent Tuscan citizen. It was requisitioned by Colonel MacCloskey of the 885th for his Headquarters.

The Stars and Stripes flies at half-mast at Castello Pasquini, Castiglioncello, headquarters of the 885th – 859th BS. Roosevelt, the U. S. president, had died on April 12th,1945.

It was a beautiful setting, with tents set up all over a wooded area with only evergreen trees. The *pineta* (pinewood), as it was called, was on a 30' cliff overlooking the Ligurian Sea and, 40 miles away, was the Island of Gorgona. On a perfect day, with the wind blowing in from the West, we could smell the cheese being made on the island. It made many a GI hungry… and thirsty. There was also a converted baseball field which, at one time, was used for soccer. The villa was built in the Italian Art-Deco style on a rocky outcropping which, as legend had it, the owner had blasted a large hole at the top of the rock, providing a large room for a wine cellar. The mansion sat on top of this cellar, high above the beach below, which had a few scars from the action there with the retreating German army. There was a castle (*castello Pasquini*) across the railroad tracks and the railroad station by a parallel highway, a quarter of mile away on a hill, which housed our Operations and Intelligence Headquarters and a radio tower. It was here that Lt. Loser's tail-gunner was summoned to report to Intelligence the week of the arrival at Castiglioncello.

The tents for the personnel of the 885th and 859th BS in the Castiglioncello pinewood.

His crew had been selected for the 885th because of his Italian birth and knowledge of the language. All our letters were censored and in the case of the tail-gunner, who wrote in Italian to his family back home, his output was read by Intelligence HQ. On March 20th, he was summoned to Castle HQ to prepare a "Safe Conduct" note for Intelligence. He was told only: "There's a pencil and pad on the table. Call us when you're done". There were no other instructions. He wrote it in Italian, knowing: "Why should I write it English? This is Italy". It was a short note, the usual format; who, when, where from, where to, and random dates. When he handed it in, he was told they would get back to him. And they did... a few days later. But, the strange part was, when they called for him, they didn't want him to return with them, rather, wait ten minutes to give the two officers a head start and then proceed to the castle; alone. Headquarters was a half mile away on a hill overlooking the beaches of the town. It was across the railroad tracks and station, with a road on either side of the tracks with walkways, making it easier to cross them. When the tail-gunner presented himself, they were waiting for him with a photographer and a set of civilian clothes neatly laid out on a table. Trousers, belt, shirt, tie, and a charcoal herringbone jacket, much too big for him. He was told he was to have his picture taken in civilian clothes for passport purposes.

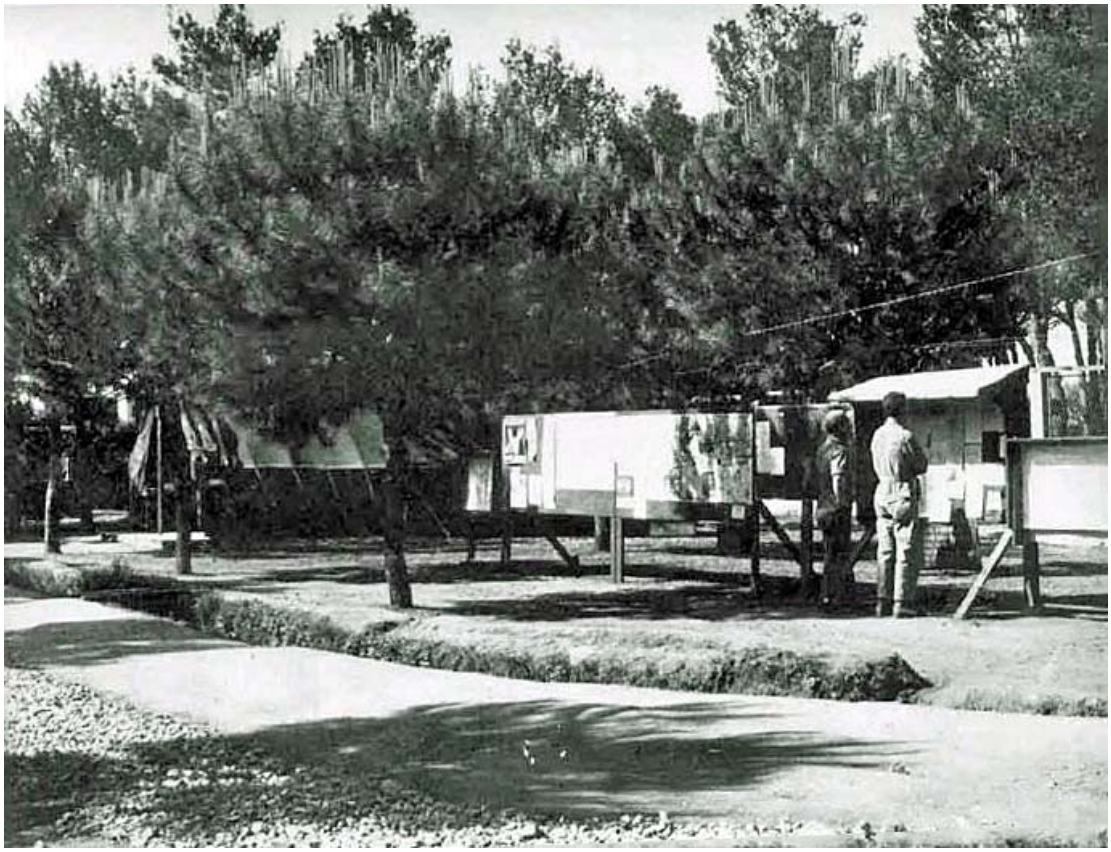
Portrait of Sgt. Ralph Cavaliere in civilian clothes, taken in March 1945 at OSS Operations Headquarters at the castle.

He eagerly complied because he felt he was now ready to work with the OSS. Our tail-gunner happily transformed himself from an American GI to an Italian civilian and was ready "for his close-up". His portrait taken, he was to wait for a set for himself; he still has them in his photo album. When the Intelligence Officer gave him his two pictures, he was admonished not to lose them and to put them in his wallet, and that they would get back to him later.

That done, the officers walked away and so did our tail-gunner; in civilian clothes! He left his uniform behind on the table bench and just left the castle without anyone calling him back to explain himself. He went back into town and mingled with the crowd. He was careful not to attract undo attention and as he blended in with the town people, he felt himself Italian. A trip to the railroad station brought laughter from the ticket master and the people within hearing distance. He had asked for a schedule and the arrival time of the next train. The reply was: "Don't you know there's a war on? When the train comes, it's here, whenever that will be". The people laughed at him for asking, but it went no further. It was a deliberate, silly question on his part. He was just having fun, and "he would be too young to know better". In fact, his aunt back in Calabria did say to him: "They robbed the crib", when she saw him in his US uniform. After a few hours of sightseeing and window shopping, he was nearing his base camp and had decided not to press his luck and return to the castle. It would have been a problem if he had to show IDs. If he presented his military ID, why was he in civilian clothes? If he showed his recently taken photos, where were the accompanying documents?

It was here when he heard a voice calling out to him: "*Raffaele, che fai da borghese?*", "Ralph, what are you doing in civilian clothes?". It was from a girl, named Maria, who did laundry for our men and whom he had befriended. She had visited the camp every day with her mother, returning and picking up clothing from the airmen. At times, she was seen rummaging through the 50-gallon garbage pails scraping for food. This was a bad turn of events for our tail-gunner and he walked past her as if she were calling someone else. He could tell she was puzzled and confused, but he kept on walking, crossing the tracks and taking the opposite road back to the castle HQ. When he entered the great hall, no one noticed (at least, it seemed that way).

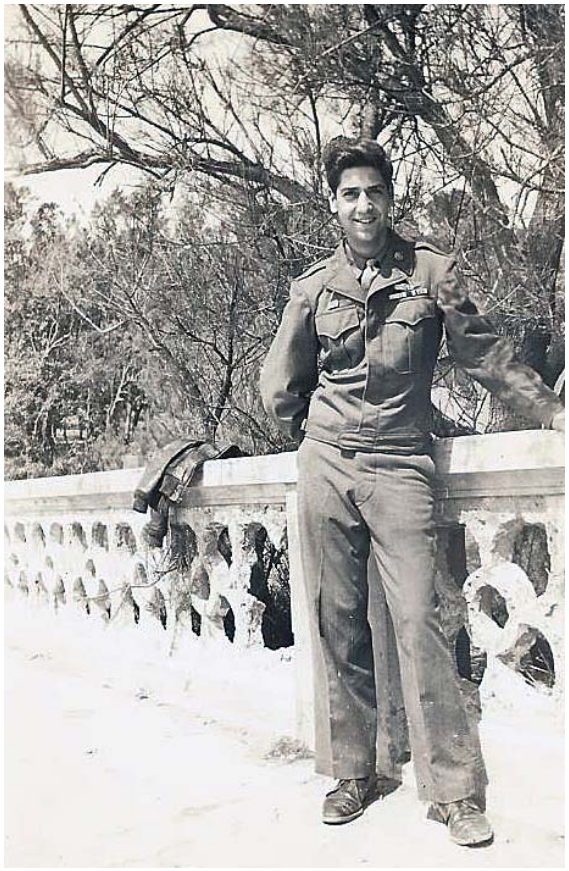
He changed back into his uniform and tried to make eye contact with some of the personnel, but no one was paying any attention to him. And, no one questioned him on his odd behavior. As he walked out, even the sentry had not asked any questions, which was stranger still. He was seen walking in, in uniform; then walking out in civvies; returning back in civvies, finally, out again in his ODs. The only conclusion drawn from this was that he might have been tailed to see if he could blend with the Italian population. But he never was called back, as future events concerning the war, were going on at a furious pace. April saw a steady deterioration of German capabilities to wage war. When our tail-gunner returned to his tent, his crew was surprised to see him back. The men thought he had been put on the carpet for remarks and views in favor of our former enemy, Italy (one of his many quirks!). Little did they know... and they were never told. They also never asked... his OSS "connection". I'm fairly sure the officers knew. As for the 17-year-old laundress, Maria, who was a daily visitor at the camp-site, before that encounter with the tail-gunner, was never seen again.



The Bulletin Board in the camp of Castiglioncello kept pace with the war and told everyone which way to turn.

We were already set up in our tents in the *pineta*, which were left behind by the previous occupants of the 97th Bombardment Group. A stray dog, not more than a puppy (somewhat like the dog in the "Our Gang" or "Little Rascals" films), came by and hung around outside the tent. He was white with a couple of black spots around his little head and just stayed there looking at us. S/Sgt. Clarence Block, our ball-gunner, was on his cot to the rear of the tent and

when the dog spotted him, he went straight to him. Why him? Who knows…? A friendship was formed right then and there and the dog never left his side. When we were on missions, there he was, waiting for us on Block's cot. S/Sgt. Andrew Babich made an observation which was as funny as it was absurd. He said, and I quote: "Look, he understands American", as if the dog was an Italian person. He answered to the name *Cricket*, which was given to him by the ball-gunner. I don't know what happened to him after the war was over in Europe. I was still in Rome at the time, but I would think he would have had to stay behind, unless, by some stroke of luck, Block, somehow, might have been able to smuggle him in when he returned home. He was a playful puppy, friendly with anyone, especially the KPs. They certainly were his best friends. He even had his own mess-kit. At our two, post-war reunions, we had lost contact with Clarence Block. He was from Windom, Minnesota and if *Cricket* ever made it to the States, he would have had a wonderful home with the former ball-gunner. I used to give him a few of drops of wine in his tray - which he never refused.



Sgt. Cavaliere at the seafront in Castiglioncello. It was a "boardwalk" in cement, about 6' wide.

At the entrance to our camp-site at Castiglioncello, there was a ball field on one side and our tents in the middle of pine trees, opposite. It wasn't far from the open-air mess (or kitchen), and the road above. The *pineta* was on a high cliff above a beach, called *Costa Fiorita* before the war. Headquarters was a villa at the edge of this cliff overlooking the Tyrrhenian

Sea to the west. I had met a crew-chief, Frank Di Natale, who came by when his work was finished (which wasn't often), and we played to the gathering. He was of Italian descent, who was born in Boston, Massachusetts. We played the same music as I did at Cerignola, with the same reaction as was encountered in Puglia. The Italians were wonderful and this *italiano* was in his glory. There was no sheet music, only his memory, to play those beautiful Italian melodies, including the politically incorrect ones... and his favorite American songs. This happened, perhaps, on only three occasions, sad to say. And yes, there was dancing among the citizenry, including the young girls with our airmen, and a little singing. All joined in and the Brass, going and coming to and from the castle, looked the other way, even smiling.

Sgt. Cavaliere by the seashore in Castiglioncello. The camp is on the background, above the beach, hidden by trees.

The Rosignano Air Base was about fifteen miles down the road and it was difficult for Di Natale to get away from his duties. Still, the memories remain, never to be forgotten. My crew was aware of my Italian leanings, and when I was summoned to castle HQ, they could only assume I was going to be reprimanded for these actions. Such was not the case. They could not be privy to why I was summoned to the Castle. The secret remained with me. Officers were aware of my waywardness while they went back and forth from camp to castle. Their trips took them by the entrance where we played and they couldn't help but notice what was going on. In fact, this might have made a favorable impression on my part in my being asked to report to Intelligence. Obviously, I could never reveal the real reason and so my crew held on to the notion that I was on the "carpet" for actions detrimental as a soldier of the USAAF. I

was also inclined to talk favorably about Italy. Everyone knew my feelings, especially the Brass... but I was never taken to task. And I often wonder, *why didn't they?*

Left: Castiglioncello seashore, 1945. Sgt. Andrew Babich with a little Italian girl. He and Sgt. Cavaliere saw her wandering alone at the beach and by talking with her, found she was looking for food. After they took the photo, they took her back to camp. The KPs felt sorry for her and gave her food to bring home. She couldn't have been more than ten or eleven years old. Right: the same spot, as it is today.

There were no camp activities except ball playing at Castiglioncello (I played first base and left field), and outdoor Sunday Mass (there may have been Saturday Services for our Jewish boys but I can't remember). The only other camp life was fraternizing with the Italians at the camp entrance. Sometimes it seemed like a Sunday picnic. After all, the campsite was once a park with its pine trees and the Italian girls and the GIs were flirting with each other. It was all innocent banter. At Castiglioncello, ground-crewman, Frank Di Natale and I had our own "USO Troupe", so to speak, with a guitar and mandolin; when we played to the crowd, some were dancing, but on only three separate occasions since his job as mechanic at the Rosignano Air Base, about twenty miles to the south, took up much of his time.

As for dress, most of us were in OD uniforms, even wearing ties, and fatigues were rarely used, except by ground personnel or ground-crews. Officers were always in uniform whether behind a desk or flying. As for hygiene, we had only cold water showers and they were installed in a wooden shed, but it had wooden floor planks (good thinking).

And let's not forget the Kitchen Police, KP. Our open-air Mess was opened 24 hours every day and night. Since most sorties were at night, the aircrews, coming in at all different hours, had a chance to unwind before going back to their tents; on call for another mission. Everyone did his share and we all looked out for each other.

Our letters home during the lull between flights reflects all this. It was camaraderie non-pareil!

April 1945: The War Comes to an End

Spring of 1945 saw the war inevitably drawing to a conclusion, but when it would end, no one could know. The German Army was putting up a stiff resistance to the Allied offensive in the Po Valley, in spite of the relentless onslaught of the 15th Special Group, now designated the 2641st Bombardment Group (Special), equipping the partisans with supplies and war materiel and parachuting OSS Agents, "Joes & Janes", in enemy held territories. This was an immense undertaking and the 885th was up to its task!

Rosignano, Italy, April 1945. Top row, left to right: 1st Lt. Jim (Harvey) L'Hommedieu, bombardier; 1st Lt. Thomas Bonna, navigator; 2nd Lt. Paul Le Sieur, co-pilot; 1st Lt. Henry Loser, pilot. Bottom row, left to right: T/Sgt. Leonard Schiller, top-turret and flight engineer; S/Sgt. Andrew Babich, radio operator; S/Sgt. Clarence Block, waist gunner and dispatcher; Sgt. Benjamin Montgomery, waist gunner and dispatcher; Sgt. Ralph Cavaliere, tail gunner. The picture was taken before a day sortie at the hardstand of their B-24 Liberator #670 (X).

April began with a bang for the Group, which now comprised about 40 crews from both the 885th and 859th (*Carpetbaggers*) Bomb. Squadrons. Lt. Loser and his crew started the month with their sortie to Innsbruck, Austria on April 1st. They were met with light ground gun-fire on a clear night, with an Austrian agent on board, who parachuted safely, making this flight a successful one. The mission took only five hours and, on the way, the waist crew dropped leaflets to the countryside below. No mission was ever wasted, even at the point of exciting the population below to rebel against the Nazi occupiers. One such drop consisted of parachuting toilet paper with Hitler's face on the tissues (we had dropped these previously on our bombing runs with the 464th Bombardment Group).

April also saw plenty of OSS activities with the partisans, especially in Northern Italy. Lt. Loser and his crew did their share of sorties, with 14 missions and 16 drops. Four Italian Agents successfully landed in the Cremona and Udine areas, while four Brits parachuted safely in the Piedmont Alps a day later.

A B-24 Liberator of the 885th BS dropping its load in a daylight mission.

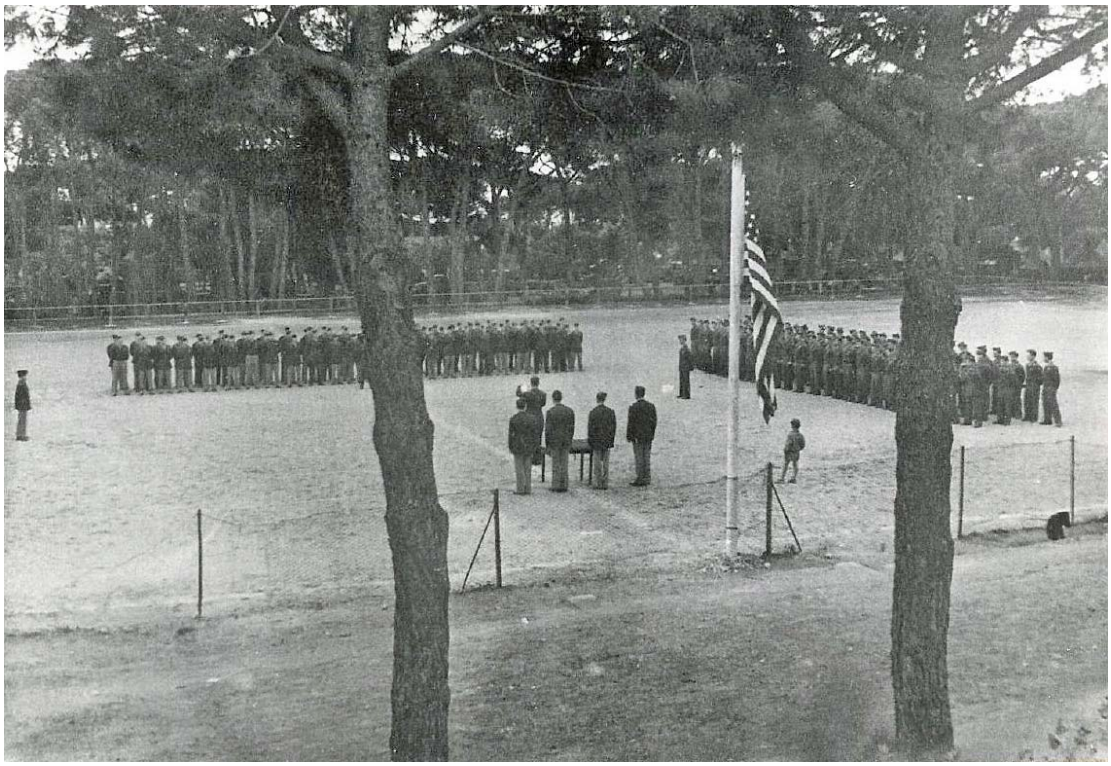
In all, this crew managed to land twelve "Joes" out of thirteen, with six of them Italian, five British and one Austrian - previously noted. With the other nine successful drops of supplies and equipment out of sixteen to the partisans, it wasn't a bad month. The German Army was really hemmed in on all sides, including in the air, with the partisans putting up a great fight against vastly superior numbers. *Flak* was felt on only one of these sorties and

ground gun fire erupted in Austria. One aborted mission was a disappointment to all concerned because of the dangerous weather condition encountered on the way to Pilsen, Czechoslovakia. The B-24 aircraft was carrying supplies, probably food and medical, and after trying twice to take off from Rosignano, they were on their way, but after three hours into the mission it had to turn back and land at Udine. It would have been a nine-hour flight otherwise.

There was a very unusual mission worthy of note, carried to Carrara on April 14th; a rare day flight, lasting three hours and a quarter. It was here where "medium" *flak* was encountered, although dangerously close and an Italian agent parachuted safely near the Carrara marble quarries. Lt. Loser was flying extremely low because of the short distance involved for the drop and the B-24 came upon a village, probably Massa, flying perhaps less than about 300 feet above the town. The tail-gunner had a perfect view of what was going on from one end of the town to the other and he reported back to the pilot, telling him, the town was *surrendering to us*. The townspeople were out in force in the streets, and outside their balconies, flying white sheets and white flags, maybe even white pillowcases, and all the others waving their hands, and it seemed as if they were also saluting us as we flew over. It's not known if this ever happened before or since. It's doubtful... If the son of Julien LeSieur is reading this, I wonder if his father, Lt. Paul LeSieur, co-pilot, ever mentioned it? He should have! According to our radio-man, S/Sgt. Andrew Babich, who was sitting at his radio station behind the cockpit, he saw Lt. LeSieur take control of the aircraft soon after the drop. He then flew toward the town at low level altitude and when he saw the crowd come to life, he buzzed the length of the town in a good-will gesture, dipping his wings as a sign of greetings with which the population went wild with enthusiasm. At first, with the plane coming in low, the good citizens of the village thought the worst and were waving the white makeshift cloths in surrender. The tail-gunner took this all in and marveled how happy the Italians felt. I'll wager there was dancing in the streets and the wine flowed that night at Massa... Leave it to the Italians. They always seem to find a silver lining even in adversity.

We had flown three out of four nights from April 9th to 12th, and on April 13th we were not called upon to fly a day mission into the Alps. Instead, our aircraft, *Smokey*, was flown by another crew, piloted by Lt. Hebinger. It was her first flight since the March 9th one and for which she was laid up for repairs ever since. In addition to supplies and equipment, there were nine crewmen and five Italo-American GIs; OSS agents, flying to their rendezvous with the Italian partisans entrenched in the valley below. After the fourth pass, one of the four engines caught fire as two of those agents were parachuting down in error. They were not supposed to jump. Both men survived the jump (the plane was flying lower than the prescribed safe altitude of 900'), although one of them sustained a broken leg. Lt. Hebinger, ironically, had his own aircraft flown by another crew at the same drop zone and, because he was early, he could not make his passes until the other aircraft showed up to release its supplies first. Luck was not in Lt. Hebinger's favor. Everything went wrong. Too many passes deep down in the valley. Too heavy a load and too low an altitude to safely parachute the Agents... and, too long a wait for the other aircraft. It could not negotiate the mountain peak and all was lost. There's a memorial built for these young men who gave their lives for their Country and for Italy... and a grateful group of partisans, to this day, commemorate that event with ceremonies and speeches, while inviting the relatives of these fallen airmen to the site on the day of the crash at Livigno, close to the Swiss border. *My teething ring had not been left behind with "Smokey"!*

On the night of April 16, we flew a sortie to two separate drop zones, one to the Trento target and the other at Udine. According to my log, we carried a single agent who was to parachute in the East Po Valley, near the Trento area. When we arrived, our "passenger" balked at jumping because he felt we were flying too low, below 900 feet. We weren't. Our waist-gunners were the *dispatchers*, whose job was to tap the agent for the jump at the exact moment called for by the bombardier. His refusal would mean another pass at the target and we couldn't afford that luxury. There could be German activity everywhere and his "reception party", the Germans this time, would be waiting on the ground. It was a split-second decision for them, only a few seconds flying at near-stalling speed and then, we'd be past the target area and too late for the drop. The escape hatch was already opened and the two men just picked him up and threw him out. The tail-gunner was oblivious to all this and all he saw was the parachute opening up and the "Joe" safely gliding down to earth within the prescribed area. Only after we landed at our home base did the details come out. It must have been a funny scene in the waist as the men picked our reluctant hero up and out. At the base, our pilot reported the incident and all had a good laugh because, after all, the drop was successful, besides being a clear night and, the agent met with the partisans. In fact, both drops were successful that night. There was another drop zone earlier that night, where we parachuted supplies successfully. Our flights were serious business, but sometimes laced with a bit of comic flair. In all, Lt. Loser's crew carried a total of 28 agents in occupied territories with 18 successful drops, from March 9th to April 17th. It was a very good outing. The 885th Squadron certainly was a unique unit.



Castiglioncello, Italy, May 1945.
The 885th BS and 859th BS are assembled at the Parade Grounds, which doubled as a ball field, to receive the Presidential Unit Citation for the February 17th/18th mission. Officers are to the left in the photo, enlisted men on the right.

A sortie to the mountain valleys was a true test of the venerable B-24's capabilities. She had to descend to about 900 feet above the terrain below, coming in from above the mountain peaks, at times somewhere at about 4,000 to 5,000 feet high above the valley below. She had very little room to swoop down in a fast descent to reach the drop-zone and deliver her supplies and human cargo. Flying low at near stalling speed meant she was flying slower than the landing speed of 110 mph. It was closer to 95 or 100 mph and the pilot had to deploy full flaps while the aircraft was shuddering as if she were breaking apart. At least, that was the impression inside the plane. At about that speed, it was possible to deliver the pay load within a small area and when that was done, the pilot would accelerate, still with full flaps, to give the aircraft more lift as she maneuvered her way around the mountain side for another pass to finish the drops.

There were almost always two passes to complete the mission and one or two more to parachute the agents. In all, there were at least four passes, if everything went well. There were times when the B-24 circled overhead because of cloud cover over the drop zone, but could not linger long because of potential German infiltration in the partisan stronghold. Time was always of the essence, but on any given night, two to four passes would be the norm, depending on the payload. The bombardier, who's job it was to ensure the equipment and agents were parachuted on target and timed exactly, had done his job well. And then came the difficult task for both pilot and co-pilot to get the heck out of the valley safely and speedily. The flaps always played an important role on these and all other missions to flat areas. As the aircraft gained speed, so were the flaps reduced until the aircraft was safely out of danger and, from there on in, the plane steadily gained altitude (even though the B-24 was a very slow climber), away from the mountain ranges on her way home. Here, the navigator, in our case, Lt. Thomas Bonna, used his navigational skills in guiding us home. In the meantime, our tail-gunner chatted away with Lt. Loser, the pilot, or the co-pilot, Lt. Paul LeSieur, on how the parachutes were deployed. He had exceptional night vision. The bombardier, who "did his job well", was Lt. Jim L'Hommedieu and now, he took possession of the nose-turret and all that remained was for S/Sgt. Andrew Babich to contact the radio tower, S/Sgt. Ken Mattison, at Castiglioncello to home him in to the tower and on to the Rosignano Air Base, another 20 miles to the south.

A word on the flight engineer. When not in his turret, he oversaw and heard the performance of the aircraft engines, watching all gauges and dials functioning properly. It was his job as overseer. He would know all there was to know about the B-24 and her idiosyncrasies. Ours was S/Sgt. Leonard Schiller who had a sensitive ear for any B-24's performance. S/Sgt. Block and Sgt. Montgomery were the dispatchers on these missions. They were the ones who threw out one hesitant agent out of the airplane because he balked at parachuting down too low which was not to his liking.

An extra mission was flown on May 10th, after Germany's surrender, to Austria, but this flight was a humanitarian sortie into Austria where food was dropped on a prison camp, probably American, but it did not count as a combat mission. On this sortie, Lt. Loser's tail-gunner was not available. He remained in Rome after his crew returned from the Eternal City.

Lt. Loser, seeing no more missions being scheduled, received permission to fly to Rome with his crew, for a few days, leaving on May 5th. On May 8th, while walking down *via Veneto*, the tail-gunner was with his radio-operator friend; war was officially over and all emotions burst loose. The sounds of sirens were everywhere, cars' horns were blasting away,

bells could be heard from the churches and everyone was glad-handing us as we tried to get past the teeming crowd. There were tears among the women and all had relief written all over their faces and their eyes. It was some display of happiness. As for the two close friends, they parted ways when a beautiful *romana* (I never met an Italian girl who wasn't beautiful) made eye contact with Andrew Babich, the radio-man and off they went... and that was the last time the tail-gunner saw his friend until after the war. As for his crew... it was the same story; he never saw any of them again until a reunion was held in New York City in 1946, with Lt. Loser and crew. While in Rome, the two friends were window shopping and it occurred to the tail-gunner that he could have been in Manhattan: the shops and displays were as elegant as those on Fifth Avenue... *and this was war-torn Italy.*

When the war was finally over, I was delayed in Rome because of an infection to both hands, caused by row-boating at Castiglioncello prior to the trip to Rome. My hands were bloodied and raw from a full day of rowing, (it looked like I had spilt wine on me for the moment), with my radio operator friend, S/Sgt. Andrew Babich. An Italian girl and a gallon of wine joined us on our sea venture and although Babich wanted to do the rowing, I insisted I would take care of that and I would interpret for both of them as we spoke to each other. My hands became progressively worse by the day but it would not stop me from going to Rome. On May 8th, during the street celebration of the war's end in Europe, I finally decided to go to a dispensary on *via Veneto* and was sent to a hospital, instead. I was there a full month and when I left to return to camp, I was told everyone was sent home, but the 885th Squadron office personnel was still in Italy.

I went searching all over Southern Italy trying to locate the remnants of the Squadron; from Rome to Naples, Pozzuoli, back to Rome and finally to Caserta, where I met up with the Commanding Officer, a very much surprised, CO Captain Stone. He told me my crew had left Castiglioncello for the States over a month ago and the Squadron was about to leave also. It was mid-June and the Captain, looking for my records, couldn't find them. He advised me to come back the following day to see if he had any luck. And here starts what was to become a heartbreaking story. As I walked out of the Office HQ, I saw a grandmotherly looking lady waiting for me. We struck up a conversation, which the years left no trace, but what I do remember is she had asked me for my name and that she would be back "tomorrow." I called her "*signora"*. She also reminded me of my grandmother who had died in August of 1942. The similarity was eerie to say the least. When tomorrow came, I returned to HQ for an update on my status. They found my personal effects of two duffle bags and my B-4 bag, but no records. Walking out, there was this same lady once more waiting for me, this time with a basketful of fruit. We exchanged pleasantries while I was admiring the extra-large cherries, nectarines and oranges, the likes of which I have never seen before or since. She kept calling me "*figlio mio*", a term meaning "my son", but in this context, she meant, my boy, patting my face every so often.

After she left, I went back in and asked my Captain, since my records are not here, if I could borrow a Jeep and visit my old haunts. Imagine his answer to this: "Why didn't you tell me this yesterday? I would not have asked to search for them. Now, they're going to look for them and if they're found, they know you're here. If your records are not found, it means you've already left as far as they're concerned, but you have to give them two more days. With any luck then, take your Jeep and go wherever it takes you." I remember this conversation, although, it's not word for word, but this was the gist of it… I prayed my records were not

going to be found. In the meantime, I would have to wait it out two more days and the lady would be visiting me with more fruit. Our conversation, although I've forgotten, had to be about family and how I ended up in Italy. I noticed she kept staring at my face from time to time. I was doing the same with her. I'm sure I reminded her of her son or grandson, as she reminded me of my maternal grandmother... I still have pictures of my grandmother when my mother and I left Italy for America. These two ladies looked so much alike.

July 27th, 1946. First reunion of "Henry's (Lt. Loser) Boys". From left to right: Andy Caldwell, bombardier; Thomas Bonna, navigator, and his wife Stella; Henry Loser, pilot; Jim (Harvey) L'Hommedieu, bombardier, with his wife Bette; Ben Montgomery, waist gunner and assistant radio operator; Ralph Cavaliere, tail gunner and assistant armorer-gunner. For some reason, it seems we had two bombardiers.

Then two days later, Captain Stone said: "Cavaliere, I have bad news for you". My records were found and that was that. I would have transport to Naples and, there, a B-24 would be waiting for me. When my "grandmother" returned for her regular visit, I had to tell her about my pending departure for the following day. As far as I can recall, all she could say was: "*Figlio mio*", with the usual pat on the cheek. The next day when it was time for me to leave, a P-38 Lightning came to fetch me and I asked the pilot if he could wait for a kindly old lady to whom I could say goodbye. It was early morning and the pilot agreed. The P-38 fighter was stripped of all its contents which were behind the cockpit. There were no ammunition belts, no radar equipment, just an empty space to fly, "piggy-back." Large enough to fit my "equipment" and myself. We waited until the last minute, but my "grandmother" never showed. It must have been after 2 or 3 in the afternoon. She was always at the HQ office around 9 a.m. but this time,

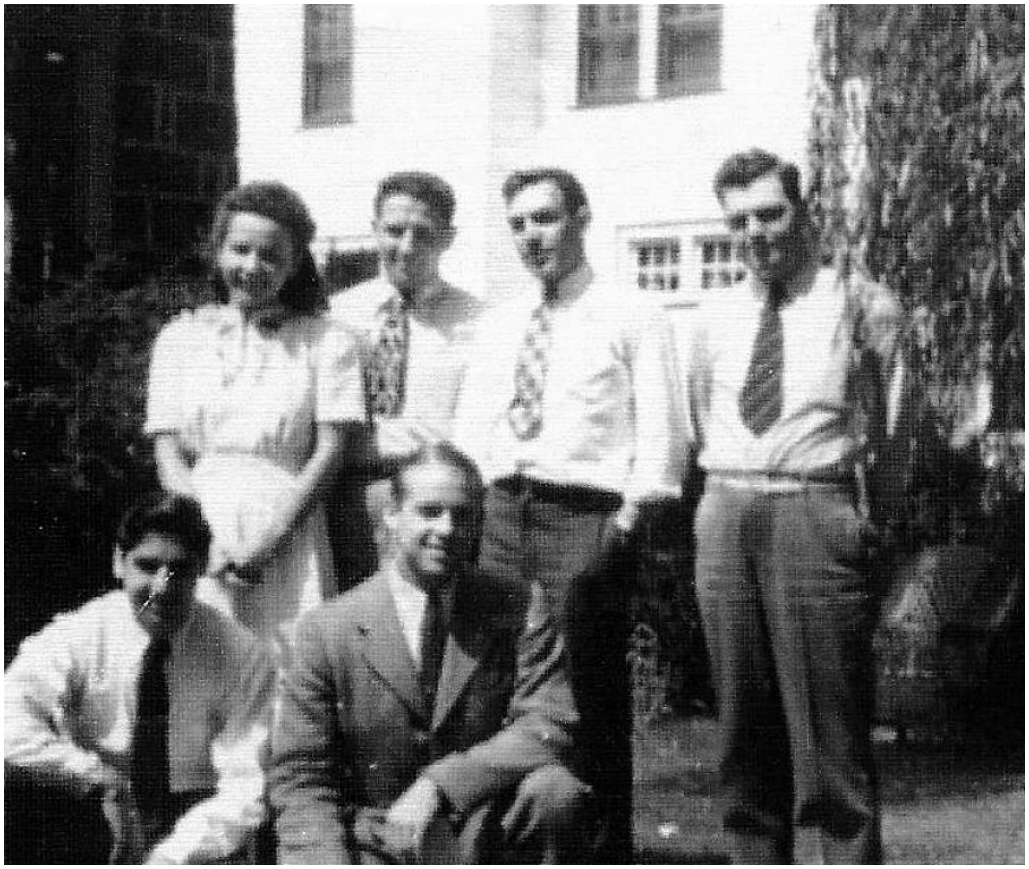
she missed her "appointment". I finally got into the P-38 and was flown to Capodichino Airfield in Naples for my return home. There, a B-24 was waiting for the flight home via Marrakech, Dakar in Africa, Natal in Brazil, then Georgetown, British Guyana, on to San Juan, Puerto Rico and Savannah, Georgia.

I truly believe my adopted grandmother died after she heard the news of my pending departure. I can't explain her absence any other way. If she were not able to come, she would have sent word. My grandmother, Teresa, died of a broken heart after the death of her youngest son, Pietro Antonio, of the *Regia Fanteria* (Italian Royal Infantry) in Lubiana, Yugoslavia, a few months after she received the news in March of 1942. She had lost another son, Pasquale, in Abyssinia in 1936 during the war of 1935/1936 in East Africa. My "new" grandmother must have had either a son or grandson killed in the war and she must have died, also, of a broken heart when I left, as did my grandmother when she received the news of her son, my uncle. I remember him, he was only five years older than me.

Another reunion of Henry Loser's crew at the Cavaliere's in Astoria, 1947. Bottom row, from left to right: Andrew Babich, radio operator; Benjamin Montgomery, waist gunner; Jim Malcolm, nose gunner. Top row, left to right: Jim (Harvey) L'Hommedieu, bombardier; Ralph Cavaliere, tail gunner; Henry Loser, pilot; Frank (Francesco) Cavaliere, Ralph's father.

To end this narrative, we must make mention of the chaotic atmosphere in the Italian Alps. By the last week of April, the German army was in full, but orderly, retreat. The partisans now were hunting down fascist, would-be escapees and fighting Germans was secondary. And,

they constructed road blocks to prevent the Germans from entering Austria and as a means for searching the convoys for escaping Italians. The reason being, that if they are found in the convoys trying to escape, they would have to be fascists. The partisans gave the Germans "an offer they could not refuse", to quote a famous phrase. If they weren't allowed to search the convoys for Italians, they simply will fire on the convoy and destroy it. They had the means with which to back up their threats. They were our supplies and equipment from those sorties we had flown. The German convoys were also surrounded and they had no choice. When the partisans were satisfied with their catch, they cleared the roadblocks with German help and allowed them to continue unopposed. As for the fascists who escaped from being caught, they made their way to the American lines, not the British. They felt American headquarters would be more amenable to their pleas, for, either immunity or minimal punishment. Fascist legation and embassy personnel would exchange secret pre-war government information between Italy, France and Britain for leniency.



At Henry Loser's home, Haverton, Pennsylvania. Bottom row, from left to right: Ralph Cavaliere, tail gunner; Andy Caldwell, bombardier. Top row, left to right: Stella Bonna, wife of Thomas Bonna, navigator, next to her; Henry Loser, pilot; Benjamin Montgomery, waist gunner.

In the end, the 2641st Bombardment Group, of which the 885th OSS Squadron, along with the 859th SOE Squadron, formed an integral part in shortening the war in Europe. The partisans rose up in numbers toward the end because of the efforts of the OSS and the crews in

supplying them with the necessary tools with which to conduct clandestine operations. Colonel Monro MacCloskey and his staff were exceptional as were the Squadrons!

As for the tail-gunner, his good luck charm, working together with his God, did wonders for him. The "magic teething ring" went on all his 41 sorties (45 missions). It was hung in his tail-turret by the Fairchild gun-camera box over his left shoulder. It had served its purpose. He left behind many Italians he had befriended along the way and today, still thinks of them. But he had no doubts whatsoever, he would be coming home *sano e salvo* (alive and well). *If only the teething ring had been left on "Smokey", for Lt. Hebinger and his ill-fated crew.*

There's an old saying in the Army: *There's the right way, the wrong way and the Army way*. They should have added: *my way, the "Cavaliere" way!* Cardinal Rule # 4.

A postscript is necessary here to end the narrative. When a plane went down, we usually heard about it by word of mouth. There was an open air bulletin board, and except to check for missions, we didn't bother much with it. I never did. Our officers would come by our tent to give us the news on missions, anyway. But when we did hear of a downed crew, we mourned only for the moment. We hardly spoke about it, even if the men were our friends. Mourning, especially on missions, was a distraction which we could ill afford. There was business to take care of. *There was none of this seeking revenge on the enemy. No one went on a rampage as shown in war movies.* Doing so would put a crew in jeopardy and more loss of life. We were even keel in our attitudes and we tried our best to take care of the business at hand… But, I personally felt, *the enemy also had friends who were killed by us*. It is to be expected; men will die on both sides, so why the revenge act? War movies were, and are, all Hollywood hype, as far as I was concerned.

As for our beloved *Smokey,* aka *Queenie,* I still feel her loss, even today. When we had heard she crashed into that mountain peak, Monte delle Mine, near Livigno, in the Northern Italian Alps, close to the Swiss border, I had lost my closest friend. I did not know the crew, but only a few years ago I came in contact with one of the OSS agents, S/Sgt. Armand Terracciano, from Rhode Island, who had parachuted in error and saw *Smokey* hit the mountain after an engine caught fire, trying desperately to climb over the peak… she missed it by about 100 feet. All perished, except two of the agents. He told me the whole story in writing of that fateful day, where the agents were praying together thinking this would be their last mission. Steve, a younger brother of Lt. Victor Carlson, navigator, has traveled over the years to the crash site memorial, along with Terracciano. It was the first and only time that the crew, led by Lt. Neal Hebinger, flew *Smokey*.

Massapequa, New York
January, 2017

Appendix

Flying in the 1940s was very different from flying today. Aircraft were not pressurized, and there was no comfort on board. It is worth spending a word to describe our flight uniforms, arms and equipment:

- Uniform, complete with tie and jacket or fatigues and fatigue hat... I never wore fatigues on missions and rarely on the ground.
- Leather helmet with attached head-sets and goggles, some polarized.
- Fleece-lined boots and mittens: thumbs only, with no fingers.
- Fleece-lined flight pants and fur collar flight jacket.
- Electric suit with matching socks. At low altitudes, electric suits were not used and we wore regular boots instead of fleece-lined ones.
- *Mae West*, the inflatable life vest to be used when ditching aircraft on water.
- Harness for chest or standard back parachute. Parachutes were inspected by hired Italian girls and sometimes were given to them to make wedding dresses. Silk was a luxury, as was everything else.
- Caliber .45 M1911-A, Colt semi-automatic side-arm with clip holding six rounds, and one in the chamber.
- Double-edged symmetrical, dull gray blade leg dagger with scabbard.
- Back-pack survival kit with machete, including first aid kit and compass.
- Emergency Box, including morphine, on waist fuselage, starboard “wall”.
- Throat mike: it could be used on any surface from where sound is emanating, besides throat… It was used on the accordion, playing the Italian tarantella, earlier taught by tail-gunner to nose-gunner, celebrating news on going to Italy when we were over Canada.
- Oxygen mask.
- Chest parachutes near gunners’ stations. They were never worn on our person: too heavy, too bulky.
- Gun heaters for all caliber .50 Browning machine guns; at the breach.
- There were electrical outlets and oxygen tubes all over the aircraft, also relief tubes. We never left our stations during flight for any reason. One may say we were glued there until safely close to home base.
- We had gun camera boxes to record enemy fighter action but were never used, by us.
- Teething ring, “assigned” to camera box by tail-gunner as a good luck charm.
- We were issued helmets and helmet liners, but I don’t recall anyone wearing them. We used our steel helmets to wash our face and hands. I used mine also to cook outside my tent on occasion.
- Twin .50 cal. machine guns in turrets carried 500 rounds on each of two belts. Single .50 cal. waist guns carried 1,000 rounds on one belt. They were armor piercing, anti-personnel, incendiary, combo incendiary/armor-piercing and tracers.

The agents

Enrico Barbina, an historian of the 885th Bombardment Squadron, asked about our relationship with the agents we carried on our missions. I neglected to write this part of our operations in our narrative, and now that he jumped started my memory, here's the story.

We were not to make eye contact with any of them and no conversing whatsoever. We knew only their nationality, maybe not all of us. They came aboard at the last second, just before we left our hardstand on the way to the line and hence, to the runway itself. Single agents, at the command of the bombardier, were dispatched by our waist-gunners... the one I mentioned in the narrative was really "dispatched" as he hesitated to jump. Others in groups of four or five, including women, had a "leader" who lead the way when our bombardier, Lt. L'Hommedieu, gave him the verbal signal over the intercom.

We never knew who they were and to us they were simply, the "unknowns". This would explain why I didn't remember. I may have been rascally at times and reckless but I was very disciplined and focused on missions. We weren't allowed to know them and I seemed to have followed these instructions to the letter, all these seventy some odd years. Mayhap it's selective memory?