

Copy of my "Memories" of an Episode in *France* 1944

On the 19th day of June 1944, we were brutally torn from our sacks at our *Fortress* Base in *England* by the Officer in Charge of Quarters at 0300hrs. This rude awakening served to confirm the tentative schedule for a Combat Mission posted the previous afternoon. It also served to bring out the usual griping and damning of things in general and the War in particular.

As we waited for our transportation to the Mess Hall for breakfast, the usual statements were heard in the cold damp darkness, "Bet its Berlin again,... Hope its a milk run for a change,... Only one more to go after this one".



Soon the trucks arrived and we all piled in with the usual shouts of "Over here, Crew 5... Let's eat... Room here for two more". Then to breakfast where we usually had two real eggs, the kind that come in a shell. The only fault that could be found, though, about those eggs was the fact that they were boiled and the first men there got them almost raw and just barely warm and the last men got them hard as rocks; but they were beautiful, real eggs and we would eat them any old way. There were other things too, but we would have them any breakfast, not just breakfast before a mission; things like almost petrified toasted English bread, bacon that could be broken into small pieces, but impossible to chew, oatmeal, fruit juice, coffee that was so strong it would melt the spoon if it were left in there too long, and milk, yes, wonderful, white milk that tasted just like a mixture of chalk and water.

We finished there, had time for a cigarette, then the call "Let's go, and we hit the trucks for the Briefing Room. As we entered the guarded, large room, our names were checked and rechecked for security; and

the men were given an opportunity to talk with their respective Chaplains.

After everyone was in the Briefing Room, attention was called and the Commanding Officer entered. The CO of the 401st Group always came to our briefings, no matter what the time, whether he was leading the group or not, and gave a brief talk on the mission. The men really appreciated that.

The long-awaited moment arrived. The screen was raised from in front of the large map of Europe and we saw our route and destination marked in red. This time there was a loud sigh of contentment, because we saw the route led to Bordeaux in the south of France. It looked like a "milk-run" and we should have no trouble. At any rate, not much trouble with Fighters or Flak. The Fighter Cover was extensive and they would be with us all the way. The weather looked o.k. too, a bit of an under-cast over the Coast of *France*, but not too high, so we were quite happy.

Then to the Equipment Room, where we changed clothes, put on our heated suits, picked up our chutes and oxygen masks and all the rest of our equipment. By now just about 2½ hours had passed and it was still only 0300 hours. We were given another hour to clean our guns, that is wipe all the parts completely clean of oil, and put them in the ships. While the most of the crew did this, the Pilot, Lt. *Massey* and Co-Pilot, Lt. *Ceresa*, were checking the ship thoroughly from nose to tail, and conferring with the ground crew, who had been up all night readying our plane. Our Ship, "The Channel Express" had been on 37 Missions, 17 of them with us as the crew. She looked mighty competent and deadly as we got ready to go aboard.

It was then about 0415 and we were all ready; the pilot had notified the tower and now we had about one-half hour before taxi time in which to rest. The flare went off at the tower as a signal to start taxiing and the big "Forts" got in line around the perimeter. Another flare and the lead ship took off followed at fifteen second intervals by the rest of the group. While all this was going on, all of the crew, with the exception of the Pilot, Co-Pilot, and Engineer, (Sgt. *Faulkner*) was taking it pretty easy. I, as usual, was sleeping up in the nose of the ship.

For the next 1½ hours, we circled at our rendezvous point, getting altitude, getting into formation, and picking up the rest of the wing and the division. About 0630 we were on our way almost due South, climbing and we reached the South Coast of *England*. At 12,000, I called the men in the ship and had them "Go on oxygen". They had all replied with the usual "Roger", so I knew they were all awake and had their masks on. In about 20 minutes the Coast of *France* was under us, and I told the men to get into their Flak suits. We went across the Coast of *France* directly over the *Normandie* Beachhead and found clouds piling up in front of us. We continued climbing before we got to them and finally leveled out at 27,000 feet just barely over the fog bank. The ground was completely blotted out and we only knew our position through the Navigator, Lt. *Nealon* and by checking the charts we carried. About an hour later, the time then about 0820, we started to let down, because the overcast had cleared considerably. We let down to about 24,000 feet when the cry came over the interphone "Bandits at 12 O'clock low". Sure enough, we saw the Jerries climbing toward us head on. We tracked them in with our guns, they were in range, we fired a few bursts and they were through our formation, all in a matter of seconds. Our speed being better than 200 mph and theirs perhaps 300mph, the rate of closure was terrific. We seemed to have come through o.k. and a quick check of the crew told me no one was hurt. Suddenly I turned around toward the Flight Deck and I saw smoke and small particles of some burning material falling down into the nose from the Flight Deck right over the escape hatch. I started to reach for the fire extinguisher and in doing so tore my interphone connection apart. Right about then the engineer dropped down into the hatchway and attempted to put the sparks out with his hands. I sat where I was a moment and felt the plane turning to the right out of formation and the bail-out alarm sounded. I reached for my chute, snapped it on and motioned to the Navigator to do the same. I then noted the Engineer and Co-Pilot struggling with the escape hatch, trying to open it, but having considerable difficulty and no success. I still was connected with the oxygen System, but their masks were off and they seemed to be getting groggy and weak from lack of oxygen. I then started to lean toward them intending to help get the hatch open, but was pinned

down in my seat by centrifugal force and couldn't move. I remember trying to lift my arms but found it impossible due to the tremendous centrifugal force holding me down. Something in the plane seemed to snap and I was hurled into the Plexiglas nose and everything and everyone in the nose piled on top of me. Again a tremendous force seemed to be at work and I was crushed against the glass. My left ankle was pinned under an ammunition box, causing excruciating pain. The breath was forced out of me completely even though I tried with all my strength to hold it in with my one free hand I beat against the glass in a vain effort to through. One of my last thoughts was that at least I would be the first in the ship to hit the ground. Everything blacked out, and the next recollection I had was a loud "Pop" and I drew a deep breath of wonderful air into my lungs. I had blown through the Plexiglas nose of the ship when it exploded. I tore at the rip cord of my chute; the chute opened and I was brought up with a very slight jar. Things seemed rather dark and I assumed my helmet had fallen over my eyes. I threw that off and found that didn't help, so I reached up and felt my eyes. They actually felt as though I had a golf ball under each eyelid. By forcing my eyelids open I could see to some extent and looked up and checked my canopy. It was o.k., so I looked down and saw the crazy quilt pattern of the earth about 3,000 feet below and I was lazily floating down toward it. I experimented with the shroud lines and found that I could turn myself to face my drift very easily and thought to myself that all I had to do now was wait to get down. Suddenly I heard some loud reports and my first thought was that someone was shooting at me. I again pulled at my shroud lines to start swinging, in order to make it more difficult for them to hit me. (Afterwards I found that the loud reports I heard were only our 100 pound bombs going off one by one as the beat from the burning plane detonated them). By this time I was getting close to the ground and started to prepare for the landing impact. The last few hundred feet went by so rapidly however, that I hit before I expected and bit my tongue very severely on landing. My hands were cut and sore and I had some difficulty getting out of the chute harness too, because I couldn't see unless I held my eyelids open. When I succeeded in releasing myself, I held my eyes open and looked around. I was about 50 yards from a very small village (*Reynard*) and a group of 15 or 20 people were coming toward me. I staggered over to them and said my one word of French "Cachez Moi". They spoke to me and I had no idea of what they were saying, except the word, "Américain". It sounded like a question, so I said "Yes, American". (Afterwards I found out that they were trying to find out if I were American or German before committing themselves.)

Someone handed me a bottle of Cognac and a sandwich. Where they ever got that on such short notice is beyond me probably someone's lunch. Then they pointed toward one of the group and motioned that I go with him. It was difficult for me to walk so they assisted me onto a bicycle and my guide pushed me down the road about one-half mile. We then turned off to the right on a very small path and about 200 yards in we heard trucks rushing past. My guide motioned for me to dismount and lay in the brush. He then left me and went back toward our starting point. As soon as he was out of sight I moved off about 100 feet into a large briar patch, covered myself with leaves and brush and waited to see what would happen, because I had no idea where he might be going or what for. I lay there for about 10 minutes and saw my guide coming back alone, so I made my presence known to him and started following him. That short stop had stiffened me up considerably and my left ankle, ribs, and back were paining me almost unbearably. We walked about two miles through the woods and came to an old deserted farmhouse. We went into the tumble-down barn and I sat on some old hay pretty-well exhausted. While making this walk I had taken several slugs of cognac and I really think that was what kept me going. I saw a well outside the barn and motioned to my guide to get me some cold water to bathe my eyes with. He did so and I managed to reduce the swelling over my eyes so that my eyelids would stay open about $\frac{1}{16}$ th of an inch. After we lay there in the barn for about one-half hour, we heard someone coming. My guide wasn't alarmed, so I assumed he was expecting someone. The door opened and Lt. *Massey* and his guides came in. It was mighty good to see him alive and safe. He broke down for a minute but soon pulled himself together. He had blown out of the ship after passing out from lack of oxygen and came to while falling through the air with his parachute in his hand. He had snapped it on and landed safely.

We still couldn't understand our guides too well, however, as *Massey* had no Knowledge of French either. One of *Massey's* guides spoke a little Dutch and I could pick out a word once in awhile, so we were a

little better off. Our guides tried to explain what was in store for us and finally we understood that later in the day we would start walking to the town of St. *Angeau*, about 10 miles by the route we would have to take. The time now was about 1000 hours. At about 1600 we started out through the woods and fields seemingly just aimlessly wandering, but actually following some plan of our guides. Our escape route seemed to be well laid out, however, because every once in awhile we would meet various Frenchmen who would tell us the way ahead was clear. These men we met were very emotional, shook our hands, kissed us on the cheek and tears would stream down their cheeks as they said "Thank you" (*Merci*) over and over again. I guess they were thanking us for all Americans.

Photos (3 et 4): *André Fricaud*



All the while we were walking, my leg was really bothering me and I kept slugging at the cognac bottle to keep going. After what seemed an interminable length of time, but actually was only a couple of hours, we met a man with a horse and two-wheeled manure cart. We got in this cart, laid down and were covered over with a bundle of burlap bags and canvas. We jolted, and I do mean jolted, across several fields, along a very rough road and through a small brook and finally stopped at a barn in the center of St. *Angeau*. The driver backed the cart into the barn and we got out. My back muscles, my ribs and my head were aching pretty badly by now and it was a relief to lay on some soft hay for awhile and rest.

We were rather hungry by now, not having eaten for about 18 hours and we tried to tell our benefactors that by pointing to our mouths and stomachs. They finally got the idea and brought us some soup. We damned near burned our throats out with it because we were so hungry and the soup was hot as hell, but never before did soup taste so good. We felt immeasurably better after that but we still couldn't talk to our guides and they couldn't speak to us. The owner of the barn we were in finally managed to inform us that an interpreter was coming. That helped us a great deal, because we had no idea, so far, as to what was in store for us.

The so-called "interpreter" showed up after awhile and we found she was a school teacher with a very limited knowledge of English. Her English was about as good as our French, so we got very little information from her.

Along about midnight, we were given to know that we were to start moving again. By now the

combination of fatigue, shock, cognac, and hot soup had me pretty sleepy and it actually took a great deal of effort on my part to start out again, particularly as we didn't know how we were going, where we were going, or how long it would take to get there.

We started walking through the quiet village and every step felt as though it would be the last on my bad ankle. Soon we reached the outskirts of the town and were turned over to two new guides. We walked and stumbled through the darkness for about two hours and finally came to a farmhouse and entered it. For the last mile or so I was being half carried because my leg had given away entirely, and I couldn't put my weight on it. I was glad to see the end of our journey. A cold supper of meat and bread was laid out for us, but neither *Massey* or I could eat very much. We were so tired we almost fell asleep at the table. Our friends saw that and led us out to the barn and we found a bed made up of hay and blankets. It didn't take us over 30 seconds to get in it and get to sleep. I woke up several times with my various aches and pains, but all in all, had a fine rest and awoke at about 1000, greatly refreshed.



We climbed down out of the hay-mow and found a room similar to a harness room, in which our host, so to speak, awaited us. He seemed to be asking if we wanted to eat, because soon they brought us some break-fast, bread, cheese, and a concoction they called coffee.

Before we ate we had an opportunity to wash in a bucket, but without soap. It was good to wash my eyes with cold water because overnight they had closed considerably. They brought me a mirror too and I was shocked by the appearance of my eyes. The area surrounding them was completely black, eyelids puffed way up and the eyeballs a fiery red. I felt worse after seeing them than I did before.

However, we finished breakfast and asked for some drinking water. They seemed rather surprised that we would want to drink water instead of the wine they offered us, but did bring us some.

We still remembered the warning of our

S-2 at the base about drinking any water, if we went down, without first purifying it and so added the little pills that were in our escape kit and felt safe in drinking it.

Then, about 1100 hours, two strangers came in and intimated that one more of our crew would soon be with us. We tried to find out who it was and if there were any more than one alive, but couldn't make ourselves understood. About 1130 hours, we heard a wagon pull up in front of the barn and Sgt. *Berard*, our Waist Gunner, came in. We were overjoyed to see him and he us. To top it all off, he spoke French. At last we would know what we were going to do. We could also find out if there were anymore of the crew alive but were saddened to hear that all seven of the others had been killed in the crash. So we lost seven good friends: Lt. *Ceresa*, Lt. *Nealon*, Sgt. *Faulkner*, Sgt. *White*, Sgt. *Mahler*, Sgt. *Eames*, and Sgt. *Waters*. We also found that the Germans had been searching for us all night long and one of the Germans doing this had been killed by the Maquis when he became separated from the rest of his patrol. We

learned also that there was a garrison of Germans 20,000 strong about 20 miles from where we landed and about 35 miles from where we now were. Also that the Maquis of French Forces of the Interior would come for us in a few days and supposedly help us get back to *England*. Also that our Host and Hostess were Belgian refugees, with two sons *Paul* and *Alfred*, who worked the farm by day and joined the Maquis at night.

All day long people from a nearby village, who were known to be trustworthy, visited us and really embarrassed us with their profuse thanks. They also brought all sorts of food to help us. We were very much impressed by everyone's desire to help.

That evening, even more people came and we had what you might call a party. Before we were through, we were all pretty well plastered from the wine they "forced" on us. But a good time was had by all.

The next two days, June 21st and 22nd, passed very much the same.

The next day we did nothing but lay around and we had plenty of time to talk among ourselves. We felt that we weren't getting out very fast by staying here and our thoughts were with our folks at home. We knew they would worry if they didn't hear from us soon so we decided to get "mobile".

The Commander of this camp told us it was impossible to walk out of *France* and would give us no assistance in trying to do so. We decided, though, to take the chance and two days later started out.

Sgt. *Guidry* had become quite friendly with one of the Maquis and offered to lead us to a friend of his that might help us plan a route out. We accepted and started off. We walked about seven miles and I found that my ankle just wouldn't stand going too far. I had my doubts then on my ability to walk to *Spain*.

On our arrival at our guide's friend's home, we found a family consisting of a M. *Beau*, his wife, a son about 19, a daughter about 17 and a younger son of 11. They welcomed us, told us they would help us and would have dinner for us in about an hour. We sat around discussing the best way out with these people and had just about decided on a route when our Host said he would contact some Count in the vicinity and get his idea on the subject. So we left our problem at that point and sat down to eat.

These people had just killed a calf that afternoon and we ate the brains, lungs and jowls that evening which they deemed a delicacy. That was the first time any of us had eaten this sort of thing and we were a little squeamish about it. Before we left these people, though, we found we would have to eat damn near all that calf from its horns to its tail.

The next morning M. *Beau* went to see the Count and returned with him. We discussed the situation with them and the Count strongly advised us to stay in this vicinity, because of the impending allied drive expected to free this part of *France* very soon. He offered to get a house for us to stay in, in fact, already had one in mind. We decided to stay because the Count was very persuasive and seemed to know what he was talking about. Three days later, in the evening, we proceeded to our new home. It was an unoccupied farm house in fair shape, set some distance from any main road. There was however, a small road quite close that we were told to "keep an eye on".

We stayed here for most of our stay in *France*. The first few days we were rather nervous and stayed pretty much indoors. However, as the days went by, we became bolder and within 10 days we were moving around pretty freely. We were getting terribly bored, so we offered to work for the neighboring farms, harvesting their crops of wheat, rye, and oats. They were glad to have us because of the shortage of men.

On July 15th we had worked all day in the fields and the farmer invited us to have dinner with him. We accepted, being tired of cooking our own, and went with him to his home.

When we were half through eating we heard a car coming up the road and the farmer and his family became frightened. As it came closer, we saw it was a Maquis car and felt relieved. When it stopped outside, a Maquis rushed in and told us he had an American Officer out there that wanted to see us. We

went out expecting to find another Airman that had been shot down and imagine our amazement when an American Major stepped out in the field uniform of a paratrooper. We actually were speechless for a minute. He was a big 6 foot 200 pound Irish boy from *Boston, Mass.*, down there in *France* to organize the Maquis, teach them how to use American equipment that was dropped to them by parachute, and to maintain radio liaison between the American Army and the Maquis. He had, also, a Sergeant along as a radio man for this purpose. This Sergeant was killed about two weeks later when he and the Major ran into an ambush. The Major luckily escaped in this ambush only by engaging in a running fight with the Jerries and ended up by walking 30 miles back to his headquarters.

In this wood were finding some parts of the B-17 and the corpses.



The Major discussed our position and advised us to stay where we were rather than try to get out. This relieved us a great deal because we constantly had wondered if we were doing our duty by not attempting to get back to *England*. He also told us that he had sufficient money with him to pay for our food and lodging so that we wouldn't be impoverishing the French people in that section. This was a good thing too as we had felt that we were taking away the natives small supplies without

recompense.

The Major also told us he would transmit our names to *England* and they wouldn't send out KIA notices to our people at home. (We found later that they could not notify our folks of our well-being because of security reasons.

From this day on things went pretty smoothly and about August 1st the Major brought us another American Airman, Sgt. *Flakinger*, a Gunner on a B-24 that had been shot down. A week later the Major again arrived at our "Camp" with 5 more Americans he had picked up in the area and one British Merchant Seaman, who had come into *France* on the *Dieppe* Raid. This sailor had been in and out of prison camps several times in the three years he spent in *France* and was in pretty tough shape from the beatings he had taken.

Now, August 10th, our garrison strength was 12 and we called ourselves the "Bastard Detachment of the 8th Air Force".

During the month of August we were pretty free. I mean we could move around, in a radius of 20 miles, in almost perfect safety, The Jerries, at this time, being too occupied with *Patton's* drive South to bother us.

Something discouraging about General *Patton's* drive South was the fact that he didn't come far enough. The Major had given us a small Battery Radio (3" by 6" by 1") and we could pick up American newscasts on it. When we heard General *Patton* was driving South under a 24 hour news blackout, we were pretty excited. We expected momentarily to see him come over the northern horizon and were terribly disappointed when his drive turned East above the River *Loire*.

We visited several towns during August and made many friends. Upon entrance into a town, we always had half the population trailing us wherever we went. We accepted many dinner invitations and these

people really put themselves out to entertain us.

2 ND LT DOMINIC CERESA
T SGT ROBERT L. MALHER
TSCT JAMES P. FAULKNER
SSGT ALFRED E. WIETERS
2 ND LT WILLIAM T. NEALON
TSGT HAROLD L. EAMES
SSGT PAUL A. WHITE



On e home in particular was very nice, that was M. *Masseneau's* (the Mayor's sons). This fellow had quite a lucrative-creamery business in *Chasseneuil* and his dinners were wonderful. They consisted of at least six courses and a different wine for each course. We always left that house in a rosy glow.

Our most interesting visit was to the town of *La Rochefoucauld*. This town was situated five miles from a German garrison, so the element of danger helped make it interesting. In this town was the Castle of the Duke de *La Rochefoucauld* and we were invited to go through it. One portion of it, still in good repair, had been built in 1200, had dungeons, battlements, and even a moat surrounding it.

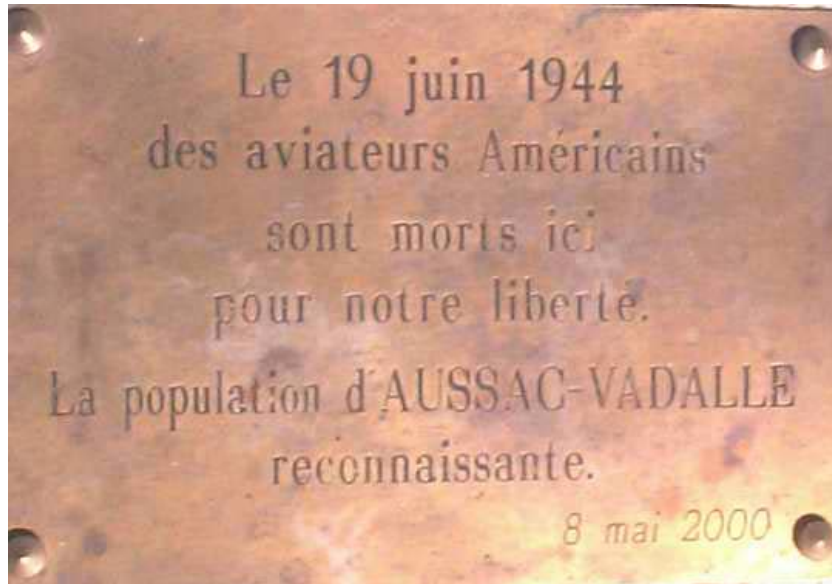
Along toward the end of August, we were getting restless again and were thinking seriously of heading North to the American Lines. Lt. *Gonet*, one of our August arrivals, and I decided to take off the 30th of August. We contacted the Major and had his permission to start, but he strongly advised us to wait one more week. Because of that I decided to stay, but Lt. *Gonet* decided to go on and try to get through. The closest Americans were at the River *Loire* at this time, a distance of 100 to 150 miles. He left on the 30th and on the 1st of September, the Major gathered us ail up and took us to *Limoges*, 50 miles distant, to meet an expected C-47 that was bringing in supplies to the Paratrooper Unit in that area.

We arrived in *Limoges* the afternoon of September 1st and met the detachment of Paratroopers; a very rough-and-ready bunch of boys, and all damned-fine fellows.

We were quartered in the finest hotel *Limoges* had to offer. This hotel had been the headquarters for the German troops in that area only two days before. That was how newly liberated *Limoge* was.

The next morning we were wandering around *Limoges* seeing the sights with the usual crowd of 50 or 100 people following us, when we saw an American Jeep and what looked like, from a distance,

American soldiers in it. We, of course, rushed over to them and found they were War Correspondent. I don't know who was more surprised, us to find correspondents up there, or them to find Americans in civilian clothes in a town that had only been recently liberated. We found they had driven up from *Marseilles* and were trying to get through to *Paris*.



That afternoon we were alerted for the flight and at 2200 hours were taken to the airport. At 0020, September 3rd, we heard a plane and shortly saw her outlined against the moon. The field was only lighted by about five flare pots and the plane circled four or five times. We were sweating her out hoping that she wouldn't go away without landing. Finally she did come in and we all breathed a sigh of relief.

In a very few minutes, we had her unloaded and piled aboard sans parachutes. Ail of us, of course, had been in an aircraft accident

and were a little nervous about flying without chutes, but the end justified the means.

We took off at 0045, flew for four hours and ten minutes, and landed in *England*. It would be impossible to describe our feelings on landing in Allied territory again and knowing that we would soon be home.

Two weeks later, we met Lt. *Gonet*, the fellow who left us the day before we went to *Limoges*. He had walked every step of the way to the American Lines, been shot at several times, and had to swim the River *Loire*.

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