

# The Illustrated Story of the Silver Bracelet

by

Todd N. Weiler  
August 18, 2024



## Prologue

I am very honored and humbled to be the conduit through which the information and pictures you are about to read has flowed. When I first heard this story as a child, I was always intrigued by the quest to find my Uncle's crash site in Europe. Being a WWII story I always imagined the crash site to be in Germany where the heart of the war was. Little did I expect it was where the heart of my Uncle was...in a rural farm area just like his hometown of Burlington, Wisconsin...in the country of what was then called Czechoslovakia.

The next amazing part of this tale is how much of it happened serendipitously. I almost on purpose didn't intentionally look for details as they kept coming without me looking for them. I feared I would jinx it and the magic would end if I did. I was fortunate to make hundreds of new friends here and abroad, on this journey leading me to the discovery of this lost chapter of Weiler family history. This is a story about a tragedy that turned around as if to balance the injustice that occurred. It's a travel back in time story, a mystery, an aviation story, a history lesson, a travel adventure, and a story about hope with love. It affirms there are good people in the world and we share good values equally.

This complete story would not be possible without the help of key individuals. First is Svatopluk (Svat) Vaculik who tirelessly searches for Americans tied to Mission 263 and found me. Next are Jozka and Marie Spelina who together managed to return the silver bracelet, despite encountering many set backs and misinformation. Their perseverance and dedication to fill in the provenance of the bracelet for 22 years is a blessing from which this story is built upon. Next is Vlastimil Hela and Roman Susil who are part of a Czech "Memorialization" crew who annually keep alive the sacrifices of these 41 airmen. They host events where the B-17's crashed. They validate that the airmen who gave their final last full measure of devotion to bring freedom to the Czech people, was not in vain. To Jana Turčínková and Lenka Lewis who translated the many conversations over the years so that I may learn the eyewitness accounts directly from the Czech people.

I owe thanks to many people; to Loy Dickinson who encouraged me to dig deeper and learn more about the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group. His excellent book "Mission 263" with co-authors Bill Tune and Frank Pindak was a crucial reference. To "Jersey Joe", Joe P. Owsianik who befriended me early on and tossed down the gauntlet to travel to the Czech Republic with him; to the hundreds of 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group veterans who shared their stories of the war with me and enabled me to capture the essence of what my Uncle James A. Weiler went through. To all the historians in the US, France, England, Germany, Italy and the Czech Republic who diligently combed the Internet and web pages adding additional material to this story every year. Mission 263 is fortunate to have garnered so much publicity, that now an "army" of people are still looking...because they know about it.

It was hard to organize and connect so many stories with so many pictures over the past 19 years into a cohesive and engaging read. I hope this effort meets your expectations. Maybe through reading it, you will become a part of the mission 263 family. Also as a result may you never forget the sacrifices our veterans paid. I wish you luck in researching your own family history and never give up hope for looking. It seems fate and serendipity are entwined some how. You may never know how though if you don't try and look for yourself. Do it now before it gets harder. Good luck and all the best. In honor of the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Mission 263 August 29, 2024!

# The Illustrated Story of the Silver Bracelet

By Todd N. Weiler



White...black...white...black...light...dark...on and on and on. It was like looking through a flickering shutter of an old kinescope movie, but in slow motion. Looking skyward on a cold February day in 1966 I was mesmerized by the flickering light through the overhead skeleton bone bare tree branches in winter lining the road. This was my first memory of my Uncle James A. Weiler. He was the unseen Uncle my relatives would always talk about. Today we were piled into the family white Ford station wagon to learn more. We were headed to Burlington, WI for another family visit with grandma Nora Weiler. She had some news about her son James A. Weiler who was missing in action in WWII.

The country road we traveled on wandered through wide-open fields broken up with long tunnels of huge elm trees standing like timeless sentinels lining both sides of the road. As the car passed quickly through the leafless "tree tunnels" their long winter shadows created a mesmerizing strobe-like effect as if blinking to clear an object stuck in one's eye. Sometimes the road went so close to a barn we could see a farmer inside milking his cows. Sadly, this experience is no longer possible. All the elm trees are gone having fallen victim to time and Dutch Elm disease. Some how the bleak winter cold absence of life was a fitting setting to learn the news of an unseen relative.

As a 12-year old suburban dweller, these rides were a welcome reprieve from the relative congestion of Milwaukee. I tried to imagine what it was like for my dad, Joseph and his brother Jim, to live in this rural farm area growing up. Looking skyward I wondered how a small town country boy like Jim felt about seeing airplanes soaring high in the sky hoping for the day he could escape and follow his dream to join them. Little did he expect to discover that his dream would turn so dark. Fate dealt him a cruel hand. He was at the wrong place at the wrong time. He became one of the thousands of missing airmen casualties of the war over Europe at the end of August in 1944.

My grandmother, as perhaps all mothers, always held out against all the negative reports of Jim missing in action. She hoped that some day, even 22 years later, that he would just some how come home and the reports were wrong. She thought he had a head injury and didn't know who he was. She always hoped. Never a doubt. But today that changed. I will never forget that look on her face.





A small brown paper wrapped box covered in postage stamps had arrived from Canada bearing a note about the silver bracelet. It had spent 22 years behind the so-called “iron curtain” only to now be returned. The sender sent news of how it was found in earlier letters to confirm he had the right family. Watching my grandmother hold it tore her soul out. The glimmer in her eyes of hope, against hope, was gone.

The bracelet was made of solid silver and about 1/8 inch thick, a half-inch wide and two inches long. It bore the inscription of “James A. Weiler” and a pilot’s wings logo. On the back was a date, October 1, 1943 and the letters “C” and “A”. The “C” was for Catholic and the “A” for his blood type. Jim’s parents, Jake and Nora Weiler gave this ID bracelet to him upon his graduation from flight school and becoming an Army Air Corps pilot. The silver links added weight to the bracelet making it feel heavy as one held it in their hands. Many other pilots had similar bracelets. But this bracelet had been to hell and back. It was no forgery. It had a story to tell. A story that struggled to get out, but persevered through some very serendipitous circumstances.

As my grandmother held the bracelet, it was painful for her to look at it. She just uttered that tongue clicking noise like old people do when they don’t approve of something. The bracelet had been severely twisted and bent. It had a deep gash in it. As we passed it around and we all looked at it in our small hands. One couldn’t imagine any case where one could have survived wearing it in the

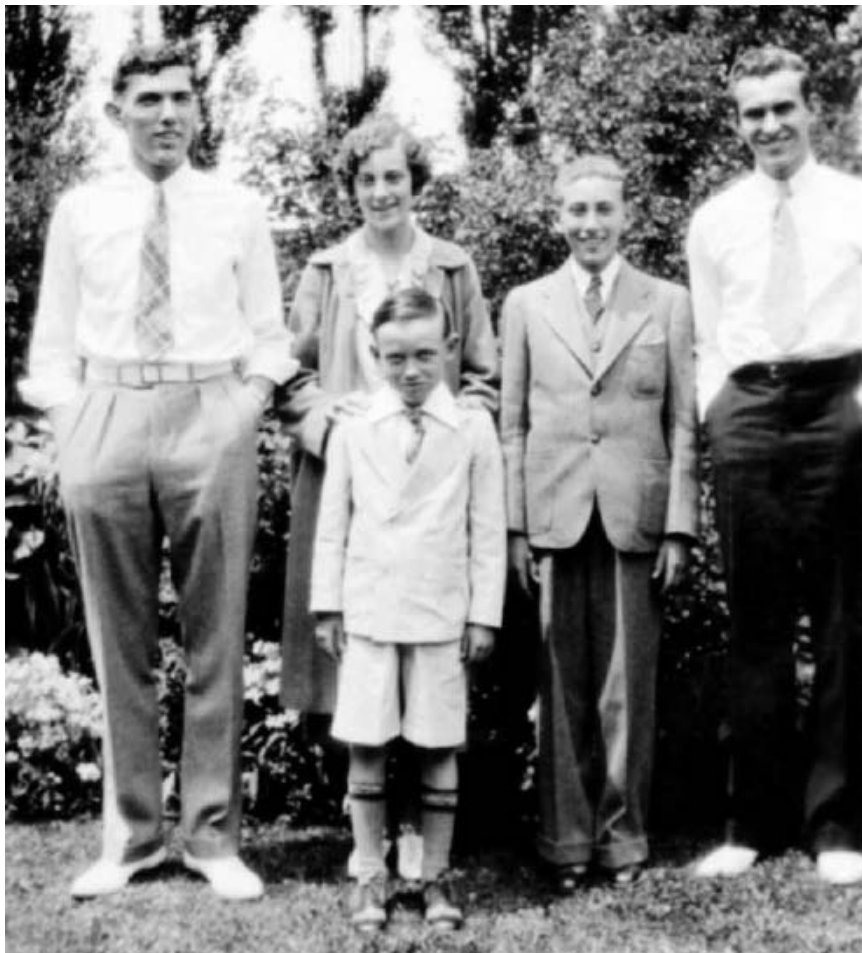


condition it was in. It was the final answer to the question my grandmother dreaded. The answer was in a box to all those long 22 years. That door of doubt had now closed forever...never to be opened again by her. But as the saying goes...as one door closes, another opens. This is a story about how the pendulum of fate, which swung horribly bad at first, was about to swing back into balance towards something remarkably good. Hence this is that story...the story of the Silver Bracelet.

### **Jim's Home Town Burlington, WI**

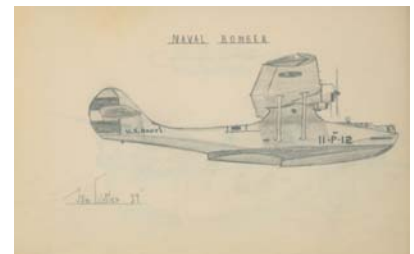
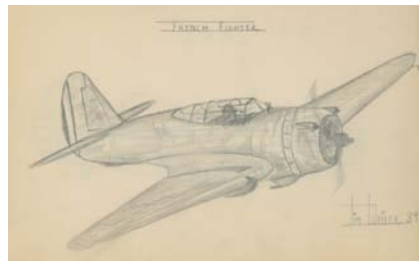
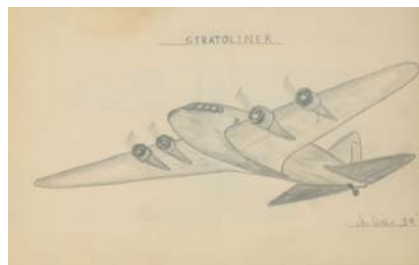
Our story begins with my Uncle James A. Weiler. Jim was the third son of Jacob and Nora Weiler. He was nearly a New Year's baby, being born on December 30, 1921. Jake was the local veterinarian having graduated from the top of his class of the Chicago Veterinarian School. They lived in a modest home on McHenry Street, a few blocks from the hill topping St. Mary's Catholic Church. Jake worked to have the Milwaukee dioceses build a catholic church in Burlington.

Jim's oldest brother was Harold, followed by my dad Joseph and then his sister Mary. Philip was the youngest and Jim's fourth brother. Harold and Joe were close enough in age they both played on the St. Mary's High School "Hill Toppers" basketball league at the same time. Jim's interests lay outside of traditional sports. He was into archery having won several competitions and, of course, his soaring interest in airplanes.

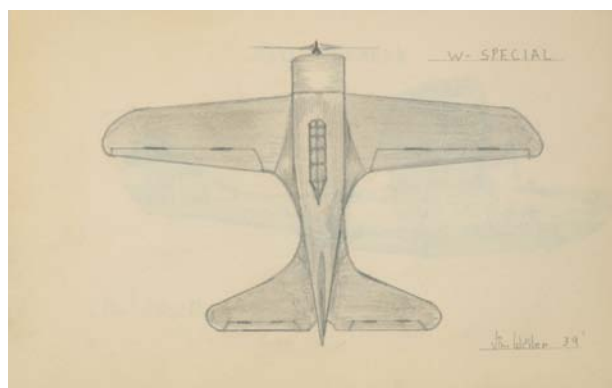
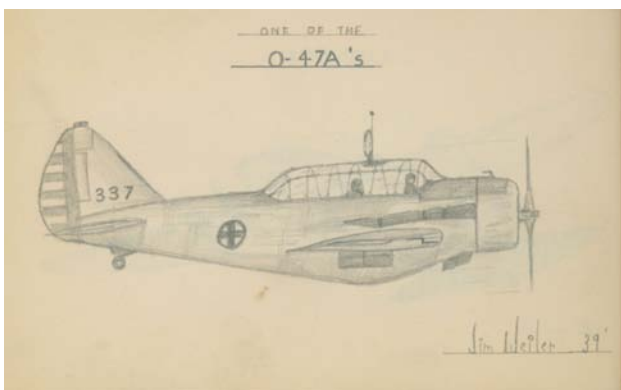


Weiler children 1935 (L-R) Harold (Doc), Mary, James, Joseph and Philip Weiler in front.

Everyone who knew Jim remarked about how he loved airplanes. This is also evident in the sketchbook that Jim kept as a teenager. Sketchbooks are often a great window into the soul of a person. He drew all the things teenagers draw...birds, nature, butterflies, and mom. It was a kaleidoscope of all the things he was exposed to in his small town. But clearly, as he matured, his true interest immersed.



Jim's Drawings and Archery awards



The "Weiler Special" by Jim Weiler 1939.



1939 St. Mary's HS graduation Picture



Last Drawing in the sketchbook. Note the markings!

Suddenly Jim Weiler's sketchbook was all about airplanes. He copied designs from what he saw or read about. He copied the distinctive marking of the then Army Air Corps with the stripes on the ailerons and elevators with a black band around the fuselage. He even drew one of his own designs, which he labeled the "Weiler Special". His last plane drawing is prophetically marked. It's the only one drawn going down in a dive and the black banding and tail stripes were on his last B-17! It was a dark prophecy drawn in pencil five years ahead of time.

He always said as soon as he could graduate from high school that he was going to learn how to build airplanes. True to his boast, as soon as he graduated from high school in 1939, he went to Glenview, California for technical training and then Burbank, California to learn how to build airplanes at the Lockheed plant.

Before he left, the Weiler family endured a dietary disaster perhaps called the "Can Luck" disaster. My Dad loved talking about it, especially if we complained about our meal. The place where they lived on McHenry Street was down hill from St. Mary's. In one particular storm, the home was flooded up to the first floor. Unfortunately, the food pantry was in the basement. The water had soaked everything there for days. When it dried out, all the cans had lost their labels. So the family had to endure "Can Luck" not "Pot Luck" meals. It meant if you opened two cans of sour kraut...that is what's for dinner. Too bad!





The Weiler home flooded.

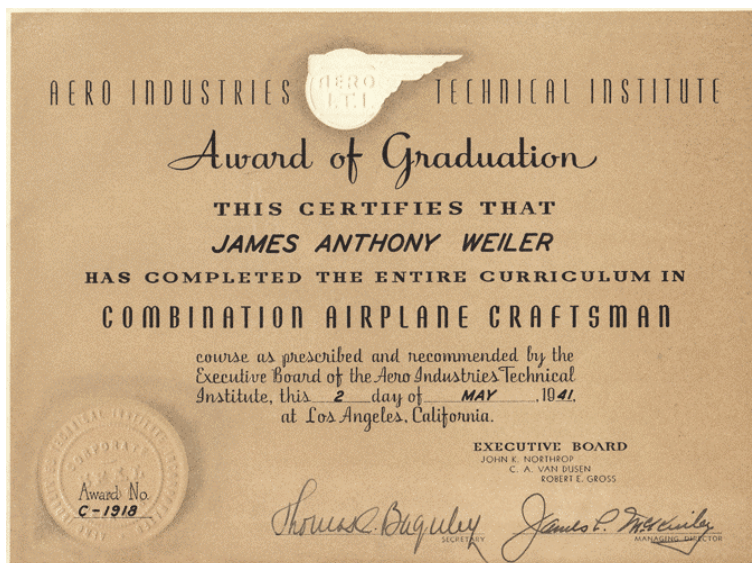


Jim's sketch of the Weiler Home on McHenry Street.

Food was never a real problem for the Weiler family. Jake being the area's only veterinarian and surrounded by farms with cows always had access to food. In fact, during the depression, he was paid in barter with meat and vegetables to the point of nearly running out of cash. He had to pay cash for the medicines and tools he needed. But since the Weilers lived near the train tracks, my dad said, the hoboes learned that the Weiler house always treated them with kindness. A good meal was often assured in their home.

### Building planes in California

Jim was hard at work in California building planes. He was doing what he loved and met other like-minded people. He met a crewmate Thomas Maribito there who also went through training. He wasn't there long, when on December 7, 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, Honolulu, Hawaii. It didn't take long for the Weiler boys to sign up for the military branch that they were interested in.



Jim Weiler is certified to work on airplanes.



"Doc" Weiler Navy flight instructor.

Harold the oldest went to fly for the Navy. He ended up as a stateside flight instructor out of Corpus Christi, TX. My father Joseph went into the Army tank corps ending up in the 33<sup>rd</sup> Armored division. Jim in July of 1942 quit his job in Glendale, CA and signed up for the Army Air Corps. Youngest Weiler was Philip, who was itching to get into the Navy at age 17. Soon the Weiler boys

were scattered all across the country. My Grandma Nora proudly hung a banner in the front window of her home with four blue stars on it signifying she had four sons involved in the war. Tragically...one was to go gold.



Weiler Family 1940.  
(L-R) Jim, Doc, Mary, Nora, Philip, Jacob, Joseph.



The Weiler family 1942 winter. (L-R) Mary. Joseph, Nora, Jim, Jake, Harold (Doc) and Philip.

### **Basic Training and Flight School**

July of 1942 was time for Jim to have his dream come true and learn to fly the airplanes he drew and built. He received his primary pilot training in Santa Anna, California graduating January 13, 1943



with the Pilot Recruit Class 42. Then it was off to his basic training at Thunderbird, Phoenix, Arizona. He then went on to Marfa, Texas where he received his silver pilot wings along with the 7,000 other American pilots who trained there until the end of the war. He received his commission as a second lieutenant on October 1, 1943. That is when Jim got his silver bracelet.



You can find Jim Weiler upper right second row.



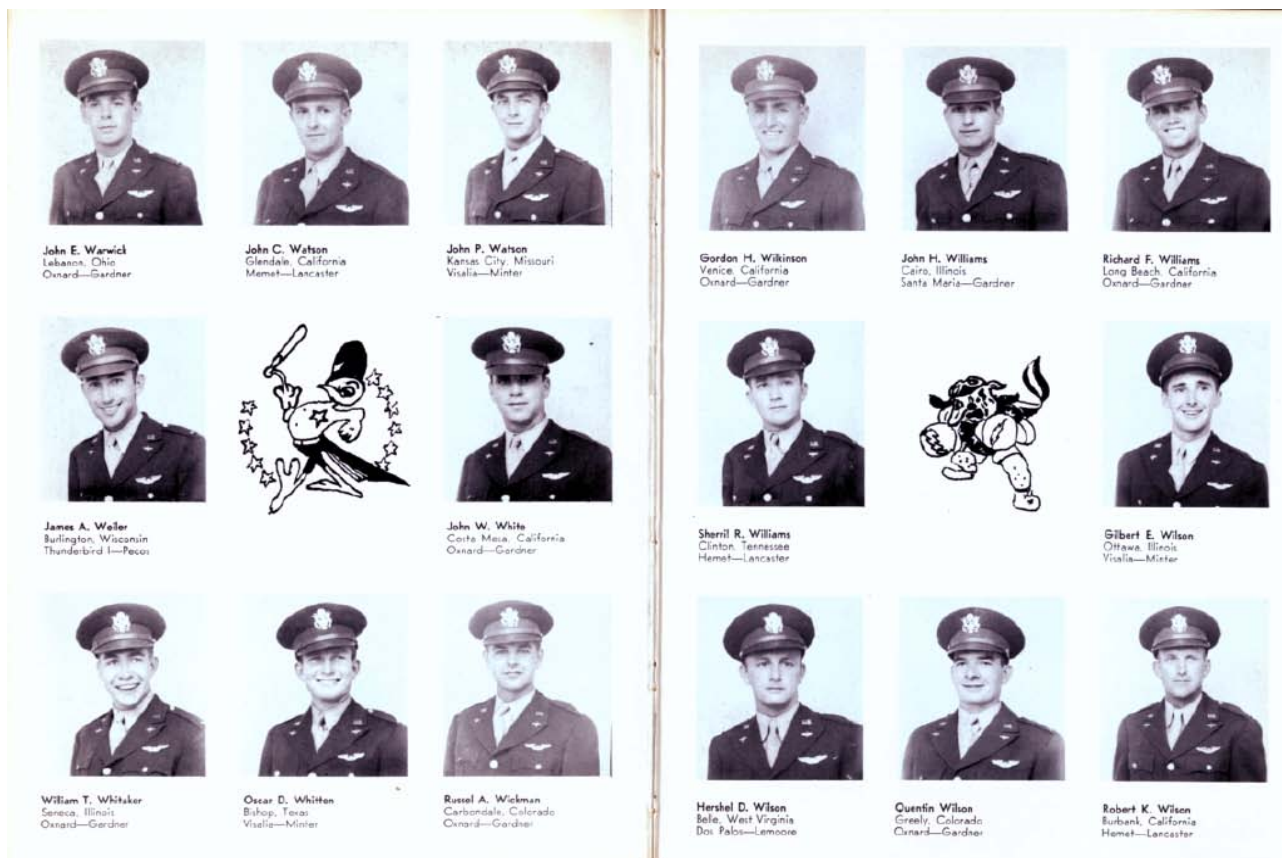
Cadet picture.

James A. Weiler  
279 McHenry Street  
Burlington, Wisconsin  
Primary—Thunderbird No. 1



Cadet picture.





Marfa Class 1943 Note: John Warwick friend upper left above Jim Weiler.

Jim's yearbooks are filled with pictures of pilots with black corners. A number of his classmates died in flight training and such was the notation in the yearbook. The Air Corps was a risky business and many things could go wrong. Note the picture of John Warwick in the upper left corner. John Warwick was a close friend of Jim's in flight school. Warwick and Weiler being alphabetically close, likely shared the same seats next to each other often. John Warwick survived the war and upon learning the death of his close friend Jim, decided to honor him by naming his first son Jim! Jim Warwick had a picture of his namesake in his home for decades not knowing who he was. In 2007, after reading my accounts of my visit to the Czech Republic (CZ), he contacted me and I filled him in on the rest of the story. The Weiler boys also made a pact that whoever had the first son...he would be named Jim. Harold was the first to have a son, and thus James Courtney Weiler was born. They lived in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Jim Warwick lived in Gallup, New Mexico. The two "Jims" never knew of each other living just 2 hours apart for decades. Jim C. Weiler passed in 2002 while Jim Warwick attended the Czech Republic 263 Commemoration in 2009.

Jim's older brother Harold told an interesting story about Jim's pilot graduation. After graduating Harold and Jim took a plane, likely an A-6 Texan and flew home to visit the family. There is a great picture of Jim in a leather and sheepskin flight suit striking a pose and pointing to the sky while his sister Mary is standing on the porch of the family home smiling in approval or embracement.



Jim at home with his Sister Mary.



Jim with goggles.

After their brief visit with the remaining Weiler family in Burlington it was time to get back to the base at Fort Sill, Texas. On the journey home Jim's brother Harold, or "Doc" took the controls. Doc was Harold's nickname after "Doctor" Jake Weiler the town veterinarian. The two-seater plane took off and the two Weiler boys were headed south. Soon the small plane got into a storm. Doc was in the front seat as the pilot and lost track of his position. Doc tapped the top of his head as a sign for Jim to fly the plane so he could check the maps and get his bearings straight. A short while later the plane went into a steep dive with a severe spiral and nearly crashed. Doc pulled the plane out of the spin and leveled it off and asked why Jim lost control of the plane? Jim said, "I didn't know I was supposed to be flying the plane!" Doc replied, "Didn't you see me tap my head?" Jim said, "No I never saw that signal!" So right there, just after Jim's graduation, both Weiler boys, both pilots, could have been killed over a simple hand signal and miscommunication. Fate is fickle indeed.

Jim was then transferred to Roswell, New Mexico for special four-engine training and received his final combat training at Drew Field in Tampa, Florida and then Hunter Field in Savannah, Georgia. This is where nearly all the U.S. WWII B-17 crews embarked for Europe. There was a rose trellis covered Quonset hut that all the airmen posed next to for the crew photo. While many airmen had this crew picture, very few wrote the names on the back of the photo. How that miracle happened will be covered later.

It was frustrating to have such a beautiful picture and not know any of the names of the airman standing alongside Jim. Many of the airmen were sporting their "Brownie Belts". These were the brown leather holstered 45 caliber pistols issued to all the crew members in case they got shot down. As nice as that sounds it wasn't so practical. In reality the downed airmen would surrender their pistol to their captor only then to be shot with it. Soon word got back to the crews and they learned to empty the gun tossing the cartridges one way and tossing the gun the other way or hiding it away from them. The odds of surviving after being captured greatly improved.



Jim Weiler can be seen wearing his silver bracelet with his hand on his knee and rolled up sleeves.

### Arrival in Italy

It was now July of 1943 and the Allies had just driven Gen. Rommel and Germans out of North Africa. Fresh replacement crews were coming in from the States regularly. The flight route took them over the Labrador coast of Canada, to Greenland, Iceland and Britain. German U-boats would sit off the coast of England jamming navigation beacons and sending false codes hoping the bombers would follow them missing their turn and run out of fuel having to ditch. From there it was a gas up in England and hop down to Gibraltar, then to the North African coast to Massicault, Tunisia. Then they flew north to Italy and the Adriatic east coast. An alternate route went from Brazil to North Africa. The desert flight training was not as crucial now the Americans had taken the airfields at Foggia, Italy in March of 1943. Foggia was near that tiny boot spur on the boot of Italy sticking out along the Adriatic Sea near the port of Manfredonia. It was a busy place. Half a dozen or more airports crowded the Foggia air complex. Jim was assigned to the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Corps, 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Wing, 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group and the 20<sup>th</sup> squadron at Amendola. Amendola airport today remains an active air



base under the control of the Italian Air Force. Not much remains of the Allied World War II presence there. There is a story about it by Linda Gartz on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb web page.

The Amendola base consisted of one airstrip and two American bomb groups on either side of it. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group was on the south side and the 97<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group was on the north. The British were tucked in the southwest corner of the field flying their Wellington or “Wimpy” bombers. By day, the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 97<sup>th</sup> bomb groups flew daylight missions. By night, the British flew the night missions. The round-the-clock bombing was part of the strategic bombardment plan of the US Air General Curtis Lemay. No rest for the enemy. Nearby the Foggia air complex was growing and the fighter support bases housed the famous Redtails of the Tuskegee Airmen. They provided cover for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb group. The bomber pilots I talked to had nothing but praise for the Redtails as they always stayed to protect their bombers. That was the Redtail’s prime directive. Unlike some other units that may have been in pursuit of any fighters in hopes of becoming an ACE or upping their record number of kills.

Foggia air complex in July 1943 did not yet have complete air superiority. Bomber losses were down significantly from initial 40% in April 1943 to about 20% in July and dropping. It was still a dangerous time to be a bomber pilot with the outcome of the war undecided.



Foggia Air Base in 1944.

Ironically I made this map of the Amendola field drawn up from the memories of Milton Zamboni. He was one of the chief mechanics working on the planes. He knew where every plane was parked of every squadron. When I ask the pilots where they parked their planes...none could remember! Thank goodness for mechanics! They are the unsung heroes from whom we have so little documentation. They were priceless!

There was typically a crew chief sergeant and 3 mechanics. They had to patch up and repair the squadron's planes. They would be able to replace engines, wings and half a fuselage if needed. The ability of the B-17 to bring its crew home was legendary.

One such plane named "Sweet Pea" from the 20<sup>th</sup> squadron had a flak round detonate inside by the waist gunners killing them. The plane stayed together and flew back. The ground crew looked up and heard what sounded like a loud train whistle. They saw the stricken plane with a hole through it. It landed and just as it came to a full stop it cracked in half. The ball turret gunner was extracted and grateful to be in a steel ball. However the damage prevented his exiting before landing.

### **First missions from Amendola Italy**



Pictured above is the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb group's 429<sup>th</sup> squadron's "Sweet Pea". The ball turret gunner Elmer Buss survived. Note the open hatch. Next picture is 20<sup>th</sup> Squadron B-17 "Big Stuff" sits on the hard stand at Foggia. The plane went down on a mission to Ruhland, Germany March 23rd 1945 on its 109th mission. Two engines out, prop wind milling, it belly landed near Kety, Poland. The crew survived. Note the distinctive "Y" of the Second Bomb Group on the tail.

Jim Weiler didn't waste any time getting into combat. As was the practice, the training crew was broken up on arrival and they flew initially mixed in with the more experienced crews. After a few missions they would be reunited...if able. The crew photo shown was taken at Savannah, Georgia and taken on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1944. A month later July 5<sup>th</sup>, Jim was at the right-hand seat controls of a fully loaded and armed B-17 as co-pilot. His target was in Montpelier, France. Ten days later he was going after the oil fields of Polesti, Romania again as co-pilot. A week later, again the oil fields of Polesti, but now flying left seat as a full pilot in command. On August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1944 his next mission was to Freidrichschafen, Germany. Then Blechhammer, Germany on the 7<sup>th</sup>, Savona area Italy, on the 12<sup>th</sup>, Toulon, France, on the 14<sup>th</sup>, St. Valier, France on the 16<sup>th</sup>, Oswiecim Poland on the 20<sup>th</sup>, Vienna, Austria on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, Bruno, Czechoslovakia on the 25<sup>th</sup>, Blechhammer, Germany again on the 27<sup>th</sup> and then the dreaded 13<sup>th</sup> mission flown by Jim Weiler...Mission 263. Moravska Ostrava, Czechoslovakia on August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1944.

Now it was time to for Jim to write his first letter to his older brother Harold "Doc" Weiler. It was written Aug 9, 1944 two days after finishing a mission to Blechhammer Germany. Doc was a busy

flight instructor for the Navy in the Gulf of Mexico at a base near Corpus Christi, Texas. Jim had completed five missions when he wrote this.

Aug. 19th  
Dear Doc,  
Your letter of Aug. 3rd arrived today. About time the "Judge" dropped his kid brother a line. Have already dropped a few for you & right where they'd do the most good. A letter from Mom brought news of Lloyd Murphy & Dan Dardis passing to the great beyond. I bet old "Murph" went down a fighting Irishman. Haven't lost any of my boys yet. Some of my buddies' crews weren't so lucky. Bob Davies is on his way home according to reports from Pat Schroeder who is in A-20's on Corsica. Stan Weichert is there & at present is grounded with a little "flak" in him. That stuff really gets around. A lot of my buddies from the States have hit in this territory so I see them at the American Red Cross Center in Foggia on our "non-ops" days. The news sure looks good now & I sure hope it stays that way. A lot of fellows are thinking this fruckus is coming to a close over here and they'll be sent right over to the Pacific Theater from here to complete their missions. In general, the opinion is very optimistic.

I appreciate your thoughtfulness "Doc" but there isn't anything I need. Our set up is OK & there's plenty of everything in that line. 8th AF sent a bunch of lads down here for training. Guess the weather is P-poor up there. They have been pulling some shuttle bombing deals to Russia. Wanted to get in on one of those. I have a bunch of stuff including my camera coming by soon. Hope it gets here, as I'd like to take some pictures. Were able to go swimming quite a bit in the Adriatic. Not quite as salty as the Pacific. You have to be a one man air force to get a promotion around here. Hope that news changes colors soon. Been 11 months now since you flew the old Curtiss Falcon to Major for Graduation. I lost faith in the Navy's navigation that time. Fort Self here are camp. Hah! Looking forward to Lora's letter which means a lot over here. Oh yes! I'll remember that airspeed. Jimbo

Dear Doc,

Your letter of August 3 arrived today. About time the "Judge" dropped his kid brother a line. Have already dropped a few for you and right where they would do the most good. A letter from mom brought news of Lloyd Murphy and Dan Dardis passing to the great beyond. I bet old "Murph" went down a fighting Irishman. Haven't lost any of my boys yet.

Some of my buddy's crews weren't so lucky. Bob Davies is on his way home according to reports from Pat Schroeder who is in A-20's on Corsica. Stan Weichert is there and at present is grounded with a little "flak" in him. That stuff really gets around.

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like to take some pictures. We're able to go swimming quite a bit in the Adriatic. Not quite as salty as the Pacific.

You have to be a one man Air Force to get a promotion around here. Hope these leaves change color soon. Been 11 months now since you flew the old Curtis "Falcons" to Marfa for graduation. I lost faith in the Navy's navigation that time. Fort Sill here we come. Hey! Looking forward to Lena's letters. Mail means a lot over here. Oh yes, I'll remember that airspeed.  
Signed Jimbo.

The living conditions on the base a Foggia were spartan even for the Air Corps. The captured field at Amendola was a wide-open flat land, fairly arid and hot in summer, mostly good for raising sheep and growing olives. When it rained it was a mud hole barely able to support the weight of the 32-ton fully loaded bombers on hard stands of steel press plate. The bivouacs (housing) for Jim were located away from the field about 5 miles away up the road towards command headquarters heading to Manfredonia. Campgrounds might be a more accurate term than housing. Some wine cellar tunnels and hollowed out caves provided a theater and social amenities safe from bombing. The officer's club was built from "borrowed" materials as there wasn't much left after the Germans fled. Life in summer there was just plain hot. White skivvies and sandals were in fashion. Officer tents were not much better. If lucky, they had a half-brick wall and all had a canvas roof with a stovepipe out the top. For heat and cooking, an old 55-gallon drum was hollowed out to accommodate a small copper pipe that slowly dripped 100-octane AV gas. Drop by drop it would burn. More than one tent was reported to have burned as a suspected result.



Summer in Amendola.



Bomb Proof theater.

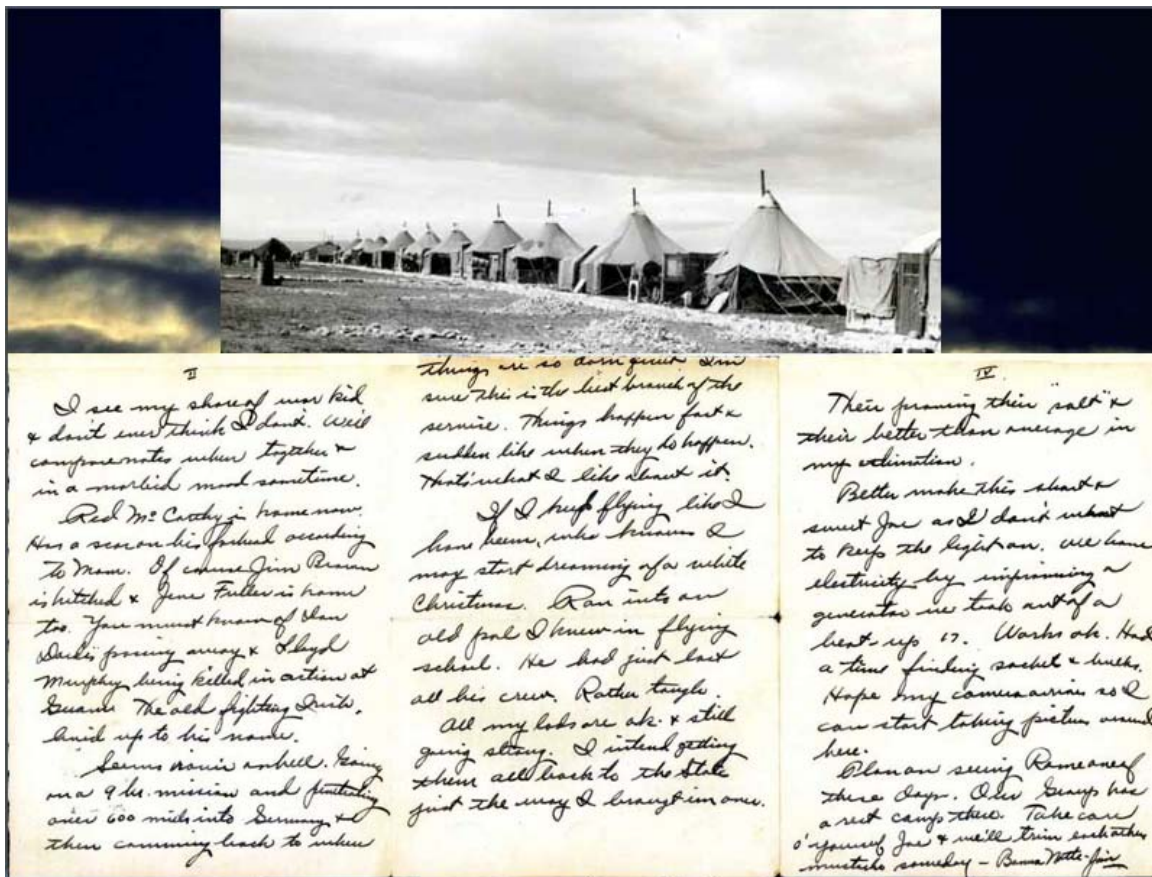


Plane Crash.



Brick walls for some tents if lucky.

On the night of August 27<sup>th</sup>, after finishing another raid on Blechhammer, Germany, just two days before Mission 263, my Uncle Jim penned another letter. This time to his brother Joseph, my father. Joe was driving tanks through northern France after landing on Normandy on the third day after the invasion. My dad said his only claim to fame there was that he was the first dental patient on the beach. A dental clinic was set up for the invasion, but it had no patients miraculously. He walked right in and they fixed his tooth. Meanwhile Jim, his brother, set to ink what life was like on the Italian base. Sitting under a dusty canvas roof and using only dim lighting from a beat up B-17 generator and light bulb...he began writing again.



Lt. Jim A. Weiler's last letter to his brother Joseph N. Weiler mailed August 29, 1944.

(August 27, 1944)

Dear Joe,

Late at night and the rest of the lads are “sacking it in” as they have an early mission tomorrow. Trying out a new type of stationary I bought with my ration ticket.

Guess you know our brother Phil is up and attempting to join the Navy. Beats me! Bob Davies is on his way back home again from Corsica. Pat Schiebe and Stan Wrickert are on Corsica also. Stans grounded temp. with some flak in him. Nasty stuff. Those Jerrys around Vurran and Ploesti are geniuses with the stuff.

I see my share of war kid and don't ever think I don't. We'll compare notes when together and in a morbid mood sometime.

Red McCarthy is home now. Has a scar on his forehead according to Mom. Of course Jim Brauner is hitched and Jene Fuller is home too. You must know of Dan Dardes passing away and Lloyd Murphy being killed in action at Guam. The old fighting Irish lived up to his name.

Seems ironic around here. Going on a 9 hour mission and penetrating over 600 miles into Germany and then crossing back to where things are so darn quiet. I'm sure this is the best branch of the service. Things happen fast and sudden like when they do happen. That's what I like about it.

If I keep flying like I have been, who knows I may start dreaming of a White Christmas. Ran into an old pal I knew in flying school. He had just lost all his crew. Rather tough.

All my lads are OK and still going strong. I intend getting them all back to the States just the way I brought them over.

They are proving their “salt” and they're better than average in my estimation.

Better make this short and sweet Joe as I don't want to keep the lights on. We have electricity by improvising a generator we took out of a beat up 17. Works OK. Had a time finding sockets and bulbs.

Hope my camera arrives so I can start taking pictures around here. Plan on seeing Rome one of these days. Our group has a rest camp there. Take care o' yourself Joe and we'll trim each others mustache some day — Bonna Natte- Jim

Jim Weiler was only 22 years old when he wrote this. He was talking like a proud, responsible father intent on getting all his “lads” back the way he brought them over. That's one heck of a huge responsibility for such a young man and 5,000 miles from home and family.

## **The Milk Run**

Mission 263 was scheduled to hit the Privoser Oil Refinery and the marshalling (rail) yards near Moravska Ostrava in Czechoslovakia. The oil refineries were a secondary target if the first (rail yards) were clouded over. Supposedly as many as 1,500-3,000 rail cars loaded with munitions and supplies were getting ready to move. It had been sighted earlier on P-38 reconnaissance photos. It called for a “maximum effort” so a large number of other bomb groups joined in the raid. It was considered to be a “Milk Run” which in the parlance of the Air Corps meant “an easy” mission. They had flown big groups of bombers from the area almost daily and the German Luftwaffe had suffered heavy losses as a result. The Germans were not expected to put up much of a challenge.

The B-17 crews got up at 3 AM and had their powdered eggs and coffee. Meat occasionally, but not guaranteed. The coffee was not Starbucks. Then came the mission briefing and the details of the

approach to the target. The pilots and navigators remained for a more detailed briefing. The crews were then transported to their planes all set on the flight line by 5:15 AM. Each bomber carried 10 men. They were the Pilot, Co-pilot, Navigator, Radio Operator, Bomb Bombardier/Bomb Toggler who is the one who fuses the bombs, opens the bomb bay doors, then operates the Norden bomb site timing the bomb drop to hit the target. The Top Turret gunner doubled as a Flight Engineer. He generally carried a pair of vice-grips to connect any severed flight control cables. The B-17 was a pulley and cable flight control system; hence the strength of two pilots would be needed to overcome a steep dive. The B-24's had hydraulic flight controls and weren't as lucky if control lines were severed. Then there were two Waist Gunners, a Ball Turret gunner and a Tail gunner to complete a full crew. The bomb load was 20-250 lb. bombs. Ammunition for the "Fortress's" defensive guns was 500 50-caliber rounds per gun. Waist gunners would occasionally get 1000 extra each. The 50 cal M2 machine gun was capable of shooting 1,400-1,600 rounds a minute. So gunners had less than a minute's worth of ammo most of the time. The Hollywood bravado of gunners shooting a stream of bullets would have melted the barrel. Instead it was more of a 1, 2, 3 style of shooting. The 9 yards of ammo for each gun remains a debated fact.

The Norden Bomb sight was touted as being a pinpoint accurate device for hitting a target. The Germans wanted one badly. Bombardiers were responsible for destroying it if bailing out. The claim of hitting inside a "pickle barrel" was wildly inaccurate. It could of, if that pickle barrel was 1,200 ft. wide. As a result, new tactics were used called "Bomb on Lead" and "Saturation Bombing". Bomb on lead meant the bombardier only had to prep the bombs and watch the lead plane to drop first. Then he would drop. It would help provide the forward guns more defensive firepower too. The saturation bombing was to drop enough bombs to obliterate an entire area. Hence, collateral damage was likely. As bombing of cities with concentrations of retreating German forces in them continued, sadly the civilians were often in the "cross fire".

Each squadron had on average ten planes. They were expected to have seven ready for each mission. Due to losses and battle damage that job was a tough task for the ground crews to tend to after every mission. On this Mission 263, the four squadrons that made up the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group were able to get seven planes up from each squadron. The squadrons were the 20<sup>th</sup>, the 49<sup>th</sup>, the 96<sup>th</sup>, and the 429<sup>th</sup>. They all had been fighting their way northward to Italy from North Africa since mission #1 April 28, 1943. The mission number tells you how many missions it took to get that far. Their last mission at the end of the war would be #412 on May 1, 1945.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group of the 15<sup>th</sup> Army Air Corps Force likes to brag that the 2<sup>nd</sup> was First! This is because while England started flying first, the lousy weather there limited the number of missions. Meanwhile the dry African and Mediterranean weather had better flying conditions. As a result the 2<sup>nd</sup> bomb group flew more missions and dropped more bombs than any other bomb group. They never really got the recognition they deserved because the trans-Atlantic telephone cable was in England, where more news reports were filed on the 8 Air Force from than Italy's 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force. By the time the news reached England about victories in Italy, it was old news and nobody cared as much.

There were ominous foreshadowing signs that day. Joe Owsianik was a left wing gunner and cameraman on William Tunes "Tail End Charlie" #159. As Joe approached his plane a mechanic warned Joe not to fly that day. Joe asked why? The mechanic said after a plane has been badly been



badly shot up, they tend to crash shortly thereafter. The plane Joe was going on was shot up a week before. Not a good sign. Later Joe said while they were in flight to the target they heard Axis Sally, the female Nazi radio propaganda announcer, break into her regular radio program with a special announcement. She said, "Good morning to you men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group. Today's your lucky day. Today you get shot down, but before you do get shot down, I want to play you a song." Joe said the song was called "Franklin D. Roosevelt Jones". Joe said, "You could have knocked me over with a feather when I heard that. Adding what Sally and ground crew chief had said Joe was worried. So some of the crews knew something was coming.

The route the group was flying went over the Adriatic Sea and Hungary. It was a lot of territory occupied and controlled by the Germans. Germans had coast watchers and flak batteries positioned everywhere along the route. There was no direct easy route to fly without coming under their observation and attack.

The B-17 initially could evade the German 88mm flak guns flying above 20,000 feet. However when the 105mm flak canon arrived, there was no escape. The choice for the Americans was to fly at an altitude that was marginally safe and yet did not compromise the accuracy of the bomb drop. The challenge for the Germans was to have the flak detonate at the same altitude as the bombers. Optical ranging sights got close and attacking fighters could call in their altitude as well. Later radar guided the flak and it could be deadly accurate. Radar could also be used by the bombers to bomb through the clouds late in the war. Flak was not the problem today. The B-17 radar was called a "Mickey".

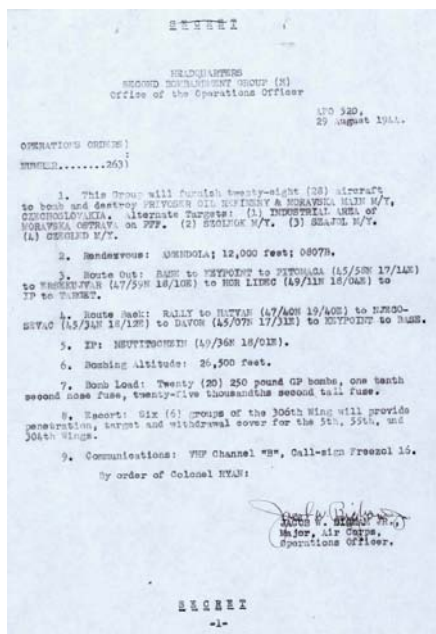


Flak Map showing areas outlined as dangerous.

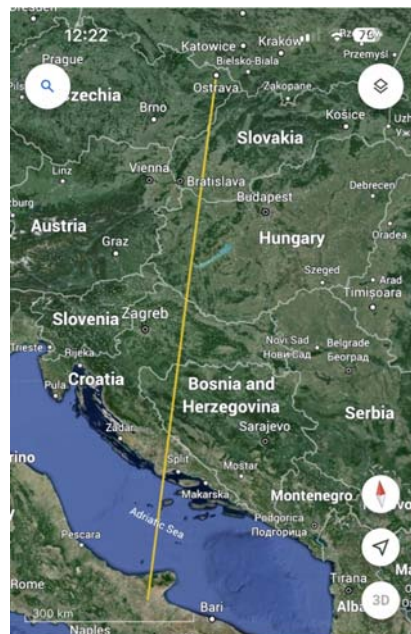


Contrails were easy to spot from the ground.

The "Mickey" radar looked like Mickey Mouse's ears due to its antenna configuration. It sat in place of the ball turret. There was no real element of surprise for the Americans. They were flying daily so much so the local Czechs had become used to it. They even looked forward to it. They knew the friendly fliers above were delivering another blow to the foreign Nazi occupiers. They looked forward to their forthcoming freedom. The flights out of Amendola were monitored by anyone along the Adriatic coast. The Americans knew the locations of the flak batteries and tried their best to avoid them. Hours would lapse before the bombers arrived giving the fighters plenty of time to scramble. As fate would have it, the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force in England was NOT flying that day. Thus, German Air Defenses could concentrate their efforts on the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force group today. Indeed they did as fighters as far away as Berlin joined in the attack.



Target for the day orders.



Mission 263 flight path.

It was a Tuesday, August 29, 1944. 599 heavy bombers of B-17's and B-24's took off from the surrounding Foggia airfields. 294 fighters consisting of P-51 Mustangs and P-38's were sent to sweep the area ahead of the approaching bombers. During the long flight the huge bomber formation stretched out a great distance. The weather was a mix of clouds and sun. The 20<sup>th</sup> squadron drew the undesirable "Tail End Charlie" position. The position is rotated amongst the squadrons, as it is the most vulnerable. The box pattern the bombers flew in, left the tail end group the most vulnerable.

The 429<sup>th</sup> squadron led the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group formation leaving at about 6 AM from Amendola. The 49<sup>th</sup> squadron held the left position and the 96<sup>th</sup> squadron took the right position leaving the 20<sup>th</sup> in the rear "Tail End Charlie" position.

Within the 20<sup>th</sup> squadron, William Tune in #159 was in the lead; Bill Garland in #118 to his left, James A. Weiler in #048 was in the center. William Bullock in #359 was on the right. Robert McCloskey in #473 was rear left, Merrill Prentice was in #885 center rear and Thayne Thomas in #096 was in the rear right ship. The 588-mile journey to the target was underway. They would arrive in about 3.5 hours, then turn around to go home, if all went well.

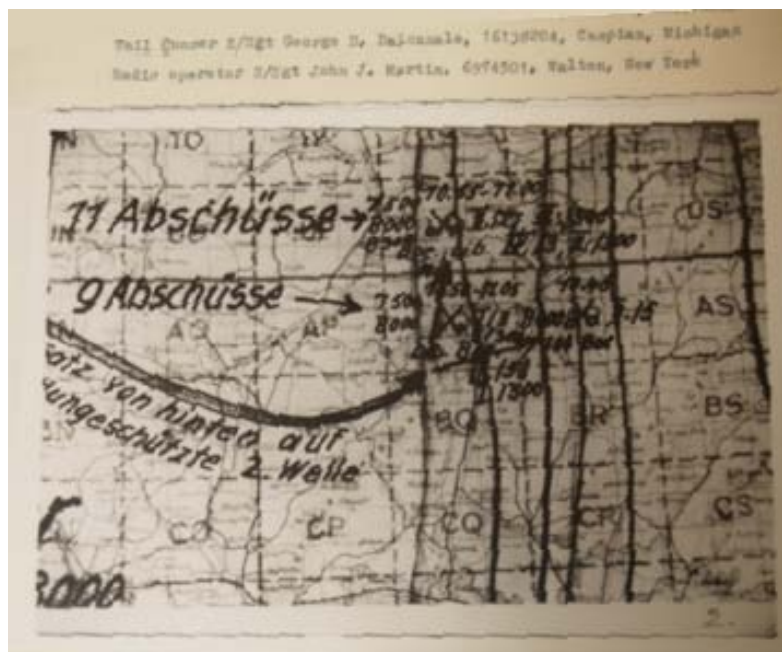
## The Battle Begins

For whatever reasons the 20<sup>th</sup> squadron along with 3 other US bombers fell behind the main group. They were some 62 miles behind the 99<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group leading the way. Two other lagging 2<sup>nd</sup> bomb group B-17's joined them. One was from the 49<sup>th</sup> Squadron and the other from the 429<sup>th</sup> squadron. A lone B-24 from 737 squadron and the 454 bomb group made up the ten stragglers. At about 10:30 AM someone in the bomber group noticed a lone ME-109 "dogging them" meaning tagging along at their altitude and speed. It was unusual and the first sign of trouble. The group was five minutes from the IP or Initial Point where they were to turn to make their bomb run on the rail yards.

The German Air Defenses, either by brilliant planning or incredible luck, managed to hit the group with perfect timing. The Luftwaffe had learned from their heavy losses the tactics of US fighters sweeping ahead of a bomb run. Instead the Germans approached the isolated group from behind hidden in clouds. The bombers were a sitting duck and a prime target. Colonel Gotthard Hardick, Commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> German Fighter Division had sent 65 Messerschmitt BF-109's and 24 Focke-Wulfs FW-190's. The Germans sent fighter aircraft from as far away as Berlin to intercept.



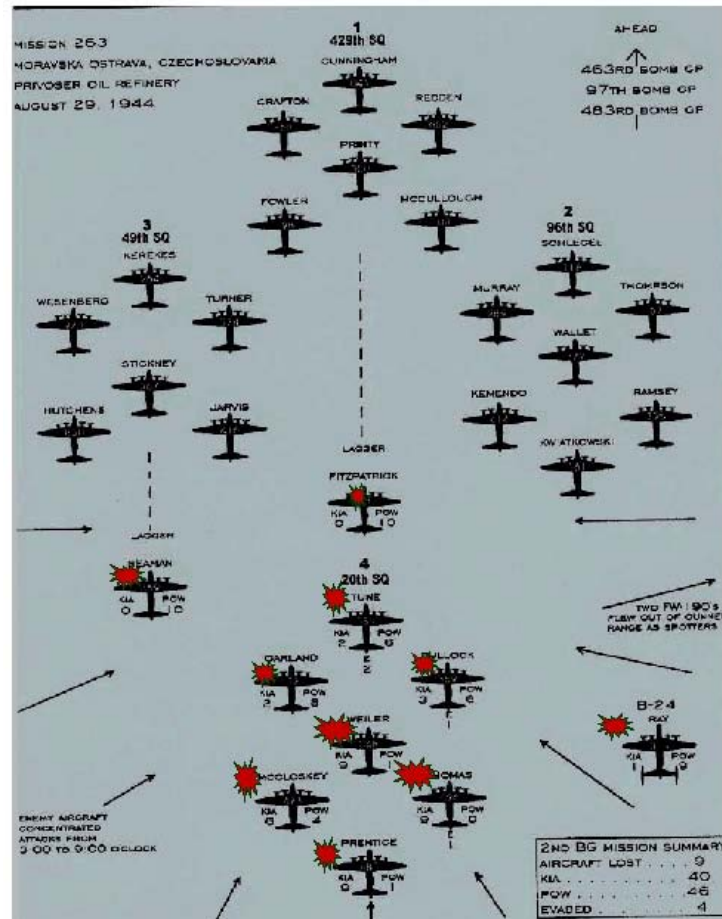
Slovak Village photo of Mission 263 air strike above.



German record of attack 11 Abschüsse 9 Abschüsse. (Abschüsse = kills). A little exaggerated.



**Mission 263 August 29, 1944 Privoser Oil Refinery  
Moravska Ostrava, Czechoslovakia**



The German fighters had learned the flight patterns of the American fighter escorts. When they emerged from the clouds behind the group, the bombers thought they were the promised US fighter support. As the Germans made their first strafing attack pass through the bomber group none of Americans fired on them thinking them to be friendly. As a result the Germans inflicted heavy damage in an instant on the stunned bomber crews. This was NOT the promised fighter escort.

One by one the heavy bombers were hacked from the skies. Below villagers looked up in shock from their bomb shelters watching the battle unfold. I talked to many of the surviving Czech witness who said they saw the “wings of the fighters winking with little white lights” and the bombers exploding, then falling from the skies overhead. Soon parachutes from the American survivors filled the fields of a 30-mile area. Citizens also witnessed fighters shooting at the men hanging in their parachutes, a Geneva Convention rule violation. This was total war. The Germans didn’t care. Only one bomber attempted to escape into the clouds, but with two engines out, Lt. John Fitzpatrick the pilot and crew rode the plane safely to Tata, Hungary crash landing with the entire crew aboard. They all ended up in a POW camp captured by the Germans in Hungary. There were horrific stories about forced marches in bitter winter from POW camp to POW camp. Many American airmen didn’t make it as the Germans tried to flee from the advancing Russians. Bill Tune had some of the most detailed and

skillfully drawn diaries of prison life in a POW camp. Some of these pictures are on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb group website. Links are posted at the end of this story.

Soon the little Czech villages along the current Czech and Slovak border of the White Carpathian Mountains saw heavy bombers crashing all around them. The mountains form a high ridge separating the two countries now. In many European historical WWII books this is referred to as the “Battle of the White Carpathians”. The little towns of Nova Bosaca in Slovakia, Vyskovec right on the border, Krhov, Sanov, Rudice, Kasava, Metylovice and Liptal in the Czech Republic area of Moravia were about to become famous.

The first to be shot down was B-17 #473 “My Baby” Piloted by Robert McCloskey bursting into flames and exploded with wreckage falling down between Moravia (CZ) and Slovakia. The second to fall was my Uncle James A. Weiler’s plane “Queen” #048 and crashing near Krhov (CZ). Third was B-17 #885 “Lovely Ladies” piloted by Merrill Prentice crashing on the border of CZ and Slovakia on a high mountain ridge near Vyskovec (CZ). Fourth was B-17 #096 “Big Time” piloted by Thayne L. Thomas. It crashed on the edge of a thick woods high on a hill near the village of Sanov (CZ). Fifth was B-17 #159 “Tail End Charlie” piloted by Bill Tune. It crashed 7 miles west of the Sanov crash site. Sixth was the B-17 #359 piloted by William C. Bullock. It crashed near Kasava (CZ). Seventh was B-17 #118 “Snafuperman” piloted by William T. Garland. They were just 5-8 minutes to the target crashing near the village of Palkovice (CZ). That was the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Squadron. All seven B-17s were shot down. The 20<sup>th</sup> Squadron was the oldest in the air corps going back to WWI on June 26, 1917. Now the legacy squadron was gone. A tragic historic first.

Eighth plane to be shot down was B-17 #369 from the 49<sup>th</sup> squadron piloted by Duane B. Seaman it crashed near Liptal (CZ). The ninth plane was B-17 #915 “Wolf Pack” from the 429<sup>th</sup> squadron piloted by John Fitzpatrick to fall. As I mentioned earlier, he evaded for a while in the clouds only to crash with his crew on board safely in Tata, Hungary. Ironically their silk escape maps which contained information and railways with routes to evade capture were useless. They were from North Africa! The tenth and final plane to fall was a B-24 from the 454<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group and squadron 737. Billy G. Ray piloted it. It crashed near Horne Srnie on the Slovak side of the border.

In less than 30 minutes all 10 heavy bombers of the straggling group were shot out of the sky. In those planes were 100 airmen. Of those 100, 41 were killed. 40 of them were from the Second Bomb Group. It was the biggest air battle over the Czech Republic and the worse loss of life in 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group history. There had been other air battles with more planes shot down, but not with a 41% fatality rate. The pendulum of fate had issued the US Army Air Corps 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force a bitter day.

The Czech people who honor the sacrifice made on their behalf now commemorate that day. The villagers who saw the battle and recovered the bodies consider many of these airmen their “patron saints”. It also coincided with the date that many the Czechs turned on their German occupiers and hence it is a day of independence for many. Sadly, it was a short-lived freedom as the Russians were coming. They suppressed any acknowledgement or commemoration of the American contribution to end the war. Ultimately, the American bodies left in the Czech Republic at the end of the war were exhumed before the Russians took over. We’ll cover that later.

Universally across the board the answer was the same. They said, “If I didn’t finish this then my kid brother will have to come and do it. And if he is gone, then his son will have to do it!” Such was the spirit, courage and motivation of the Greatest Generation. These were men of true positive character and possessed a great moral compass. Everyone I met was a class act that I am proud to call my friend. The Hollywood portrayal of these airmen as womanizing skirt chasers and heavy drinkers was shattered when I met these men in the years I knew them. I keep coming back to the line “First Class Act” to describe them. A one of a kind character, that I would hope others would emulate to carry on their legacy.

A photograph of a gravestone for Jan Mertin. The stone is a simple cross shape with a rectangular plaque in the center. The plaque contains the name 'Jan Mertin' and a list of family members: 'Janina', 'Jana', 'Jana', 'Jana', 'Jana', 'Jana', 'Jana', 'Jana', 'Jana', 'Jana'. The date '1908' is visible on the right side of the plaque. The gravestone is surrounded by a large bouquet of white daisies. The background is a dark, textured surface, possibly a wall or a large stone.

Zde dočasně odpočívalo  
**28 AMERICKÝCH LETCŮ**  
 kteří v hrdiném boji padli 28.8.1944  
 pohřbeni 31.8.1944  
 exhumováni 4.9.1946

Obviously my personal interest is in what happened to my Uncle's airplane "Queen". Thankfully there were a number of things that happened that none of the other crash sites have, or for that matter, most of the European crash sites. That fact is that we have pictures of the crash wreckage minutes after the battle. This is due in part to the ego of some unknown German fighter pilot and a crafty Czech photographer who secretly made copies of the pictures before turning them over to the Germans.



The best source of what happened in this battle was the sole survivor of B-17 4232048 "Queen". Irving D. Thompson was the co-pilot of "Queen" when it was shot down. He knew a thing or two about combat, and surviving in a B-17. A month before this battle he was awarded the Silver Star for gallantry for saving a damaged B-17, and getting it back to North Africa.



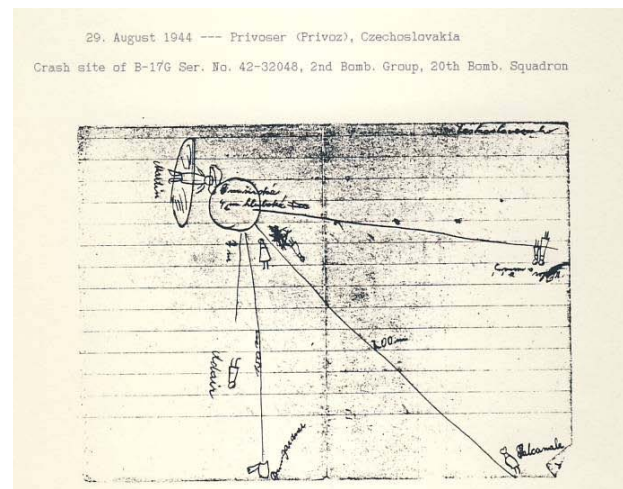
Silver Star awarded to pilot Irving D. Thompson August of 1944.

In his Missing Airman's Crew Report (MACR) Thompson said they were surprised by the first wave of German fighters and were in trouble right away. The plane was one of the lowest in the formation and had an engine on fire. He said my Uncle was killed instantly by a 20mm canon round that hit Jim in the left hip. With the plane in a dive to put out the fire, there wasn't much altitude left to do any evasive maneuvers. So the order to salvo the bomb load and bail out was given. Thompson got out with four of the crew after they salvoed the twenty 250 lb. bombs in a hillside forest about a mile away from the crash site.

The plane crashed on a wide-open rolling farm pasture area hilltop. The area provides a great vista to the nearby villages of Krhov and Bojkovice. A concrete memorial sculpture erected there in 1994 marks the spot near Krhov, CZ. Four of the airmen were found dead in their parachutes near the crash site. One witness first wrote about this incident. The initial translation of it said, in Czech, that they bailed out too high and the air in their lungs collapsed to kill them. Later translations made more sense that the airman died from the blast concussion of the plane exploding and they were too close to it. Salvoing twenty 250 lb. bombs, (2.5 tons of TNT) makes a huge shockwave, as well.

On the ground, the excited pilots of the German fighter planes landed quickly to claim their prey. In this battle the Germans lost about 10 fighters. Some losses were due to friendly fire. One smoking tail dragging German fighter landed nearby. He quickly went to town and grabbed Mr. Alois Čepa a photo lab owner and photographer. In a motorcycle sidecar they rode up to the field where "Queen" had crashed. Czech witnesses saw a fighter pilot posing in the wreckage saying in German "Das ist meine arbeit" meaning "This is my work." Detailed directions were marked on the photos and the Germans took them afterwards. Luckily, the photographer secretly kept a set, and as a result, we

have the rare actual photos of the wreckage and its victims.



Note the stick figures of the bodies and names. The distances are 200 meters (218 yards) from the aircraft's crash site.



German fighter pilot claiming "Das ist meine Arbiet!"

Every effort was made by Czech and German historians to locate the German pilot who the Czech witnesses thought the name was pronounced “Mann”. No such link was ever conclusively made to connecting a German pilot who actually shot down “Queen”. Even though one pilot was protesting vehemently he did not get credit for the kill. That pilot was shortly killed in combat. Despite the hard years of B-17 flying in April 1943 with no fighter escort and casualties of up to 40% being the norm, the Luftwaffe pilots had even greater loses of up to 70%. Hence, many of their records are lost too. We may never know, but we have the pictures of the crash at Krhov.

Irving D. Thompson did visit the families stateside when he returned, however questions of his recollections or perhaps the embellishments by a zealous small town reporter may have created some confusion. When he visited my Aunt Mary (Jim’s sister) in Burlington, he gave some conflicting answers. For example he said the name of the B-17 was “Great Ball of Fire” according to a Burlington newspaper article. The reality was it was named “Queen”. Perhaps some form of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) jumbled his memory. We’ll never know. Mr. Irving Thompson died August 23, 1980 at the age of 59.

The Germans also had a tough time creating records of this battle. They initially named Jim’s plane “Mary”. The best explanation is the German interrogator/interpreter didn’t know the word “Queen” in English or perhaps the American airman said “Queen...as in Queen Mary” hoping that it would clarify the name. But only “Mary” made it to the German Records. There is another account that my Aunt Mary thought the plane was named after her. So it’s confusing. Once access to American records became available after war the correction was made. The Museum in Sanov may still show “Mary” so just in case...now you know the source of the possible confusion.

CRASH SITE : KRHOV

AIRCRAFT : B-17G-35-B0  
 SERIAL NO. : 42-32048  
 UNIT: 20th BOMBARDMENT SQUADRON /H/  
 2nd BOMBARDMENT GROUP /H/

CREW:

PILOT 2nd Lt. JAMES A. WEILER, O-7573348, BURLINGTON, WISC., KIA  
 CO-PILOT F/O IRVING D. THOMPSON, T-61736, POUGHKEEPSIE, N.Y.  
 NAVIGATOR 2nd Lt. ROBERT L. EMBRY, O-20578882, JACKSON, MISS., KIA  
 BOMBARDIER 2nd Lt. FRANK A. SULKEY, O-761265, CLEVELAND, OHIO, KIA  
 U.T.G. T/Sgt. LONNIE H. BUMGARDNER, O34303666, THOMASVILLE, N.C. KIA  
 L.T.G. S/Sgt. ERNEST W. WAGONER, 35892365, MACY, INDIANA, KIA  
 R.W.G. Sgt. JOHN A. ADAIR, O18073665, ITALY, TEXAS, KIA  
 L.W.G. S/Sgt. LOREN E. BYAM, O16131456, LISBEN, WISC., KIA  
 T.G. S/Sgt. GEORGE D. DALCANALE, 16138204, CASPIAN, MICH., KIA  
 R.O.G. S/Sgt. JOHN J. MARTIN, 6974501, WALTON, N.Y., KIA



## Results of the Mission 263 Bomb strike

There is a website featuring the outcome of the Mission 263 bomb strike. The objective of the mission succeeded. The rail yards were destroyed and the Germans suffered a great loss. There was of course collateral damage to the city of Moravská Ostrava, Czechoslovakia.



Link to pictures and footage of Moravská Ostrava and Mission 263 damage.

<https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/clanek/regiony/bombardovani-ostravy-29-srpna-1944-prumysl-prezil-stovky-lidi-zemrely-336369#galerie=148807>

## The fate of the downed airmen and hiding in plain sight

With 59 American airmen perilously falling from the skies on August 29<sup>th</sup>, the Germans were desperately looking for them. The airmen meanwhile were desperately trying to escape. Most of the bombers crashed in about a 30-mile (48 km) radius and many of the places were heavily wooded mixed with wide-open farm pastures. The Czech's were tired of their German occupiers and were about to overthrow them. However, the true loyalties of the Czech citizens were unknown for a good reason until the end of the war. They couldn't trust their neighbors or even friends. Here's why.

The reprisals for harboring an American soldier were severe. All the conspirators and their family would be rounded up and summarily shot. The fear was genuine after a brutal massacre resulted in an entire Czech village being burnt down, and then bulldozed flat without a trace. All the adult inhabitants were executed or sent to concentration camps. The City of Lidice, which lies northeast of this area by 125 miles (200 kilometers) away, was targeted after the May 27<sup>th</sup>, 1942 assassination of the German Protectorate Reinhard Heydrich near Prague. A German order for a reprisal to avenge his death ended up picking on the small village of Lidice with 503 inhabitants. The Germans believed this village to be harboring some resistance fighters, yet no evidence ever has been found connecting the village to the assassination plot to kill Heydrich. It resulted in one of the most well documented war crimes killing 340 people, 192 men, 60 women and 88 children. It is documented so well because the Nazi propaganda ministry promoted it everywhere to frighten any American sympathizers and teach a deadly fascist lesson. After the war only 143 women and 17 children returned. Most of the women were sent to the concentration camps and the youngest children sent to

live with German families to be “re-educated”. Under the threat of these conditions, nobody knew whom to trust in Czechoslovakia. It was a frightening time to do the right thing.

Loy A. Dickinson was the straggling group lead navigator on “Tail End Charlie” piloted by Bill Tune. This was Loy’s 22<sup>nd</sup> mission and Bill Tune’s 33<sup>rd</sup> mission. The Army Air Corps had raised the minimum missions to go home from 25 to 35 by now! Tune’s plane went down near Rudimov, CZ. Loy parachuted out of his burning bomber and landed in some bushes near the Frank Baca farm. He was uninjured. A young man of 17 years old, Mojmir Baca was the first to find him. Loy 19 years old, not knowing any Czech either and Mojmir not knowing English, somehow communicated. Loy got some food and hid in a hayloft for the night. The next morning word somehow got out that an American was hiding near there. In that short time Loy made good friends with Mojmir Baca and his family. Now came a life and death decision to make. Rather than be discovered in their home, Loy decided to turn himself in. Loy walked towards the city of Slavičín and was taken to a prison there. There he met other captured Mission 263 airmen. Loy and the others were transported through the German cities that had been leveled by Allied bombing for years. The citizens, in other POW accounts, had attacked and killed the prisoners en route to the camps. Loy feared for his life. It was a scary trip not knowing what to expect. He arrived safely ending up Stalg Luft I prison camp.

The worst of it for some of the POW’s came later when in the middle of a bitter winter of 1945. They were force-marched 650 miles from POW camp to POW camp. It was collectively referred to as the infamous “Black March”. The extreme cold conditions took its toll on the US prisoners killing many of them. Loy survived prison camp and ultimately maintained his contact with Mojmir. After the Velvet Revolution in 1989 Loy returned to the Czech Republic with other Mission 263 survivors much to the delight of the Czech people. Loy even sponsored some of Baca’s family as AFS students. Jana Turčínková and Lenka Lewis who lived with Loy’s family in the states, helped as translators for many of the commemorations when the Americans visited. There was an amazing aviation connection as Mojmir Baca was a machinist and built his own airplane from scratch. He could have fled the “Iron Curtain” if not for his family.



Loy Dickinson (seated) Krhov monument 2014.



Mojmir Baca far left. At the house Joe Sallings hid in until the end of the war.



Todd Weiler with translators Jana Turčínková and Lenka Lewis at the Krhov monument.

Loy Dickinson was instrumental in getting me involved with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb group. I first met him at the 2006 Dayton, Ohio 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group reunion. He and I then did several return trips to the Czech Republic. Ultimately I became the historian for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group. Soon it will be my 5<sup>th</sup> visit to the Czech area in August of 2024. I've been there in 2007, 2009, 2014 and 2019. On each visit I have learned more and more. Most of it came very serendipitously. Now...about the vet hiding in plain sight!

Meanwhile another airman was looking to escape as well. Joseph E. Sallings was a waist gunner and on Loy's "Tail End Charlie" piloted by Bill Tune. Only two of that crew died, Joseph Marinello and Russell Meyrick. They were buried near Rudice. More on that later. Robert Donuhue escaped and the rest were POW's.

Joseph E. Sallings was from a small farm town of perhaps 500 in Luttrell, Tennessee. He had a birth defect or childhood injury that saved his life in WWII. He had a split tongue. Joe bailed out of his burning plane safely and looked for a place to escape. As a result Joseph hid at the Czech Pešát family home in the village of Přeckovice. Soon together they conspired to make up a story that he was a visiting Czech cousin who couldn't speak. That way nobody in town could talk to him and could never say they previously saw him. Indeed Joe knew only English anyhow.

Vlastimil Hela has written an extensive book on this amazing subterfuge called "Hey Joe" published in 2009. Vlastimil's grandmother was born in the Pešát's house. His grandfather and uncle cared for Sallings. His Czech book documents Vlastimil's search for the Sallings family in the US. Vlastimil, who speaks English, visited the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group's 2008 reunion in Washington D.C. with his son Libor. They met and talked with many of the vets, including the survivors of Mission 263. They then did a little tour of the United States and set off to Tennessee to find more information about Sallings. They located a sister, Lavern Wagner and learned the truth about Joseph's background.



Vlastimil Hela and son Libor meet Sen. Bob Dole at WWII Veterans memorial with 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Vets.



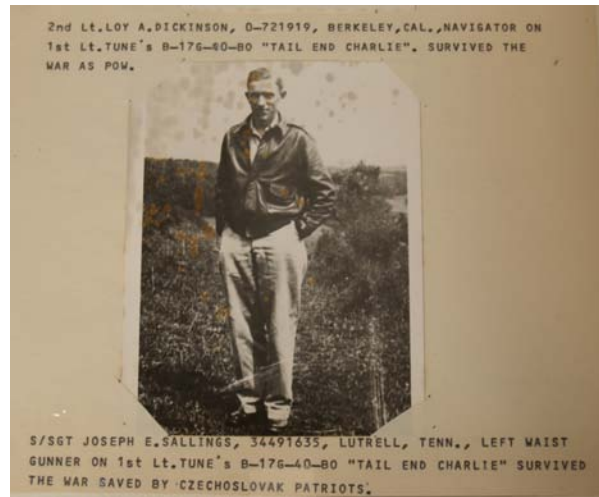


Photo of Joseph E. Sallings from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group photo book.

The Pešát family took a great risk in hiding Sallings. Sallings told the Pešát's that his family had money and would reward the Czech family if they saved him from the Germans. Luckily the home had a hidden wall space that allowed them to initially conceal Sallings from the first German searchers. Ultimately they succeeded in convincing the Germans he couldn't speak and was their distant cousin from another region. The Pešát's and the Bacas dare not share any information that they were BOTH harboring an American airman! It could have had fatal consequences. The ruse worked and nobody was the wiser until the end of the war. But Joe had one nasty habit. He liked to smoke cigarettes. As such, he would go into town and play cards with the German soldiers to win some smokes. It was one more of his clever skills that helped him to survive and quenched his nicotine habit.

Finally on May 8<sup>th</sup> 1945 the war ended and Joe Sallings and the Pešát family could share their little secret. He had evaded for 252 days hiding right under Hitler's mustache so to speak! Joe Sallings had entwined himself so deep into the community; it took an official military order for him to return home. He wasn't too interested in returning to his plowboy lifestyle in Tennessee.

Apparently Joe was quite the "ladies" man. He allegedly had many Czech girl friends. Perhaps the lure of a wealthy American family was appealing to them. Perhaps it was his unique physical features or shall I say "silver tongue talk" that intrigued the local gals. When Joe finally returned to the states the local hometown papers wrote flatteringly about his evading by hiding in plain sight. It was a great media sensation. Joe Sallings continued further embellishing his story to include that he was working with the Czech Underground and Resistance, getting information and plotting espionage on the German occupiers according to the papers. All of it was untrue according to the Czech folks, but it sold a lot of newspapers in the US at the time.

Joe Sallings' last public appearance in the newspapers was running for Congress and that failed. Next he wrote letter of endorsement and joined protests for Congress to grant war bonuses legislation for WWII vets like WWI vets got. That never got passed, but it did lead to the passage of a new G.I. Bill of Rights. Meanwhile Sallings' promise to send his Czech hosts money from his "rich" family never materialized. He was just a Tennessee country farm boy caught up in the whirlwind experience of a world war. Joe's sister Laverne Wagoner and her husband Roy visited the

Pešát home on the occasion of the 2009 Commemoration. It coincided with the release of the “Hey Joe” Czech book by Vlastimil Hela who did the research on the Pešát family that hid an American airman for 252 days.



Pešát home in Přeckovice CZ. (L to R) Božena Pešátová, daughter of Karel Pešát who met Sallings, Roy and Vern Wager (Sallings' sister) and Bohumila Pešátová – Karel Pešát's daughter-in-law. The plaque honoring the home as Joe Sallings' hiding place can be seen upper left.

Another crewman from Bill Tune's plane, Joseph P. Owsianik, was a left waist gunner and cameraman from South Plain View, New Jersey. He enjoyed the nickname of “Jersey Joe”. He was the airman who had all the foreshadowing of his plane's demise. After he saw the first wave of fighters shooting at him 10 abreast he was sure he hit one as it burst into flames. Next his plane was hit and he was injured above the right wrist. He got past Sallings who seem to be shaking his head “no”. The order to bail was given, and out went Joe. Hanging in his chute, a FW-190 with flames coming out of it, buzzed right near him. The slipstream from the plane nearly clasped his parachute. Joe never knew if the pilot was doing it intentionally, or just out of control.

On the way to the ground, Joe could see people running towards him. Joe managed to meet up with an injured Lt. Flynn and others while being cared for by some sympathetic Czechs. Joe gave one of his dog tags to a crewmate Thomas C. Coogan as he was Jewish. Joe's dogtags were “C” for Catholic. While going over his escape map, a group of Hitler Youth burst into the room they were in and seized them. The oldest shoved a pistol in Joe's mouth shouting Pistolie-Pistolie! Joe said repeatedly he didn't have one. Then, he was bludgeoned over the head with the Luger the youth had stuck down his throat. They then held him, and stripped Joe naked inspecting every opening in his body. Again, the older youth began shouting Pistolie!! while shoving the gun down his throat. His tormenter finally yanked the gun out ripping the top of Joe's mouth with the gun sight, hitting Joe's teeth. They dressed him, and took him to a building where the Hitler youth and soldiers were assembled. They put him into a cell by himself, only to be let out to go to the bathroom. He sat in the cell for 3-4 days with nothing to eat.

On the fourth day a German fighter pilot came to visit him. He said in broken English that he was the one who shot him down. He asked if Joe had eaten and Joe said “no, nothing for three days.” The

pilot stormed out of the cell and outside down the hall where a lot of yelling in German could be heard. The pilot returned and they talked. He said the B-17 was a good airplane, but the FW-109's were better. Pretty soon a blond lady came in with some food, some pork chops, potatoes, bread and coffee and the pilot motioned for Joe to eat. Joe was grateful how good the food tasted, and how nice the officer was to him. He even gave Joe four of his German cigarettes and lit one for him. He told Joe to call the blonde Czech girl who brought the food, to call her to light the other cigarettes when he wanted one.

He stood up, turned and clicked his boot heels saying "Heil Hitler"! Joe returned with a salute. They shook hands and the pilot left. Joe never saw him again. Joe ultimately was shipped to Frankfurt and interrogated. While he only gave his name and serial number the whole time, the interrogator knew much more. He told Joe that he was a cameraman from the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force stationed at Amendola Italy and more. Jersey Joe ended up in Stalg Luft IV. Later as the allies pressed into German territory they were force-marched past the concentration camps. The guards said to their faces that they were taking them to the ovens in Luckenwalde just as they marched past them. On the marches they were shot at by friendly P-51's. On April 26<sup>th</sup>, 1945 the 101st Division near Dommitzsch, Germany liberated them. Joe's 35<sup>th</sup> mission was now over.

I heard Jersey Joe recount this story over and over at stateside reunions and on CZ visits. He said it indelibly changed him for life. Joe's grandson Nic Mevoli accompanied Joe on multiple trips to the Czech Republic. Nic would record Joe's stories on a small handi-cam video recorder. Joe loved his beer. The Czech Republic is home to many original brews. It didn't take much to get Joe talking. He made sure everyone understood just what happened to him. He always drew a crowd of youths, perhaps because they wanted to hear English spoken. They would always look intently with their eyes and ears whether he was talking at a restaurant or at city hall. Sadly, Nic Mevoli died attempting a world record free dive in the Bahamas on November 17, 2013. The disposition and content of the videotapes are now lost.

When I accompanied Joe in 2007, I wondered what his first words would be to the audiences gathered for the commemorations? It stuck me and stayed with me ever since. His first words were an apology. He would say he regretted the damage done to the Czech cities and people. But he wanted to assure them they were NOT the target. The enemy was the German occupiers. They came to do their job and drive the Nazi's out of Czechoslovakia. At every stop he would open with the same remarks. He wanted them to know he loved the Czech people. As time would affirm, they loved him in return.

## **The Mass Grave in Slavičín**

The bodies of the dead airmen were taken to the morgue in the city of Slavičín. It is a town today of about 10,000 people. The morgue was overloaded and in the sweltering summer heat the decomposing bodies were a problem. On August 31<sup>st</sup> the Commandant of the German garrison allowed the men to be buried. My Uncle James A. Weiler was among the victims having died in the plane as it crashed. The local Catholic priests asked to perform a funeral service for them as the victims were found to have rosaries and bibles on them. The Commandant refused. Father Jan Mareček persevered and finally the Commandant relented. He said no civilians could be present or nearby, the priests could not wear their holy church vestments and no holy water could be used. The



Americans were to be buried in a part of the cemetery used to bury dogs and criminals. He considered the Americans as “gangsters” and “enemy terrorists” using his words. The intent was to be as disrespectful as possible. Something else happened instead.

I was able to get an eyewitness account of the burial on a return visit to the area in 2009. I interviewed Father František Maňák who was one of two apprentice chaplains to the main priest of Slavcín Father Jan Mareček who officiated in 1944 mass burial. František’s memory was razor sharp as he recalled every morbid detail of the day...the heat, the smells, the sounds, the drama...all of it. And all of this happened on the first day of being a priest! František celebrated his 33<sup>rd</sup> birthday the day before the mass burial.



Nic Mevoli, Radovan Frait, František Maňák, Todd Weiler  
Tommy Susil, Roman Susil (August 26, 2009).



Father František Maňák blessing Jim’s  
Silver Bracelet with holy water.

According to Father František Maňák, the Germans started the mass burial process at about 11 AM. At first, the Germans were down in the grave laying the bodies three abreast neatly. Soon the stench in the grave became overwhelming and they exited. They then tossed the bodies in randomly and moved them around with long 10-foot poles. The airmen were still in their flight suits, jackets and uniforms. By about 4 PM the wheel burrow dumped the last body in and the grave was covered. A few of the Mission 263 crewmates were able to watch, but couldn’t talk. A wooden marker message written in Czech about 28 Airmen and the date was placed on the grave. Everyone left. But the drama was just starting that night!

As darkness fell, an extraordinary thing happened! Under the cover of the night the local civilians of Slavičín started dropping off flowers on top of the mass grave. By morning a huge pile of flowers were on top of the grave. The Commandant Julius Artner was furious! He ordered the priests be brought back before him to put an end to it. A town crier was sent through the town banging a drum to announce it. However the priests were not full-time in Slavičín, rather they serviced many villages. They were on the road making the rounds through the countryside for nearly a week before they were finally found and brought to the irate Commandant.

The Commandant demanded the priests immediately stop the flower laying and Czechs recognition of the American “gangsters” as he called them. He threatened “there will be repercussions if they don’t stop!” Father František Mareček tried to calm the Commandant down and reason with him. Mareček said, “these are now just dead humans. They are no longer soldiers and not fighting the war any more. They are buried in an cemetery which is the rightful place for them”. Finally the Commandant agreed. The flowers continued and there were no repercussions. This is a timeless sign

of the Czech people willing to take chances to honor their liberators who gave their lives for Czech freedom. It is a tradition from 1944 to today that continues despite the passing of those who witnessed these events. This is a unique place in the Czech Republic.

The treatment of the dead Americans varied by who was in control of the area. In the small village of Rudice about 77 miles (124 km) from Slavičín, it was an entirely different scenario. The two airmen Russell W. Meyrick and Robert Marinello died when their chutes didn't open after bailing out of Tail End Charlie #159.

Here the garrisoned German troops were much older. As such, they had sons fighting the war as well. They said they hoped if their sons were killed, that they would get the benefit of a military funeral by the Allies. So the Commandant in charge there ordered a full military funeral and a 21-gun salute with no restrictions for the civilians. The town of Rudice to this day still fills the cemetery from fence to fence with crowds of people. The entire town turns out en masse. All the area dignitaries including the archbishop of the catholic church attends these major 5-year commemorations. Later the entire town drives 2 miles out of town to a place called... "America"! It's a spot in the woods where the vets were found nearby. A small silver plate marker on a tree to commemorate Russell Meyrick and Robert Marinello with a 50-caliber shell casing above is just inside the woods. The locals have deemed this CZ place "America" as an honor to the two airmen. The Archbishop then leads the town folks in an open air mass. At many of the events here, they have featured fly-overs by CZ helicopters and private planes to honor the airmen who died here.

These are just some of the commemorations that are held. Ever since the Czechs regained their freedom from the Communists in 1989 and are allowed to freely celebrate these American heroes, they have honored these crash sites and erected memorials to the Americans who died here. In the five-year anniversary increments, survivors of Mission 263 have also visited frequently. The town's people treated the airmen vets as heroes. Everyone wanted a selfie with them. They listen in hushed silence as the survivors told their stories and the translators spread the word. It was an amazing experience. It is one that I and about 40 other Americans will be doing again on August 30-September 1, 2024. It is the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of this historic battle. But the Silver Bracelet story continues!

### **Finding the Silver Bracelet in the wreck**

About three days after the crash a Czech farmer found Jim's silver I.D. bracelet in the field near the crash site. His name was Antonin Kašparec. He worked as a forced laborer at the Bojkovice ammunition factory. The Strava family owned the field where Jim's plane crashed. At the end of the war Antonin attempted to return the silver bracelet to the American authorities. However, the Red Cross teams that serviced the area after the war only spoke French and English. Antonin, perhaps intimidated because he only spoke Czech didn't contact them. So he admits to putting the bracelet into a desk drawer and "frankly forgetting about it". The next war was starting...the cold war. The bracelet would hide for 22 more years while nations fought for their sovereignty and others tried to take it away. It was as if the airmen died for nothing with the approaching storm of history.

## The “patron saints” of the area are exhumed

1946 arrives and the Americans realize the relations with Russia are quickly deteriorating. A decision is made to exhume the 28 airmen in Slavičín before the Communists prohibit it. The trucks and caissons are brought in and the three-day task of exhuming the American airmen begins on September 4, 1946. Two years and 6 days since they were first buried.

The exhumation of the 28 airmen was a very emotional event for the local Czech people. These dead airmen were treated like the area’s patron saints. The predominate Catholic area population had honored and cared diligently for these airmen while the Germans were there and even more after the Germans left. It had to feel like they were losing a part of their community’s soul. The event was held with as much solemn pageantry and officialdom as both the American and Czech people could muster. A full British Pathe film crew was brought in and the whole exhumation event film is on the Internet. Here is the link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjhRjKHlc\\_s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjhRjKHlc_s)

The film opens with a panning shot of the Czech countryside. The many crowds of civilians gathered near the church of St. Vojtěch and Cecilie, the town’s catholic church where the mass grave was located. As in 1944, flowers once again covered the grave. The US flag-draped coffins were loaded on to the caissons, as is the military tradition. Reactions from the citizens and of the women watching the ceremonies convey the deep feelings they had for these men. The Czech and US soldiers were marching along as the various coffins were being towed behind US army trucks. The trucks were slowly winding through the still war-torn streets of Slavičín.

At the head of the procession was the same priest, František Maňák. This time they could include the altar boys and all the official Catholic accoutrements for a high funeral. As the caissons passed the crowds of people many threw flowers onto the coffins as a last respect. There are various images of the large procession of civilians and soldiers following the coffins as they pass through town. Again the expressions on the faces of the crowds convey the bittersweet grief of the day. The hillsides are packed to standing room only with people, some climbing into trees to catch one last glimpse of their American heroes.

High ranking representatives from the Czech military and American military joined with the citizens in commemorating the lives of the fallen airmen. Many pleasantries formalities are exchanged, but the inevitable departures of the American heroes were a hard loss to endure.



Exhumation begins September 4, 1946.



US Army vehicles transport the caissons.





František Maňák.



František Maňák in the exhumation procession 1946.





The families of the US airmen being exhumed had a choice to make. For those airmen that could be identified, they could be separated from the rest and sent to where the family wished. That was still a tough choice. In the case of John Adair, Jim Weiler's waist gunner, the family decided to bury John at the National Cemetery in Houston instead of in a grave in his hometown of Waxahachie, Texas. The reason was John was an only son and his mother grieved his loss deeply. The family feared she would spend all her days at the grave if nearby. At 200 miles away that was a tough choice to make. On a 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group Reunion to Houston I visited John Adair's grave to pay my respects.

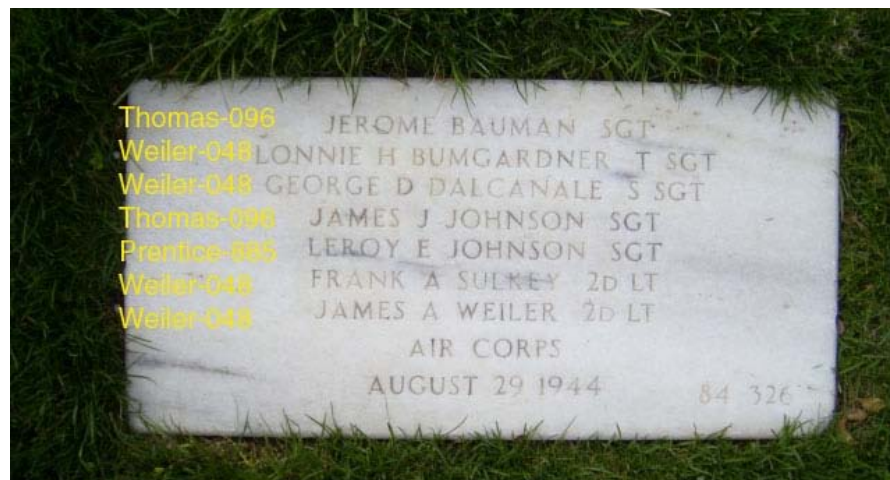


John H. Adair right waist gunner "Queen".



Todd Weiler at John H. Adair's grave at Fort Sam Houston Cemetery Section S Site 113.

The Weiler family had to make a different choice. There was no DNA testing and Jim's likely mangled body was in the plane with some crewmates when it crashed. So his parents Jake and Nora Weiler decided to leave Jim with his crewmates. He is buried in a group grave in Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery in St. Louis, Missouri. He is buried with other Mission 263 airmen that couldn't be individually identified. He is in grave Section 84 on the side of a sloping hill in view of some buildings. They are in grave 326 as the stone below shows.



Buried with Jim is Jerome Bauman and James Johnson from Thayne Thomas's plane. Lonnie H, Bumgardner, George D. Dalcanale, Frank A. Sulkey all Jim's crewmates, with James A. Weiler. Leroy E. Johnson from Merrill Prentice's plane is buried here as well.



## The Silver Bracelet comes back to America

Continuing now with the travels of the Silver Bracelet. Fast forward to 1965. Antonin Kašparec, the Czech farmer who found the silver bracelet at the crash site of Jim's plane, had a good friend named Miloslav Holub. He was a famous Czech actor with a strong resemblance somewhere between Ernest Borgnine and Anthony Quinn. Holub was going to a film festival in Montreal Canada in 1965. Antonin got the idea to give the silver bracelet to his friend Holub since he would be closer to America than he would be in the Czech Republic. He agreed and the bracelet was on its way back!

While seated on the plane, fate put a key passenger next to Miloslav Holub. Marie Spelina was seated next to him. They soon struck up a casual conversation as most passengers do. Marie told Holub she was on the way to visit her husband Jozka who was working for the ICAO (International Civil Aviation Organization) in Montréal. This is a group that works to unify airplane procedures across the world, with rules like; all pilots must speak English, etc. Miloslav must have been ecstatic to know he was seated next to someone actually connected to the aviation industry. He talked Marie into taking the bracelet and helping to find its owner in the United States. By the way, Holub means "pigeon" in Czech. So we have a courier pigeon bringing the bracelet back to the US! I told you there were aviation connections here! The pendulum of fate was swinging in the right direction again. The silver bracelet was crossing the Atlantic a second time!



**Miloslav Holub**  
Brings bracelet on plane to Canada  
("Pigeon" dies In Moravska Ostrava)



**Marie Spelina**  
Traveling to husband in Canada.  
Accepts bracelet.

**– 1965-Famous Czech actor Miloslav Holub travels to Canadian Film Festival seated next to Marie Spelina. Her husband, Jozka, works as technical officer in Operations Section of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) on assignment in Montreal. Marie agrees to help.**

Antonin Kašparec, Miloslav Holub and Maria Spelina.

Soon Marie gave the bracelet to her husband Jozka Spelina. The only clues he had were a barely legible name, a date and the wings of a pilot on it. Jozka made an inquiry to the U.S. Consulate in Montreal. The operator told Jozka to contact the Pentagon and curtly added, "Do you know what a Pentagon is?" Jozka, an aeronautical technician replied, "Yes ma'am. I know what a Pentagon is. Could you kindly give me their number?" The clerk did so and Jozka's paper chase for the owner of the silver bracelet was underway.

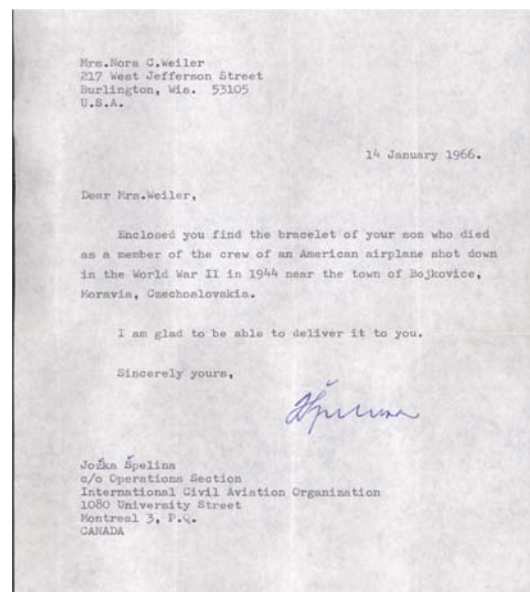
After contacting the Pentagon, they directed Jozka to contact the U.S. Air Force records center in Randolph, Texas. When the Air Force sent their reply they said there was no record of James A. Weiler in the Air Force. And they were correct! That's because Jim was never in the Air Force. The Air Force was created in 1948. Jim was killed in 1944. Jim was in the US Army Air Corps! Finally they redirected Jozka to the U.S. Army records center in St. Louis, Missouri. Bingo! They found James A. Weiler in their records. They gave Jozka Nora and Jake Weiler's address in Burlington, Wisconsin. By the way, there was a huge fire in the St. Louis military records center on July 12, 1973. The timing of this inquiry was serendipitous again. A large number of WWII veterans records were lost.

New problem for Jozka however...the address the Army gave Jozka was where Nora Weiler lived in 1944, which was on McHenry Street. It's now 1965 and she has moved to a new home on Jefferson Street. The letter has the wrong address! The pendulum of fate moves into positive territory again.

Luckily, Burlington is a small town, where almost everyone knows your name. Well, at least the mailmen do! The postman correctly delivered the letter and my grandmother had the first contact from the Czech Republic since Jim was missing in action. Jozka and Nora exchange letters and grinding through the mail system Jozka is convinced he's found the right Weiler family. Ultimately the Silver Bracelet is sent by mail and arrives in January 1966 after 22 years behind the so-called "Iron Curtain". A brief note is enclosed and that is all. My grandmother and the family are humbled. It is a bittersweet moment as the twisted bracelet confirms Jim's fate..



Jozka Spelina 1966.



Silver Bracelet letter in box.

## **Joe Weiler sends a letter asking for more information**

My father Joseph Weiler wrote back to Jozka in Czechoslovakia thanking him and seeking more information about the place and circumstances of the bracelet being found. But the letter was never answered. Political tensions were high. Nikita Khrushchev was pounding his shoe on the podium at the UN threatening to “bury” the United States with nuclear war and so anyone found communicating with an American from behind the “Iron Curtain” might be subject to “repercussions”.

James A. Weiler’s silver bracelet made the round the world trip and back home. The family had a little more information, but still a lot of unanswered questions. Who was Jozka? Who found the bracelet? Why so many years? These questions and the answers to them would have to wait another 40 years to be answered. Not only would they be answered, the Weiler family knowledge about James A. Weiler would grow from fitting on to a baseball card to filling out a story with pictures...which you are reading right now!

## **Czech monuments to the fallen airmen**

The 60’s were turbulent in terms of world affairs with wars and unrest. The Weiler family had their families to tend to. World War II was becoming just black ink in a book on a dusty shelf. One didn’t talk too much about the past war except on Memorial Day holiday. My father flew Jim’s 48 star funeral flag every 4<sup>th</sup> of July. It’s a tradition I keep up with today. Complacency was the new normal especially in suburban America which never had its freedom taken away.

In the Czech Republic it was another matter. Under occupational rule they learned to sing their national anthem in German and now Russian. They could not commemorate the Americans who died for their freedom in 1944. The glacial pace of change for 43 years was insufferable...but the pendulum of fate was moving nonetheless into positive territory again. By 1989 the Velvet Czechoslovakian Revolution succeeded without blood shed thanks to its amazing leaders and the Czech Police force, which stood between the Russian military, and the citizens to prevent blood being spilled. With their newfound freedoms restoring their democracy, they began to honor the Americans as they wish to with no interference. Then the Velvet Divorce in 1993 split the former Czechoslovakia in to the Czech Republic and Slovakia with out blood shed.

In Moravia, the Czechs began building new WWII monuments and hosting commemorations to honor the US Airmen. Many of the surviving vets from Mission 263 revisited the places where they were shot down. They arrived not as conquering heroes, but as soldiers who did their duty to the best of their ability and celebrate with the Czech citizens the fruits of their efforts. The fresh breath of freedom was still filling their lungs and they wanted to make sure the lessons of preserving freedom was passed on to the next generations. They shared the stories and gathered the records to fill their museums with artifacts and memorabilia to tell the stories of the Americans falling from the sky in 1944. Every little town had a story to tell about mission #283 in the White Carpathian Mountains.

In 1994 I was working on my pilot’s license. In 1994 a new stone monument was erected on my Uncle’s crash site near the town of Krhov, unknown to our family. It was the highlight of commemorating Mission 263’s 50th anniversary. The US Ambassador and others made up the



crowds of about 2,000 people who were in attendance. People were searching for new stories to go with the concrete artwork monument featuring a falling B-17 and a pilot looking down.



1994 Krhov, Czech Republic.



1994 Milwaukee Timmerman Airport.

In 2004 the preparation for the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary was under way. Jozka Spelina had a great story to tell and remembered returning the silver bracelet. He hadn't contacted the family since 1966. He felt bad that he never took a picture of Jim's silver bracelet. So he remembered he still had my dad's inquiring letter from 1966 with his address in Wauwatosa, WI. Another chapter of the Silver Bracelet was about to be written.

### **A letter from the Czech Republic?**

My father Joe Weiler passed away on July 27, 2005 at the age of 87 years old. The family home was to be sold, but many repairs were needed before that. The goal was to get it ready to sell in the more lucrative springtime. So mail was still coming to the house in 2005 addressed to my father. In October of 2005 a letter with some odd looking stamps arrived. It might not have arrived had we sold the house right away. Again...fate. I opened it up and learn that a Czech historian name Svatopluk Vaculik was trying to reach the brother of James A. Weiler. He explained how my father had written long ago and they were looking for pictures of Jim's Silver Bracelet to complete a story about it. It seemed strange, but legitimate. I asked my Weiler cousins who had the silver bracelet and discovered that my Aunt Mary still had it. Her son Mark Huckstorf took some pictures of it and thanks to the magic of the Internet; I sent them to Svat Vaculik in Velehrad, Czech Republic.

The news of the silver bracelet being found (again) made all the aviation history magazines in Europe. Germany and the Czech Republic rejoiced in seeing the pictures and knowing the full back-story with the new history of the Weiler family. This helped greatly later as now the Mission 263 story was being circulated anew and all kinds of historians were looking for new and additional information. Especially the “Holy Grail” of items...the elusive picture of the entire B-17 “Queen”! Does it exist? Could it be out there? So many questions! So many looking! So much fun!



Jozka and Marie Spelina in 2008.

[illegible]

## Pohnutý osud náramku pilota Jamese Weilera

V ložském sepirovém čísle časopisu *Lectures in Cosmology* byl publikován článek s názvem „Příběh stříbe-

[illegible]

Szentgyörgyi-Vasculik, Velestevac

## Laureátem festivalu ve Strážnici se stal SVĚTLOVAN

V piatej ulici 23. dverou sa schádzajú kolégovia z celého Slovenska a programom Medzinárodného folklorického festivalu vo Bratislave navštevujú Okresný dom. Medzinárodný folklorický festival vo Bratislave navštevujú Okresný dom. Medzinárodný folklorický festival vo Bratislave navštevujú Okresný dom.



Vedlejšího významu mají i  
je je možné čerpat z knihy v Rejovické,  
která je v současnosti v rukou  
Petr. Odpočívá, zahleděných lesů  
po obědové v ústředí tábora. Táborec již  
dnešního a přesně o pár let později  
to k tomu, měl si však ke dluhu. Zahrada  
k tomu, v rukou dluhu se takto a  
k tomu, v rukou dluhu se takto a  
k tomu, v rukou dluhu se takto a

sborník. Autaři programu Lucie Uhlíková a Karel Pavlíček, režie Veronika Jedličková konferenční Markéta Pavlíčková a Ivan Kalin, číselníky CM Danaj ze Strážnice, Mušče ze Zlína, Vladoři soubor Kalata a jejich CM ze Zlína, CM Jaroslava Čecha o taneční skupinu, Magdalena Mičková, Jan Gajda ml., Dětští bůžkovi soubor Handrlíček a Kanovie a Světlován z Bojkovic.

10

News of the Silver Bracelet hits the European news magazines in May 2007.

## Meeting the Survivors and a new challenge

As more information poured in I was made aware of the veterans group called the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group. It existed with live vets and...survivors of mission 262. Better yet, in late September 2006 they were hosting an annual reunion. Bet yet...it was close enough I could drive to it in Dayton, Ohio!

I contacted the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group to inquire about their reunion. I reached Loy Dickenson, the lead navigator of the Mission 263 group. He was in shock. He had been looking for the family of James A. Weiler when he wrote a book about it in 1997. He couldn't find any Weilers. Finally we connected and another thousand questions. He invited me to Dayton to get some more answers and off I went.

Dayton was great because it has every plane at the Air Force Museum there. In particular a B-17 at the time call Shoo Shoo Baby. I was able to take pictures of the Mission 263 survivors with a B-17. What a "Holy Grail" shot I thought! It was touch and go however as far how to talk to vets. Luckily my journalism training and reporters experience worked well. They mostly talked among themselves at first and I would just hang nearby and listen. Once I explained I was the nephew of James A. Weiler KIA on mission 263, they opened up even more. I generally would ask a "happy" question "like where were you when the war ended?" Then I could "peel the onion" and ask more sensitive questions. It was a ton of information to absorb and I had so many questions being the new kid on the block.





The 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb group displayed about ten 2 foot by 4 foot boards plastered with small B&W photos at all the reunions. They covered everything from North Africa up to Foggia. It was all World War II pictures. Sadly, not many names, dates and places were on them. I didn't even know Jim's plane number so I didn't really know what I was looking for. They did have some chronological books so I could find some Mission 263 items. They also had a ton of memorabilia, jackets, Mae West lifejackets, aviator caps, hats and aviation war collectibles. I was like a kid in a candy store taking in the sights and filling my head with information. So many vets. So many questions. So little time.

One of the vets I warmed up to early on with was Joe Owsianik. He was a left waist gunner on Tail End Charlie William Tune's fortress. He was shot down on Mission 263 and very open to sharing his whole story, most of which I wrote about earlier. I soaked up every line. At the end of 48 hours he threw out a challenge to me. He said, "Hey Todd! I'm going back to the Czech Republic where I crashed and shake the hand of the German pilot who shot me down. Do you want to come along?" After a pause to process what I think I just heard and I said dumbfoundedly..."YES!"

### **First European trip — going deep in to the Czech Republic**

I had never been to Europe, but I had talked extensively with a fellow sailor Tom Thomas at South Shore Yacht Club who went to Germany all the time. He went much on his own WITHOUT travel agents and booking hotels. He did so confidently and talked about how easy it was. I credit him with building the confidence in me to pull this off. Also Svat Vaculik was sending me detailed train schedules and making it sound so easy. I had only traveled by train once. It didn't go well. It was in 1979 on a college ski trip to Jackson Hole Wyoming. We hit -54°F below zero weather. That's another story. Maybe for a carefree college student then, but not for a 53-year-old senior now.

August 2007 came quickly. After a seven-hour flight to London I was on my way to see Joe in the Czech Republic. Thankfully I had a cousin and his wife Mark and Colleen Boyle in London at the time. They helped me greatly acclimate to the time and culture change, as they had been in London a while. This was critical as the airline ripped my main luggage bag severely tearing it open from end to end some how. I had a lot of stuff and had no idea how it held together without spilling out in the baggage area. The airline gave me a cheap replacement bag to replace it. I wanted to fix mine. We spent the better part of a day hunting for a carpet needle and heavy thread to sew up the rip.

After a few days there I was off to Vienna, Austria to meet up with more European friends. Winfried and Marina Dolling were Germans living in Neukirchen-Vluyn (near Düsseldorf). Marina spoke good English and I only had one semester of German in college. My wife Jan and I meet them in Daytona vacationing. They were interested in traveling in the states and we were interested in traveling Europe some day. We struck up an immediate friendship and pen pal connection. I agreed to meet and stay at a hotel of their selection. It was in the heart of Vienna and had Conditioned Air. Much to their and my surprise, this is NOT the same as "air conditioning". Conditioned Air in Europe is only the hallways. To make matters worse, we were on the roof top...hottest rooms in the hotel. The Dolling's apologized profusely, but there was nothing we could do. At night the windows were open so all the bumping thumping discotheque music from the bar across the street came in until 3 AM. Then at 6 AM the garbage trucks came banging their way to empty the dumpsters. We were in the heart of Vienna and that was the only saving grace.

After two days of sightseeing Vienna it was time for me to head for the Czech Republic via train. Svat gave me great directions and schedules, but I still had no clue how trains work in Europe. And it was tricky because I had to catch a second train or likely end up in Siberia. (Slight exaggeration, but that's what went through my mind.) I put my repaired bag inside the "free bag" the airline compensated me with because it was too big to carry separately. I was dropped off by Winfried and Marina in their car and started rolling my bag to the train platform. Just then, one of the wheels fell off. Nothing says "Ugly American" better than seeing a guy dragging a one wheeled bag etching a charcoal black streak for a 100 feet along the train platform. Ugh! I got on board as soon as I could.

I was hot, overheated and moderately exhausted looking for an empty seat. I found one just as the train pulled out. However, I found out I was in someone else's reserved seat. There was no conductor on board to ask for help. I got my bag and dragged it through the corridor car by car looking for empty seats. The smoking car was open, but I was not going there. I finally found an empty seat and realized we were soon approaching the checkpoint between Austria and Czech Republic. They were not united in the EU yet. With the checkpoint rapidly approaching I looked in my credential ticket pouch, which I wear around my neck. My passport wasn't there. First panic flash hit me.

Did I leave it at the hotel in Vienna? I left my folding umbrella under the nightstand there. What else did I leave? I pulled my bag off the high rack and went to the outside aisle to search inside it. The people seated in the seats next to me must have thought I was nuts...in, out, in, out. I started searching every nook and cranny in my rolling duffle bag tucked inside another bag. This WAS nuts. Now a full panic was running through my head. I wondered what it would be like to be taken off the train like all those escaped convict movies or worse Joe Owsianik's story!? I zipped and unzipped every thing after numerous passengers, also looking for empty seats, walked through my underwear and belongings scattered on the floor. I zipped it all up, went back to my seat and calmly waited for the security guards to take me away for no passport. I was ready to pass out over a passport.

With my arms folded on my lap, my hands slowly drifted to the fanny pack I was wearing around waist. I remembered there was an inside flat pocket. It couldn't be in...Boom! There it was. That dark blue passport was in a dark black pocket. I nearly fainted with relief. I didn't have time to. Seconds later after I found it, the cabin door flung open and the uniformed officer said "Passports?" I handed him mine as if it looked like I knew what I was doing all along. I was ready to throw up from the stress of it. And I wasn't even across the BORDER yet! My first tourist train ride was off to a hell of a start.

Now I clutched my train map closely looking for the signs to Breclav then to Staré Město. They were my connecting and then final stop. The urban landscape gave way to greener and more remote vistas. The rail infrastructure was getting more rusted and rustic as we moved east. The trains we passed waiting on the sidetracks looked like from 1950 with peeling paint. What had I gotten myself into? What a scene...a crazy American who can't speak German or Czech and no conductors coming by to announce stops or ask questions. My heart was racing. As my Breclav stop came up, I position myself closer to the door. That way I could see the station name Breclav as we entered the station and if mine, out I could scoot. Luckily that plan worked. Now, I needed to make my connection to Staré Město, CZ.



Trains looked older the more east I went.



Looking for my stop in CZ. Where is Breclav?

I didn't know how ANY trains work. Did I say that already? I was looking for a way to get to the terminal building in Breclav, but I didn't see a bridge across the tracks like I saw in London. So I walked across the tracks and got yelled at in Czech by some onlookers. Later, I found they have tunnels that go underneath the tracks. I should have studied Czech numbers. I had my CZ dictionary, but travel phrases would have been better. Nobody was in the station that could speak English. I saw my connecting train time come and go, now the panic attack was coming back. I saw an old woman waiting, wearing a babushka and I thought about speaking in German... numbers now. Then I thought that might not be the best idea since the Germans were here in WWII. I uttered my best attempt in Czech "Staré Město?" and held up my fingers like 1, 2 or 3 quizzically pointing at the tracks. She pointed to a track and I took the tunnel this time to that platform. I got on the right train finally and a short while later I was in Staré Město. What a relief.



Svat and his "translator" Frank Kolečkář from California.



Ed Lindbloom's B-17 Crash monument in Velehrad Svát's home town.

While on the platform looking around I heard a man's voice from behind call out in Czech "Mr. Weiler?" It was Svát! It was a great relief to see Svát in person. We had exchanged photos via the Internet, but I had no cell phone yet. He had a friend named František (Frank) Kolečkář with him, a

Californian, but proud Moravian living here, who spoke better English than Svat. Svat spoke better English than I could speak Czech. It was very warm. We had a great lunch and I went to Svat's home to meet his family, wife Marie and son Martin. It is where I would be staying for the commemorations. Sadly, Marie passed in 2017.

### A visit to a “hunting cabin” plum orchard

While driving with Svat and Frank, we visited the sights around Velehrad including the Basilica of Assumption of Mary and Saint Cyrillus and Methodius. Next-door is the Velehrad church where Svat sings in the choir. Before I got to the commemorations, we went up to Frank's “hunting cabin” as I call it. It was high on a hill and deep in the woods set in a plum orchard up from Velehrad. It was remote. It contained a beautiful porcelain covered combination wood fired stove and furnace. It was a piece of art decorated in ornate navy blue on white vines and repeating patterns covering it. Outside were several beehives loaded with honey and of course the stills for making the national drink...Slivovitz. The plums that grew here were huge by August. The plum trees grow prolifically here, just as dandelions grow in the US. The locals harvest the plums from the road ditches with the extra water where the biggest plums are waiting to be picked to make their family Slivovitz.

We imbibed more Slivo than we should have that night and it was time to go home. It was a bit like riding on a Coney Island roller coaster with 3 numb passengers rolling down a dark hill with curves. I've never been on that roller coaster, but it is what was going through my head at the time. Some how for entertainment my hosts thought it would be fun to sing the Czech National Anthem in Czech, German and Russian...all languages and cultures they had to endure. I could only image how the traffic accident report would have read. *“Witnesses said they could hear the men in the car singing, but there were conflicting reports. Some said it was Czech. Others said it was German. Still others insisted it was Russian”*. Such were the late night antics of an American's first trip to the Czech Republic. We got safely home without incident. It was late...but without incident.



Picking plums.



Making “the recipe”.



My wonderful hosts.

The next day we visited the Merrill Prentice crash site high on a hill in Vyskovek on the Czech Slovak border. I was so happy to see “Jersey Joe” Owsianik get out of a car with his walker. Finally an American I can understand. Translators suddenly surrounded us and in an instant the language barrier evaporated. Of course, the first course is a shot of Slivovitz, a 110 proof plum brandy that is clear and goes down like kerosene for the initiated. A drink of Slivovitz is the custom when meeting at first and the Czechs take great pride in their homemade “recipe”. I had gotten the local initiation tour the night before.





Having the first Slivo with Joe.



Group at Prentice monument.



A wing strut from "Boeing".

The Prentice monument is unique in that it contains parts of the actual Prentice B-17 cast into the artwork. The words "BOEING" can be seen stamped on items in the base. An engine cowling surrounds the base. We then started a small convoy of cars with American flags flying from them to visit the actual crash location a mile away. The property belongs to the Zitnik family and Mike Zitnik ran the Sanov museum. His father built the first monument to the B-17's that crashed here nearby. Many of the first monuments consist of a turbo charger and an oxygen tank cast into a rectangle of cement. They are fairly durable after 60 years!



(L-R) Roman Susil, Simona Susil, Radovan Frait, Jersey Joe, ??, Mike Zitnik, Svat Vaculik, Todd Weiler.



Crash signage at restaurant.



Tourists with Joe Owsianik.

At a nearby restaurant there are signs and maps to guide tourist folks to the crash sites of other B-17s from mission 263. While at the restaurant it was amazing how once word got out a US WWII vet has there, everyone wanted his autograph and a picture with him. Young and old "Jersey Joe" was a rock star where ever he went.

Our next commemoration stop was my Uncle's crash site in Krhov near Bojkovice. I brought a special bronze VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) medallion that is used to mark American WWII veteran graves and holds a US flag. I got it from the Waterford, WI VFW Post that still had some bronze ones left instead of the newer/cheaper plastic type. I removed all the black oxidized tarnish and coated it with a sealer to keep it looking golden. They appreciated it very much. They took it off the monument after the ceremonies and now keep it in a museum when not in use. I also brought a rock from Brown's Lake near Burlington, WI where Jim would have swum as a kid. I thought he needed a little bit of home with him.



VFW Medallion from Waterford, WI VFW Post.



Svat presenting me with Jim's plane plaque.



Krhov 2007 Commemoration.

In return I was gifted with a 1 x 2 foot plaque of B-17 plane parts that had been collected from Jim's crash site by Mike Zitnik. It is a great variety of parts including what appeared to be an un-detonated primer in the 50 caliber round. Great story about that. They included a written description in English, French, German and Czech of what the board contained to put in my suitcase. It listed contacts to reach out to for retrieval if there were any problems.

Fast forward to the end of my 2007 trip bringing this parts board home in my luggage with what appears to be a live 50 caliber round. I boarded my plane from Prague to Munich no problem with



the board. However on the flight to Chicago from Munich, something happened. We were all in our seats when we pushed back from the gate to leave. We were about 50 yards out when the plane stopped. After a brief wait a message came over the loud speaker that we “had to return to the gate due to a luggage problem.” My panic button was pushed again. I figured they just found the 50 caliber round in the luggage and I was about to be escorted off the plane. Check Point Charlie all over again. I began to gather my things in anticipation of it being me that was the problem. The plane headed for the gate, moved about 10 yards and stopped again. We waited there about 5 more minutes and the voice came over the PA. “Ladies and Gentleman, sorry for the inconvenience. We thought we had too many bags, but the numbers have now been worked out. We will be on our way momentarily.” I was once again able to breathe. I made it home without incident. Yeah!

### **Commemoration at Rudice**

The next big commemoration site was at the City of Rudice. This is where Joe Marinello and Russell Meyrick died when their chutes failed to open. This is also where the Germans gave the fallen Americans the full military burial with a 21-gun salute. The Archbishop was there and the whole town of over 1,000 inhabitants. Regional elected representatives and mayors were there. It was mind blowing to see it filled fence to fence with standing room only. Having a real WWII vet there, rewarded all of them. Joe sure was thrilled by the response. An outdoor mass at the crash site was held where Marinello and Meyrick were found. This is the area also now called “America”. Then food and drink was served at the local fire station. In past years, huge turnouts have gathered here. The “Jeepers” as they are collectively called attend this weekend of events camping out “Army” style just like WWII infantry. They have restored numerous US Jeep vehicles and trucks. They come from all over Europe to road rally here and commemorate with their vehicles and uniforms. They also are instrumental in giving rides to the attendees to the remote and often rustic access roads to get to the crash sites. They enjoy doing this for the visitors as well as posing in their uniforms to honor the America airmen.



The Rudice grave memorial has been updated to include two other Czech soldiers from the area who died trying to assassinate the German protectorate in Prague. It looks very nice and is a show case tribute in this proud small cemetery.

In 2009, the family of Russell Meyrick visited here. Mike Meyrick is the nephew of Russell Meyrick the bombardier KIA aboard of B-17G, #4297159. Mike brought his daughter Kelly Charles Meyrick and her son Alex and daughter Casey. It was a rainy overcast day and the outdoor mass was held in the small chapel next to the cemetery instead of the “America” site. The Meyricks wanted to see where Russell was found so we made arrangements for the family to go to the site. We found the tree



marker with Russell Meyrick's and Joe Marinello's name on it. It was easy to find as fresh white flowers had been placed there in anticipation of the mass to be held.

We took a van about 2 miles out of town to the field where Russell died. As we arrived the forests were still full of wisps of white fog blowing into the dense fir trees and the fields held back a light rain. As the family exited the van, the sun finally dramatically broke through the clouds to the west and shot golden beams of yellow light deep underneath the dark forest canopy. It illuminated the white floral wreath in a radiant light placed by the villagers in anticipation of the outdoor mass. My knees weakened and my eyes watered as I realized what was happening.

I walked 100 yards out into the neighboring open meadow, turned around to look back and saw in the sky a sign of Russell's approval. A huge rainbow was spread end-to-end over "the place they call America"! Four generations of Meyricks were getting reunited in a very, very special way. What words can replace this incredible photo? The Czech patriotic spirit seems to know no limit for our veterans. Thanks to the people of Rudice for their beautiful care, commemoration and honor of our vets. It truly is a special place.



Meyrick family at Russell's memorial.



A place called "America" in the Czech Republic.



A special sign during the visit of the Meyricks.



Rudice 2009 commemoration.

Next commemoration site we visited was the mass grave in Slavičín. The ironic thing about this is that the Germans thought they were doing a disservice to the Americans buried here by putting them in a part of the cemetery used for criminals and animals. Now 80, years later the cemetery has grown so large, the location is in a prime spot right next to the church. The pendulum of fate is working again. The city of Slavičín also has a large display of artifacts from the mission 263. My Uncle's landing gear and horizontal stabilizer are in there. I finally got to meet Jozka Spelina that day as he came down from his home in Prague. It was 41 years in the making to finally meet him. Wow!



Meeting Jozka 2007 in Slavičín.



Slavičín grave with Joe Owsianik.



Night meeting at Jim's grave.

There is a comical story of sorts to this meeting with Jozka and Svat later that night. Jozka came late to the commemorations at Krhov and he missed seeing Jim's grave. My friend Svat had an old Czech made car called a Skoda. It was of dubious reliability possibly made in the Communist era. Any rate we decided to break away from the evening party in Slavičín at about 11:00 PM and go see it. The route to get there is no picnic. You enter through a lumberyard that slopes down to a shallow stream. The road is used mostly by farm machinery to cross a river to get to the fields on the high ground near the monument. We forged our way across the stream going over about 6 inches of water. Then we drove up the grass-covered hill like a stampeding covered wagon across the plains kicking up shafts of grass and bugs as we crossed it. Svat knew exactly where we were going but Jozka and I looked suspiciously at each other in puzzlement. After about 2 minutes we got there.



Full moon behind Jim's memorial.

It was a special night. On August 26, 2007, it was a night for a total lunar eclipse on the other side of the planet. But we saw the full moon in the cloudless sky glowing brightly on the eastern horizon lighting up the hills and countryside with no manmade lights visible. Some of you know I'm an amateur astronomer as a hobby. I was in astronomy heaven. The connection here to Jim was so vivid that night I wish I could put it in a bottle. As I've said in my remarks earlier to the crowd, I don't know why fate put Jim here, but I know Jim's spirit is at rest here. It is the closest place that resembles his home town of Burlington, WI and the people here truly love him so dearly. There couldn't be a warmer heartfelt proper place. To be here in this moment with the two key people who lead me to find my Uncle Jim was an incredible amount of serendipity. The odds of me making this trip were the fulfillment of my wildest teenage dreams.

While the glow of that moment was still lingering within me, it was time to go. The three of us piled into the small car and Svat turned the key. A low groan of an empty stomach sound is all the car would offer up. Another try to start the car and the same sound. Now our stomachs began to feel it too. Nothing happened as the engine grudgingly refused to start. We looked at each other thinking to ourselves...what now? Nothing to do now except wait and try again later. We waited another 10 minutes in the shadows of the moonlight having casual conversations about anything...except cars. I was calling on Jim for some big favors. He came through as the Skoda coughed back to life after the third try. We jumped in and rolled down the hill back towards the stream. I don't think the American Automobile Association (AAA) visits here. Thanks Jim! Oh, what a night I'll never forget.

Our next daytime stop was at the Thayne L. Thomas "Big Time" #096 crash site in the woods about 2 miles from Sanov. There is a monument in town dedicated to the plane as well as a monument marking the trail entrance leading to the crash site. The hike to the site is like a reenactment from the movie "The Sound of Music"! The slopes open out of thick woods atop a ridge to a huge flowering meadow that looks down into the tiny villages in the valleys below. You would think Julie Andrews would be popping out any minute dancing and singing. A Kodak movie moment for sure.



Narrow road to Sanov crash site.



The hills are alive view!



Flahive was found by this stump!

It was in 2009, at this site, where Czech historians with metal detectors found the ball turret with the body of the gunner Robert J. Flahive still inside it. The ball was buried deep and a tree grew right over it making extraction difficult. The remains have been recovered and sent to the POW/MIA forensics lab in Hawaii in hopes of locating Flahive's relatives. The problem is trying to find any remaining family 65 years later. When a son or father dies it's hard to find the family if no more children carry the sir name. It was also remarkable to be able to talk to some living witness who saw these planes come down. One such witness of my Uncle's plane was Mr. Stehlicek. I talked to him while at the Sanov site and through an interpreter I learned he saw it crash as a child.





Witness of 263 air battle  
Mr. Stehlicek.



Svat Vaculik, Roman Susil, Mike Zitnik.



Oxygen mask and other parts  
From Jim's B-17 "Queen".

The Sanov museum is perhaps the largest museum that contains the most artifacts from mission 263. It is filled from floor to ceiling with virtually anything that fell out from the sky. And that includes German or American. There is an oxygen mask and hose I would love to swab for DNA and see if it is my Uncle's. (((Sigh))) This also the museum I saw the name "Mary" used from Jim's plane instead of Queen.

### Joe Owsianik meets the German pilot who shot him down

Like most of the men in this story, they all had a connection to aviation. Jim started in an airplane factory and ended up in the cockpit of a B-17. Willie Reschke also loved airplanes. According to his son that love of planes landed Willi in the cockpit of a German fighter. Willi made his way through the ranks and was a very proficient pilot. This was a fighter pilot who knew how to shoot down four-engine bombers. He was a Luftwaffe Ace and awarded the Knight's Cross of Iron for his piloting skills.



Willi Resche's flight record.



Joe Owsianik 1943 gunner/camerman.

By the end of the war Willi had flown 70 missions. Joe Owsianik had only half that at 35 missions. Of those flights Willi scored 27 victories. Of those victories, 20 of them were four engine bombers! Willi was also a survivor. He himself had been shot down 8 times and bailed out of damaged planes 4 times. Meanwhile, his compatriots didn't fair as well. Losses at the end of the war decimated the Luftwaffe pilots by some 70%. The domination of the skies over Europe was a major victory for the Allies. Willi survived to the end of the war and began writing about his air war experiences.

Ultimately, Roman Susil, a Czech aviation historian and now a Mission 263 expert, had located Willi. Roman got involved in the story of Mission 263 when Loy Dickinson and other American survivors were returning to the Czech Republic in the late 1980's. Roman was a bit intimidated at first by the Americans when meeting them, but once he met Jersey Joe, a lifelong friendship had taken root. Working in concert with German historians, Roman corresponded with Willi and exchanged stories and WWII information. Many of the Czech historians were actively using the Internet to locate airmen and their families to get more information. In 2005 Willi chronicled his World War II fighter pilot days and was able to connect his missions with Roman's records and learn that Willi indeed had been involved with the Battle of the White Carpathians. Willi may have scored some hits on the Mission 263 B-17's, but exactly which one(s) are uncertain. Somewhere in the battle Willi's own plane was hit by friendly fire and he safely crash-landed it.



Willi Reschke's Messerschmitt BF-109G crash landed near Banov, CZ.

In 2009 when word that Jersey Joe was coming back to the Czech Republic, Roman and the other Czech historians came up with the novel idea for the two combatants to meet. They agreed and the plan was set to make it happen during the 2007 commemorations. That's when Jersey Joe invited me to join him to meet the "man who shot me down!"

Unfortunately, Willi went out on a bicycle ride, fell and was injured just before the event. His injuries prevented him from attending in time for the commemorations in CZ, but he recovered in time to meet Joe before he headed back to the states.

At the “Cornflower Guest House in Stotternheim” near Willi’s home the two once mortal enemies came face-to-face once again some 63 years later. Both men into their mid 80’s now needed walkers and canes to get around. They greeted each other in typical macho warrior talk. Willi said to Joe, “I’m glad I didn’t kill you shooting you down.” Joe’s quick retort was, “I’m glad I was a bad shot!”



Willie Reschke and Joe Owsianik.



September 5, 2007.



Warriors at age 80+.

With smiles on their faces the two sat down to drink beer, enjoy lunch and reminisce about the war through the German, English and Czech translators. They enjoyed their meal and it was time to leave. One last question for them both was, what they thought of the war. Both of them used the same word to describe it. “Ludicrous!”

A tender moment came afterwards when it became time for them to say their goodbyes. They embraced each other, both holding on firmly to each other for balance...both barely able to stand alone as octogenarians. It was a meeting many had hoped would happen and perhaps provide some closure. Willi Reschke did finally visit the Czech Republic and visited the crash sites and museums about the air battle. Joe and Willi’s stories now live on in printed ink, on books on shelves, or posts on the Internet. Roman Susil is the administrator of the Mission 263 Facebook page. It documents the many past and current developments related to Mission 263. The link is [https://m.facebook.com/groups/mission263/#\\_ =\\_](https://m.facebook.com/groups/mission263/#_=)

Willi Reschke died on July 5, 2017 at the age of 95 years old.

Joe P. Owsianik died November 1, 2010 at the age of 86 years old.

### **A train ride to Prague to remember**

At the end of my 2007 trip to the Czech Republic I got to ride the train again, this time to Prague. I was relaxed knowing I had two Czech “experts” riding with me along the way. It was another hot day and the train was not air-conditioned. We rode with the windows partially down and the breeze from the moving train was refreshing. There a few amenities on the train, it is very basic. The restrooms had no toilet paper and there were no food cars or dining for the 4-hour trip. The views



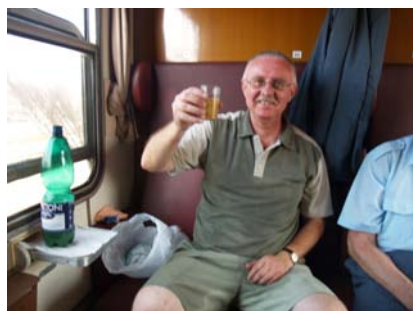
were great rolling through the rolling forested mountains up to Prague. But my drama on Czech trains wasn't over yet!

Like all the passengers, Svat packed us all a nice lunch and some drink to enjoy on our journey. One of the items he packed to drink was a homemade beverage called "Burcak" pronounced (boorchaak). I remember this because it rhymed sort of with "BullShit!" In other wine making places it is called a "must". In the Czech Republic the law stipulates it can only be sold from August to November and only grapes from Moravia can be used.

Burcak is a carbonated alcoholic drink that continues to ferment. Due to the carbonation and continued fermentation the wine must be transported and stored in unsealed and upright allowing the gases to escape. The consequences of failing to do so, result in exploding Burcak containers. This fact might have escaped my dear Czech host. The alcohol content can be between 1-7%.



The infamous train ride to Prague.



Svat's Burcak toast!



Opps! Burcak cleanup!

Svat had brought a 1 liter plastic bottle of Burcak along for us to drink. As he set out the plastic cups to pour, what happened next was the funniest thing I've seen in my life. As Svat slowly unscrewed the cap of the Burcak bottle, it started to shoot out with the force and majesty of the famous geyser of "Old Faithful" in Yellowstone National Park. The stunned Svat looked like he was choking a venomous snake spraying its poison everywhere. Nearby passengers ducked for cover as Svat twisted and turned wrestling the angry bottle spraying the entire cabin and roof. I quickly opened the window fully and pointed to it as an alternative as Svat was unable to recap the bottle. As he successfully aimed it out the window the bottle continued to empty its contents like those Mentos and diet coke videos. It was an enormous stream!

As fate once again would have it, a passenger train passed us in the opposite direction right at that moment. I can only imagine what it was like for the poor passengers in the opposing train sitting by an opened window getting sprayed with a sweet smelling applesauce-like liquid landing all over them out of nowhere! When it finally subsided, all we could do look at each other and laugh our heads off...all except our extremely embarrassed host Svat. But once again the miracle of kindness from the Czech people happened. All the passengers around us, including folks we sprayed, gave up their precious tissues and paper napkins to help us clean up the mess. Meanwhile Jozka, Svat and I sat for the next three and half hours "fermenting" our way to Prague. My shower that night never felt so good. I giggled myself to sleep replaying the scene in my head over and over. Hollywood just can't write this stuff.

Jozka gave me a great daytime tour of the city as together we climbed the nearly 200 ft. Petrin Tower overlooking the City of Prague. We also visited his aviation work place at the Kbely Air Museum and military airport. The aviation museum is one of the largest of its kind in Europe. It has the largest collection of Russian made MIG aircraft due to the Velvet Revolution. Smart thinking Czechs defied a Russian order to destroy the MIGs. Instead they hid some and buried them. The fleeing Russians didn't find them so after they were gone the Czech's unearthed them and put them on display.

I had the chance to visit Jozka's office where he was certifying the weight capacity of parachutes. An interesting fact about parachutes is that the American parachute maker Switlik, out of New Jersey, sent a card and pin to every veteran who bailed out of a disabled aircraft and survived using his silk parachute. It was called the "Caterpillar Club" named after the silk worms who wove the lifesaving fibers. Over 100,000 members including John Glenn who famously crashed his lunar lander training hover craft are in the club.

On the wall at Jozka's office was a picture of my Uncle that he hung on the wall wherever he worked. What a great tribute to a man so involved in aviation matters he helped to preserve and be a part of this fine story and legacy of the Silver Bracelet



Jozka's office with Jim Weiler's picture on the wall sent by Jim's sister Mary Huckstorf.

## **Finding Jim's crew photo with names**

The so-called "Holy Grail" for historians is when a picture is found with all the names, date and places on it. It is rare and perhaps the most elusive. Our family had one such photo, which was of Jim and his crew at the Savannah, Georgia Quonset hut just before leaving for Europe. There was no information on it...just a nice smiling face of Jim Weiler clearly wearing his silver ID bracelet. After my 2007 Czech visit, I set off to help the Czech historians locate the other Mission 263 families.

April 15th traditionally has a lot of bad karma attached to it...taxes due, sinking of Titanic, etc.. That's no longer true for me. Here's a hunk of positively great news! On April 15th, 2009 after a 2-year personal search by me and a 65-year search by many others, I finally found the names of James A. Weiler's original crew. Not only did I get the names, but the date and location of the famous first crew photo!

I first found this group photo in my Uncle's belongings just before Christmas in 2007, but it had no information. Seems fitting, 3 days after Easter 2009 another miracle happened. It all started thanks to a retired KC-135 Stratotanker boom operator named Bob Kowalski. The airplane connection continues. He also flew the State Patrol airplane to catch traffic speeders on the interstate highway.

In the fall of 2008, I teased this friend of mine, Bob Kowalski, who sits at a computer all day, to stop sending me aviation stuff and help me find some of my Uncle's flight crew. Sure enough, in a few weeks he located an obit of Loren E. Byam's mother in the Wisconsin Dells area. I called the number Bob found for a relative listed in the obit and left messages, but no calls were returned. I mailed letters to, which also went unanswered. I thought I hit a dead end.

Then, in spring of 2009, the phone rang. Indeed, I had located a nephew, William and Jean Brew, who kept some of his Uncle's letters and photos. They had been wintering in Florida as "snowbirds" and missed my earlier calls. I was excited to know I might be getting a photo of a missing crewmember Loren Byam. I opened the package that arrived on April 15th and started reading a binder full of letters and photos. Halfway through it I screamed! I found much more.

To my amazement, I found the same B&W 8x10 Savannah group photo...but this photo had on the back what I thought I would never see...names...date...and a place. Yeeehaah! The Holy Grail is now complete! I finally had the names of all of Jim's first crew as it was formed before going overseas. A month later on July 5, 1944, they would all be seeing their first combat over Montpelier, France.

The names and positions as labeled on the back of the photo are above. An "armourer" is a waist gunner or tail gunner. The "engineer" is a top turret gunner seated behind the pilot and co-pilot. Of these crewmembers, Weiler, Sulkey, Bumgardner, Dalcenale, Wagoner, and Byam all died on Jim's 232048 "Queen" on Mission 263. Laratta, also died on Mission 263, but on William Bullock's plane #359. Ed Albert Smith might be interested, as he survived on Bullocks's plane and might know Laratta. Husband, was not on Mission 263, but flew 44 missions and Mirabito flew 37 missions to the end of the war.

I scanned all the materials the Brews sent me and returned them. It is wonderful and heart-breaking at the same time to read the letters as Loren wrote as he works his way through training and ends up a

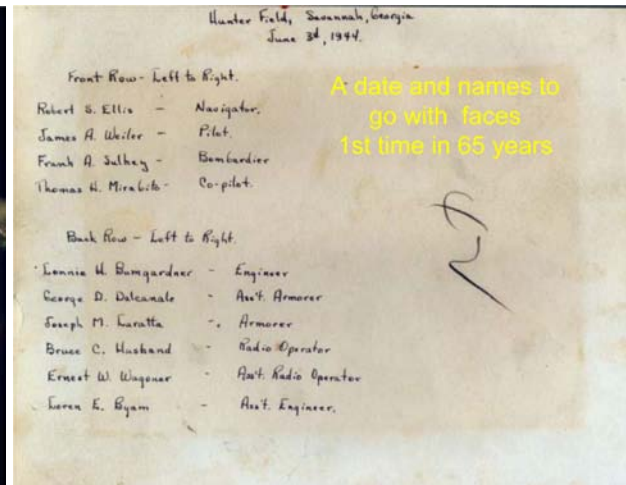


waist gunner. From the struggles on the farm back home to the desperate exchange of letters for information between mothers of the missing men, it reads like a great tragedy. But like what this story is about, that pendulum of fate swung both ways. Now it was moving into positive territory.

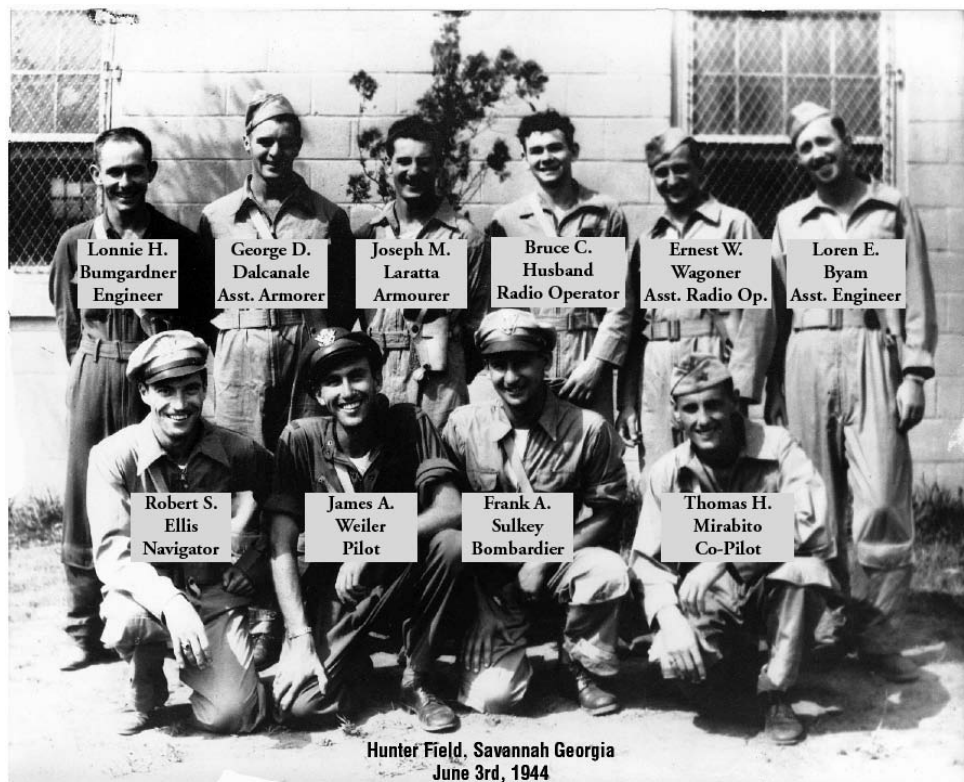
Best of all, Bill and Jean Brew came to my April 21st presentation of the Silver Bracelet program in Waterford, WI. I gave them a piece of "Queen" that my Czech friend Vlastimil gave me in Washington, D.C. last year. Another lesson here is to never give up. It can be frustrating but the magic of success is well worth it.



Loren E. Byam's family photos.



On the back of the Savannah crew photo.



Finally, we had names to go with this photo from 1944.

## Finding the next Holy Grail...a picture of Queen

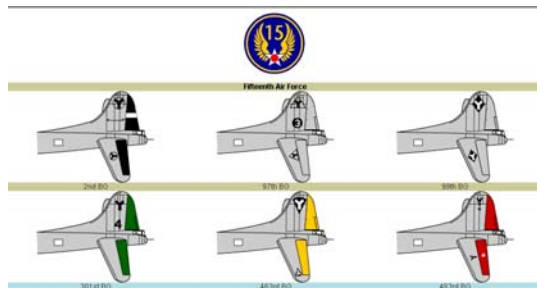
I was soon connected to a network of fellow aviation history enthusiasts who shared information from England, Italy, France Germany and the Czech Republic. In January of 2009, a belated Christmas gift arrived. It was a picture of a B-17 over Le Pouzin, France. It was a triple Twilight Zone moment because the date the War Department released the photo was...August 29, 1944. Next was the second surprise. The tail number clearly visibly is 239096. This is Big Time! This is Thayne Thomas's plane that went down near Sanov on Mission 263. That's also the ball turret with guns pointed down possibly with Robert Flahive in it.



But it had a third surprise in it. Look at the tail of the B-17 to the right with the stripes on it. Look at the Serial Number. One can see #23204...and the last digit is missing. We ran the serial numbers of all the planes in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group. Only one B-17 had those pre-numbers...232048. That was Jim Weiler's plane Queen! We now had a "piece" of "Queen". Was that all we could find?

Even more intriguing now is to note the tail marking of 232048. Remember Jim's sketchbook? Remember his last sketch of a plane in a dive? The traditional marking for the 20<sup>th</sup> squadron was all black paint on the tail rudder and the control surface of the horizontal stabilizers. A black band

would go around the wings on both sides. Not all planes got their squadron's new paint job when transferred to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb group. Some would have the old markings for months. Look at Jim's drawing! He foresaw his future plane in 1939. He just had the black band on the fuselage instead of on the wings and needed to add a few more engines. But what a find and what a coincidence!



## Finding the second picture of QUEEN

In 2009 I was back in the Czech Republic eager to expand my search for information on my Uncle's B-17. I had been regularly getting more and more leads from historians in Europe. I was also helping to locate other US families connected to Mission 263. I had a little more time in 2009 to visit the crash site of Jim's plane and pay a private visit to Jim's crash site.

I decided to reunite Jim with his brother Joseph, my father. I first visited the forest where Queen salvaged her 20-250 lb. bombs. My friend, Vlastimil Hela drove up the primitive farm road as close as he could. Then we had to walk the rest of the way. We passed a deer-hunting stand as the only landmark as we went in. The craters were still there and the tree canopy had not closed all the way yet. The bark of the surrounding trees facing the craters had been scared by fire and were still blackened limbs extended to shattered ends and non-existent branches. The filtered sunlight fell into the open hole and the little undergrowth that was there was coming back slowly. Off in the distance through a break in the trees I could see the ridge where the monument to Queen sat high up on the crest of a hill below us. It was easy to visualize the stricken burning bomber struggling overhead trying to stay up, volplaning down in flames towards the inevitable crest.



250 lb. salvaged bomb crater in woods.



Reuniting Joe and Jim.



Jet contrail overhead.



When we arrived at the Krhov monument, I had brought with me a small 35mm film canister of my commingled parents cremation ashes. I sprinkled some of them around Jim's grave as this site now contained the blood of James A. Weiler. 65 years later the Weiler brothers were reunited. They both had their wings, now and were hopefully united in eternal rest. I stood for a moment of reflection thinking about what they would be saying to one another after being reunited. My friend Vlastimil Hela was taking pictures at the time. Later we looked at them and I saw something remarkable. There was a jet contrail of a plane high overhead. This is not an area of frequent air travel. I took it to be just another amazing sign that Jim and Joe were acknowledging my presence there.

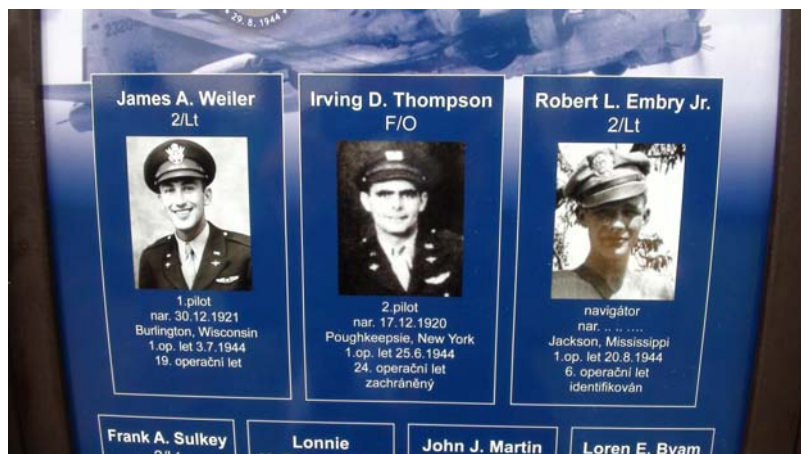


Another sign was when we were sitting there the cattle in the nearby pasture came up to the Krhov memorial. A small barbed wire fence keeps them from crossing over. We placed the silver bracelet on the grave and took some pictures. As we sat on the nearby bench, the cows started walking towards us. It was like the reenactment of a Christmas nativity scene as they surrounded us. All I could think of it was Jim's father Jacob Weiler sending some of his "patients" to greet us and say hello. Jake was the town veterinarian of Burlington, Wisconsin. A day later during the formal ceremonies at the same Krhov monument, the cows once again joined us. It was a special moment indeed. It was a family reunion bigger than I could have hoped for.

The monument now features some weatherproof signage written in Czech and English to help explain the nature of the monument and the battle it commemorates. It features pictures of the crew, some of which I helped locate, their names and position on the plane. Similar signage is being built at all the B-17 crash sites to help honor the Americans that died here. The Czechs also have created a series of "Pop-up" easels for each Mission 263 airplane that tells the story of the Mission 263 airmen. These displays travel around to all the local schools in the area. It is a part of their continuing recognition of the airmen who died here. The annual commemorations continue here whether Americans are present or not. Later visits to the Commemorations have yielded many surprises over the years. In 2014 I met a gentleman who showed up with an M2 50 caliber machine gun. He hid it from the Russians in 1946 by burying it in concrete. Then after the occupation he dug it out. Amazing!



Krhov signage



Just before the formal ceremonies at Krhov in 2009 and while at City Hall for a lunch before the event, one of the Czech historians came up to me and said, “I found “Queen”. I noddingly said thank you, as I too, found pieces of her at the crash site earlier in the week. The dense clay soil by the crash site is such that the lighter pieces of aluminum from the plane, “float” to the surface. Metal detectors can find thousands of pieces. They are about the size of potato chips. I could still find pieces without a detector. I put them in my pocket to give to other 263 families. Others leave the big pieces on the grave as a tribute to the crew of “Queen”. The Germans bulldozed what remained of the plane into a big hole. “Queen” gives up some pieces of her from time to time.

Radovan Frait said, “No, No I found a picture of Queen...on Internet!” To make a long story short, Radovan Frait, a local Czech historian found a picture of a B-17 with the tail numbers of 23204 and

the last digit was missing. Jim's plane was 232048 as I explained earlier. We had a date and a mission number from the new photo. When I returned home and after two weeks of eliminating all the 23204 possibilities, indeed the final result is it was "Queen" in a full picture. Look closely and one can see the name "QUEEN" written in staircased letters on the nose. And to think that it came to life 65 years to the date it was destroyed. That was a surreal twilight-zone moment for me. In just two years, I've gone from just a tail photo to a complete photo. Jim sure knows how to pull strings and put things in my lap.



## **New picture found in January 2024**

As more of the veterans pass away, families are opening trunks of their deceased one and discovering more about their relatives that they didn't realize. I get over a dozen calls and emails a year from such families saying they just found their father's or grandfather's war memorabilia and want to know more about him.

I've helped perhaps 50+ families over the years searching for their loved one's military history with the Second Bomb Group. As their historian, I try to link the information we have with what they are searching for. We are fortunate, and perhaps the ONLY Bomb Group that has the flight records of every crewmember of every mission. Thus, if I know their name, chances are I can find their records and show them every mission, what plane they flew on, the date, the target and the outcome as listed as well.

Here in addition to the flight records, are two detailed books that contain the MACR (Missing Airmen Crew Reports) chronically by mission number. It's every flight taken by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group. The first book is called the "Defender's of Liberty" (DOL) and the other is called "The Second was First" (TSWF). DOL has the pictures in it while TSWF does not. Both are organized by mission number, but TSWF is more recent and contains newer information. With the date or mission number one can lookup and download just that particular section. The blow-by-blow account of every battle is covered and the details are taken from the MACR's and personal accounts.



Tragically no such resource for the ground crews or administrative staff are available. Sadly, the last living vet I'm in contact with is a ground crew mechanic Milton Zamboni. He's 104-year young and still sharp as a tack. He identified parts of B-17's the Czech Historians have found at the crash sites many a time. Sadly, Milton had no pictures of his time there as his motorcycle and camera were stolen just before he returned home.

Oddly enough, fate plays a little game with me. Virtually, whenever I leave town on a road trip or vacation, someone contacts me asking about their relative in WWII. It happens when I am the farthest away from my books and other resources that I use to help find information for them. January 2024 was no exception. I was out west skiing for a month and I got a notice from Roman Susil in the Czech Republic.

An American professional historian named Artur Stasiek posted on a Facebook B-17 page a number of photos he purchased. Artur lives in Niles, IL (near Chicago). The picture came from the estate of James J O'Toole of Chicago who served with the group in North Africa and in Italy. He passed away in Western Springs in April 2006. We believe O'Toole was ground crew as there is no record of him in our 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb flight crew database. Artur bought the materials in 2003 that contained hundreds of photos and negatives. He has started scanning some of them and posting them. One picture caught our eye.



#4232048 Queen Jim's B-17 finally found by Artur Stasiek January 2024.

Now we had the true Holy Grail. The indisputable tail number in complete detail. If one zooms in closer on the nose the name "Queen" appears just like it did in the earlier photo. It was a remarkable find and especially satisfying to us in the Mission 263 family. Once again I wasn't looking and serendipity drops a gift in my lap. It has been a story that keeps growing and growing as we discover more.

And there are countless other stories about the many airmen that flew these planes and their service. I am extremely lucky to have been a part of this voyage of discovery over the years. It was nice to have like-minded friends along the way. The task was daunting at times, and I never would have thought I would be going back to the Czech Republic 5 times. But it happened. It is a story that perhaps the Germans or the Russians had hoped would never get out. But thanks to the tireless efforts of many others, I can share this story with you.

## **What Else?**

There are many tender stories I've experience with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group. I was at the last reunion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group at Barksdale Air Force Base in Shreveport, Louisiana in 2015. There was one story of how the B-17 "My Baby" flown by Robert McCloskey and shot down near the Czech/Slovak border got a B-52 bomber named after it. "My Baby" was the first of the Mission 263 bombers to go down. Lloyd R. True was a Radio Operator/waist gunner/tail gunner for 44 missions. He was fortunate enough NOT to be flying on Mission 263 and he survived to the end of the war.

As the WWII story goes, Lloyd R. True was a radio operator on a nameless plane. His wife had a baby but the mother and child's health were in doubt. When all was well nine days later, Lloyd got the belated news and he exclaimed before the ground crew "My Baby". Hence the next day the name was on the plane and "My Baby" took to the skies until its fateful end on August 29th, 1944.

Fast forward to 2013 in New Orleans and 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group reunion there. A Col. Joe Jones was a pilot of a B-52 Bomber that had made publicity runs to NATO in 2010 to the Czech Republic. On one such mission Roman Susil introduced himself and some other Czech aviation historians. They presented Col. Jones a plaque of plane parts from Mission 263 and the 20<sup>th</sup> squadron. Col. Jones realized it was the same 20<sup>th</sup> squadron as his and "My Baby" was the first plane to be shot down.

When he returned to Barksdale he named his B-52 "My Baby" in honor of the legacy squadron plane from WWII. On the side of the plane he added the names of the crew from the B-17 that was shot down. On a return trip from another NATO visit they had an emotional moment.

As the Colonel tells it, when they returned home with the remains of the lost planes on the plaque, at the way point check-in on approach to Barksdale, they read the names of the WWII airmen lost on "My Baby" that day. The tower patched the audio into the flight line and everyone heard the names announced of the original 20th squadron "My Baby" vets returning home a final time. The flight line was in reverent awe at the sight. It must have been a surreal magical moment 65-plus years in the making. This story and the details were presented at the 2013 reunion and a delegation from the Czech sister city was on hand to meet Lloyd R. True and Col. Jones. Interestingly enough, the name of the first casualty of Mission 263 was top turret engineer Jim Jones. No immediate relation, but how ironic it is the beginning and ending cast of this history are both named "Jones". Sadly Lloyd R. True died of heart attack on the way driving home with his son from the reunion.

There are other remarkable moments. At the Albuquerque, New Mexico reunion in 2014 Ann Rhoades niece to James A. Weiler, hosted an evening with Navajo Code Talkers. Two of the marine

code talkers told their stories of fighting in the Pacific and the risks they took using their Navajo language to confuse the Japanese who had no clue. They had their books call “Navajo Weapon”.



Navajo Code Talkers meet 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group Vets Oct. 24, 2014.

The Navajo were so vital to the marines that each talker was “partnered” with a marine to protect them. But if the Navajo were ever captured, the “protector” would have to kill them lest they be captured and tortured by the Japanese. That night was a great mix of Marines and aviators telling war stories and signing each other’s books. The highlight of the night was when one of the Code Talkers sang the Marine hymn in Navajo! There wasn’t a dry eye in the room when he finished.

The last gathering of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb group eagles was in 2015. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group reunion was held at Shreveport, Louisiana. Only 6 vets were left to attend. Shreveport is home to the Barksdale Air Force base of B-52 bombers and Global Strike Command headquarters. Two of the four 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb group squadrons remain active on the base. The 20<sup>th</sup> squadron is all B-52’s and the 49<sup>th</sup> is a weapons testing squadron.



2015 Reunion vets (l to r) Vince Warner 496th Nav., Loy Dickinson, 20th Nav., Byrle Spillers 20th U.T., Lew Waters (seated) 20th T.G., Art Winkler, 429th U.T. and Richard Forst 96th Radio.



The Barksdale museum had a number of planes on display including a B-17. The museum there is small, but contains items and memorabilia on display from WWII. It was a tough last night as everyone said his or her goodbyes. The many new and old friendships were the glue that held the group together for so many decades. But one could see in the vets the years had taken their toll. The reality of travel was rapidly fleeting. It was a nice send off by the Barksdale Base. Besides being welcomed by the female base commander, Col. Kristen Goodwin, she briefed them on the capabilities of the base. She linked the vets accomplishments to building the foundation resulting in the bomber base there today. Everyone was taken out to the b-52 bomber flight line for a group photo as a final treat. The last hours were spent with young cadets talking to the veterans and exchanging their goals for their career in the Air Force against the experience of the vets. The gravity of the moment hit me pretty hard. I get tears just thinking about those last conversations.



Most of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group activities consist of the Czech commemorations of Mission 263. The Group maintains a website of the history of the group. Many of the other WWII bomb groups have consolidated under the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force webpage. Families and historians continuing their informational searches leave “notes” there on the bulletin board. The 15<sup>th</sup> continues to host reunions where the remaining veterans often attend with their families. The Barksdale Air Force base remains the home of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group’s two legacy squadrons, the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 49<sup>th</sup>. Excavations in France and other parts of Europe continue build museums around 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb group planes.

## What If?

The alternate title of this story could be called “What If” What if Jim was interested in cars instead of airplanes? What if Jim and his brother Doc died on that furlough flight home after Jim’s graduation? What if that German pilot didn’t have such an ego? What if Marie Spelina took another seat? What if Jozka gave up after talking to the US Embassy in Montreal? What if we sold my dad’s house quickly and Svat never found me? So many questions would have gone unanswered!



Svat Vaculik, Marie and Jozka Spelina.

But that is what this story is all about...asking questions and getting answers. Some call it luck,...others call it determination. There is a special feeling that’s hard to put into words when things go your way. It feels like it was meant to be and no effort was really needed. Something bad in this story happened often to bury it so many times, yet it struggled and sometimes languished to get out. But it did get out...against some incredible odds at times.

At times I felt like I was under water. I couldn’t speak the languages of German or Czech and it was a weird feeling of isolation at first. Then, as I met more and more people, they wanted to genuinely help me. Our mutual interest galvanized into a second “family” as our relative’s lives intertwined with theirs. This is where that universal feeling of community came from and helped get me through the rough spots, hardships of travel, language translations and sheer work needed to tell this story.

As dark and terrible of a start the killing of 41 men was, the balance of fate seemed upset and needed to right that tragic wrong. So it took a small piece of jewelry to connect so many people to ultimately get it home. But it wasn’t done. Fate pushed the storyline deeper and back to the Czech Republic where it engaged many more followers. Aviation threads were everywhere in this tale. Together, they created a lasting legacy about the positive power of human virtue and resourcefulness to overcome huge odds.

I hesitated to write this story as it kept growing year after year. Now with the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary approaching it seemed a righteous time to do so. I wish my parents were alive to share it with them and to see their reaction. But in reality, it is not written for the people of the past; this story is for the future. It can teach young people much from the courage and adversity the characters in this story faced. Hopefully, it can guide them in the choices they are making today in life. Good people are all

around the world. They can be found by judging their actions and deeds. Build your community with them and you will have a lasting legacy.

Of all the places Jim's bomber could of crashed, I think fate put it in the right place. It is high on hill in a quiet countryside as similar to his original hometown could be. The Czech people there honor these vets more so than we do for our own in the United States. They go to the cemeteries and do so out of pure respect...not because they are US citizens. It is a wonderful thing and I hope it continues, even as the clouds of aggression are not far away from them today. This is a special place. It has been a privilege to share it with you. I hope you can visit it some day, as all are welcomed there. May your search for your own family history stories find a successful resolution. All the best!

Todd N. Weiler, 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group Historian  
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[www.2ndbombgroup.org](http://www.2ndbombgroup.org)

## Epilogue

War brings the best and worse out of people. As much as Jersey Joe and Willi Reschke summed it up in one word "Ludicrous", more than one word is necessary to convey the true meaning of such a huge piece of history. Stories like this one shed some light on the good and the bad in order for others to appreciate their lives and their history. Some are fortunate to have a history to tell...after all, it's the winners who write the history. How the people made their choices and under what circumstances speaks volumes to their human nature and their individual character. There are fundamentally good people out there even while the times might say otherwise. This story shows that people want to help the good folks no matter where they are. People value freedom globally and it is not a commodity owned by just one culture or time set. The values of a small town boy going off to fight a war that had not yet reached his doorstep, was a great sacrifice to make. It was greatly appreciated by those living with the war on their doorstep. The fact he was able to do it doing what he loved...is a tiny bit of solace in knowing he gave up all his tomorrows for us to live today.

This experience has given me a deeper appreciation of history. It's no longer dates and places, but rather people and stories. They speak to us from the past that we may learn. Time may change how we save our history. The old paper libraries of the past maybe not handle the digital deluge coming in the next generation. I hope the character of the people in these stories transcends whatever comes next. I am so lucky to have met so many of them now that their numbers are so few. I have boxes of unopened records and film negatives to review yet, and who knows how many more stories are in them trying to get out like this one. Thanks to the many historians struggling to sort out this past. May your efforts be rewarding and perpetuate stories like the Silver Bracelet. And thus you can keep 'em flying!





## **Resources on 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group and Mission 263**

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group has a website with their records and history of the B-17's and WWII. The on-line database is there with the two books in PDF format with even more details. There are old newsletters and war stories from the veterans. There is a bulletin board to post new inquiries to others searching for information. There are details on how search the military records and navigate the National Archives for service records. There are videos showing my flight aboard a B-17 and with the vets at the 2007 Houston Reunion. You can find info on other branches of the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force. There are details of each squadron as well as a links page to all kinds of WWII planes and fighter groups. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group webpage is: <http://www.2ndbombgroup.org/>

The Czech's maintain an active Mission 263 Facebook Page. Roman Susil is the curator/monitor. While it is mostly in Czech, efforts are made to translate most of it into English. Roman knows English and can respond in kind. This site covers the annual commemoration ceremonies and events, air shows and aviation history in the Czech Republic. It covers excavation updates and related searches with metal detectors by historians and artifact hunters. It also is actively searching for Mission 263 family and relatives.

**Mission 263 Facebook Page** is : <https://m.facebook.com/groups/1599389250309226/>

15<sup>th</sup> Army Air Force Facebook Page hosted by Hughes Glantzberg  
<https://m.facebook.com/groups/1599389250309226/>

### **Mission 263 Books:**

#### **Mighty by Sacrifice: The Destruction of an American Bomber Squadron, August 29, 1944**

It is written by the father and son team who were Bill Tune's neighbors...James L. Noles Sr. (Author), James L. Noles Jr. (Author)

### **Videos**

The 2nd BG veterans and their children and grandchildren take a flight over Galveston Island in the B-17G "Thunder Bird" from the Lone Star Flight Museum during their 2007 Reunion in Houston, Texas. This video contains on-board footage of the sights and the sound of four thundering 1,200hp Wright 9-cylinder radials of a B-17G during the engine start-up, taxi, run-up, take-off, and flight. 18:52 TRT

<http://www.2ndbombgroup.org/2BGReunion101207.wmv>

A collage from the 2007 Reunion of the 2nd Bomb Group Association in Houston.

<http://www.2ndbombgroup.org/LibertatemDefendimus.wmv>

###



## 63<sup>rd</sup> Anniversary Mission 263 Pictures 2007



### Rudice



### Krhov





## 65<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Mission 263 Pictures 2009







**70<sup>rd</sup> Anniversary Mission 263 Pictures 2014**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Veterans Loy Dickinson and Chuck Childs**











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**Vyškovec**





## 75<sup>rd</sup> Anniversary Mission 263 Pictures 2019









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