

While visiting the National Museum of the Air Force in Ohio this year, we were surprised and pleased to see an elaborate display commemorating a secretive WW II unit called the "Carpetbaggers." It was tucked under the left wing of the museum's B-24D, and featured life-size mannequins and a prominent display case.

The following is the unit's story as told at the Air Force museum in the display:

Operation CARPETBAGGER: Night Flights Over Occupied Europe

In 1943, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) – the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency – called upon the U.S. Army Air Force (AAF) to conduct special operations from the United Kingdom. Aircrews started flying leaflet-dropping missions in October 1943, but plans called for them to fly dangerous, clandestine missions deep into the heart of occupied Europe. The majority of these missions secretly airdropped supplies by night to partisan fighters, under the code name Operation CARPETBAGGER.

Loads carefully packed into trailers at Holmewood, England, under tight security were taken to Harrington, where they were loaded onto the aircraft for a mission.

As directed by the Combined Chiefs of Staff in September 1943, the Eighth Air Force formed the 801st Bombardment Group (Heavy) (Provisional), at Harrington, England, from elements of the inactivated AAF Antisubmarine Command. Redesignated the 492nd Bombardment Group in August, 1944, this special unit became best known as the CARPETBAGGERS. Their B-24 Liberators received a directional air-ground device, named "Rebecca," that directed the navigator to a ground operator using a sending device called "Eureka."

Once in range, the aircrew contacted the partisans on the ground with an "S-Phone," a special two-way radio, to receive final drop instructions and to verify that the ground parties really were partisans and not German.

A cargo hatch, called the "Joe Hole," replaced the B-24's ball-turret, and parachutists, called "Joes," dropped through it. Special blisters for the pilot and copilot's windows allowed greater visibility, and blackout curtains replaced the waist-guns.

With their B-24s painted glossy black -- the best color for evading searchlights -- the CARPETBAGGERS flew their first mission to France from Harrington, England, the night of 4/5 January 1944. Often operating in weather considered impossible for flying, the CARPETBAGGERS flew most of their missions to supply French partisan groups north of the Loire River in support of the upcoming D-Day invasion. Their busiest month occurred in July, 1944, when they dropped at least 4,680 containers, 2,909 packages, 1,378 bundles of leaflets (to disguise what they were really doing), and 62 Joes.

As the Allied forces broke out of the Normandy beachheads and raced across France, the number of missions grew smaller. By September, most of France and Belgium had been liberated and the full-scale CARPETBAGGER missions over France ended on the night of 16/17 September 1944.

Nevertheless, the men of the 492nd Bombardment Group stayed busy delivering arms, ammunition, passengers, and gasoline desperately needed by the advancing Allied armies.

However, they soon returned to the dangerous work – nighttime delivery of supplies and Joes. Ranging much further into Nazi occupied territory than before, the CARPETBAGGERS made deliveries to Norway, Denmark, and Germany. Over heavily defended Germany, where no partisans waited to guide them, the CARPETBAGGERS used faster B-26s.

In addition to the dangers from German night fighters and flak, the CARPETBAGGERS always ran the risk of crashing into hillsides as they made low-level parachute deliveries to the resistance forces waiting below.

From January 1944 to May 1945, they completed 1,860 sorties and delivered 20,495 containers and 11,174 packages of vital supplies to the resistance forces in western and northern Europe. More than 1,000 parachutists dropped through the B-24 Joe Holes into enemy territory.

Twenty-five B-24s were lost and eight more so badly damaged by enemy action and other causes that they were no longer fit for combat. Personnel losses initially totaled 208 missing or killed and one slightly wounded. Fortunately, many of those listed as missing had parachuted to safety and returned to Harrington with the help of the same resistance forces they had been sent to resupply.

Aerial Delivery Canisters

Packed at Holmewood, England, this aerial delivery canister contained supplies parachuted to Norwegian resistance fighters during World War II. This parachute attached to one end of the canister, and the other end had a shock-absorbing cap to protect the contents.

Once on the ground, resistance forces quickly gathered the canisters before German forces could arrive.

(In the glass display case):

Dropped into Norway:

9 mm British Sten gun

.20 cal US M-1 Carbine

.303 British Enfield

Nazi arm band – taken by a partisan from a German officer.

French Foreign Legion uniform given to a crewman who fought with the resistance. Gift from the widow of a French resister. George Wein was shot down in 1944 and had joined the resistance.

(Note the last surviving B-24D in the background of the photo).

Family History

Charlotte's father, Karl August Megert, flew black B-24s with the unit above, the only American unit to fly bombers painted black during WWII.

Karl was born in Topeka, Kansas in 1924. His family moved to Borger, Texas with Phillips Petroleum, in 1936. He graduated from high school in 1942, not a good year to be turning 18. With the war raging, he enlisted in Lubbock in 1943.

While in Lubbock with his cousin, he met Lelda Henshaw, and love struck, so much so, that he proposed. However, Lelda felt that at 16 that she was too young to make such a decision. They would continue to exchange letters over the next two years.

His first assignment: Peabody College with the CTD (College Training Detachment) in Nashville, where he spent 4 ½ months with other military cadets, on the road to becoming a pilot and an officer.

Karl received Primary flight training in Decatur, Alabama, where he soloed in a Stearman biplane trainer. (He remembered one incident during his early training: performing some unauthorized

acrobatics. Because his Stearman had an unusual paint scheme (a yellow replacement wing), he was easily identified and disciplined. It was fun however). From there, he moved across the river to Courtland AFB, where he spent 2 ½ months in Basic flight training, flying the more advanced Vultee BT-13 "Valiant," better known as the Vultee "Vibrator".

The third phase of flight training after Primary and Basic consisted of Advanced flight training in Seymour, Indiana, mastering multi-engine flight in AT-10s. However, he said everyone was a little disappointed. This assignment meant that they would not be flying single engine fighters, but multi-engine bombers or transports.

That was confirmed when he returned to Nashville to train in old B-24Ds. Shortly thereafter, stationed in California and awaiting orders overseas, he again proposed to Lelda. This time she accepted. They were to be married in a church, but his orders were changed, and the wedding had to be moved up one day. Unfortunately, the church had two weddings already scheduled for that day, and did not have time for a third. Instead, they were married at the home of a friend in Alameda, California, on Sept 1, 1944.

He formed up with his 9-man combat crew in Walla Walla, Washington. All of the other officers in the crew (co-pilot, navigator and bombardier) were fellow flight officers, as was Karl. The pilot originally assigned to the crew was a lieutenant, and he wanted other lieutenants on the crew. What a mistake. Karl received his crew.

He told me years later, "I couldn't have had a better crew". They were very professional and responsible. "They were great". The bonds formed were deep, and they stayed in contact for years after the war.

The crew took a troop train to the East Coast, then a troop ship to England. That was during the days of conveyances and sinkings by German U-boats, which made trans-Atlantic crossings hazardous. The name of his ship was the "New Amsterdam" and he sensed it had been luxurious in peacetime, but was now very crowded with young soldiers.

It docked in Stone, England on Christmas Eve, 1944, and he reported to the 492nd on Christmas day. There, they lived in tents, two officers per tent. Later, they received Quonset huts, which would have been quite an improvement. (Imagine living in a tent during the cold English winter). He told Lelda afterward that all of his clean clothes would be cold and damp every morning, despite a small heater. They were also served a lot of lamb, so much so, that he never ate it again.

Based at Harrington, he flew clandestine missions, often single-ship bombing missions, or dropping supplies and covert agents. I seem to recall Karl mentioning that at least once, his "Joe" was wearing a German uniform. If so, that was an especially brave thing to do. German policy was to send captured soldiers in American uniforms to POW camps. Soldiers captured wearing German uniforms were shot as spies. (We had the same policy). As the European war reached its conclusion, he dropped supplies to liberated POW camps.

His crew was not assigned to a specific aircraft. He would typically take off at dusk, fly at night around 500 feet, and return at dawn. He was always concerned about defensive cables being stretched across valley floors. Purpose: To bring down aircraft.

After VE day (May 8, 1945), Karl's co-pilot elected to stay in England with the occupation forces. Karl had a young wife to get home to. His lieutenant was replaced with a "trouble maker," as he described him, for the flight home. The US had many troops in Europe, and it wasn't easy to bring them all back in a timely manner. As was customary, his black B-24 for the flight home ("Moonlight Madonna" painted on its nose) carried a crew of nine, plus 10 extra passengers.

For the long return trip, they refueled in the Azores, then Goose Bay, Labrador, finally touching down in the US at Bradley Field, CT. It was to be his last flight in a B-24. There the crew said their goodbyes and went their separate ways, at least temporarily. They knew they would be reforming to go to the Pacific and resume combat flying.

Germany was now defeated but not Japan. The Japanese were fanatical fighters, and the Invasion of Japan was expected to be very costly in American lives. However, the atomic explosions at Hiroshima (Aug 6th) and Nagasaki (Aug 9th) forced Japan to surrender within days, saving the lives of untold Americans and Japanese.

While on leave in the 'States, the crew had orders to report to Sioux Falls, SD, for deployment to the South Pacific. He was in Texas getting a haircut when sirens went off. Japan had surrendered! The war was over!

(Revisionist historians have since questioned the necessity of dropping the atomic bombs. For the decision makers at the time, however, there was no debate. President Truman firmly believed that dropping the bomb saved many thousands of American lives, and ultimately Japanese lives as well.

We'll never know which American lives were spared. One of those lives may have been Charlotte's father. Thank God for Truman's decision to use it. With VJ day, Karl's crew's orders to report to the Pacific were cancelled. World War II was over).

Karl's crew did reunite briefly in Sioux Falls as ordered, but that was it. Captain Megert was honorably discharged at Ellington Field, outside Houston.

Afterward, he rarely talked about the war, for as Lelda explained, "He put it behind him and moved on". He did share with her one memory, however, and it was not a pleasant one. He had befriended a fellow pilot at Walla Walla and they were eventually posted to the Carpetbaggers together. His first name was Nathan and he was from Illinois. Karl and Lelda were considering naming their first son after him. Tragically, he was returning from a mission when his damaged aircraft crashed into the English Channel. Nathan was killed. Karl saw the plane go down.

After the war, Karl and Lelda returned to Lubbock, where they began to raise a family. He worked full time and yet found the time to pursue college on the GI Bill, eventually earning his degree in architecture after nine years of taking classes when he could. (I don't know how he did it).

On weekends, Karl would rent Piper Cubs, Taylorcrafts, and similar civilian aircraft, charging \$5 per ride to pay for the aircraft.

"I really enjoyed flying," he later told me. "It was one of the high points of my life." He continued to fly privately. (His last flight was September 28, 1980, when he landed a Cessna at Addison airport, based on his log book).

Oldest son George was born in Borger, Texas, on July 9th, 1946. About this time, tired of paying apartment rent, they bought a plot of land for \$100, paying \$10 per month. First, Karl installed a pole for electrical lines. Together, they built a small home on First Street behind the football stadium at Texas Tech. Initially, orange crates served as kitchen cabinets. Their curtains were made of old sheets that Lelda had painted with sun flowers. The bathroom was closed off, but that was all, except for the 2x4s, not yet covered with sheet rock, separating the bedroom, living room, and kitchen.

(They eventually finished the interior walls, and added additional bedrooms and a music alcove for a piano).

John was born on Oct 10th, 1950. Gary was born on Dec 10th, 1953, and the family moved to a larger home shortly thereafter. Karl's "favorite daughter" (and *only* daughter) Charlotte was born on May 24, 1956. Robert was born on September 12, 1959.

The young kids would occasionally rough house together. Karl or Lelda would warn Charlotte "You're going to get hurt.". A young Charlotte: "No I won't". A few minutes later: "Waaah!"

Karl Megert lived a long life. From commanding a bomber crew and surviving combat missions, to raising a family, working full time while earning a college degree, teaching himself to play piano, to eventually retiring to Missouri in a house he built....a very impressive man.

I was honored when Charlotte's Dad gave us his emergency silk escape map that he carried on missions, as well as his dog tags and hat insignia from his officer's cap. He also gave a photograph of one of his B-24s taken during the war. They will stay in the family. Some day, someone perhaps not yet born, will request them, and it will be our pleasure and responsibility to pass them down.

Ron Waters, 12-14-05
Based on notes taken in conversation with
Charlotte's mother and father, and a visit to the
National Museum of the Air Force.

From: <Tombrittan@aol.com>
To: <defactohistorian@comcast.net>
Subject: Re: Moonlight Madonna
Date: Tuesday, December 20, 2005 15:03

Tom,

I agree. Night bomber B-24HNT-15 FO 42-52692 857th BS (RCL: R) transferred to 956th BS (RCL: A) was originally in 486th BG, 832nd BS, as 3R A at least from 7 May through 18 Jul 44. Robin Smith, 486th BG Webmaster, has no name for it. Three night bombing missions (Shaw crew on each occasion):

Feb 20/21
Feb 21/22
Feb 23/24

If we go on at this rate, we shall have a name for them all! Wishful thinking!

Tom B.

Dans un e-mail daté du 20/12/2005 19:47:24 Romance Standard Time, defactohistorian@comcast.net a écrit :

Think this could be 692? I'm waiting on a picture.....

TE, ret.



42-52692 Moonlight Madonna

