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A WOODEN PLANE, A TOP-SECRET MISSION AND MY PART IN THE FALL OF NAZI GERMANY

by marvin edwards

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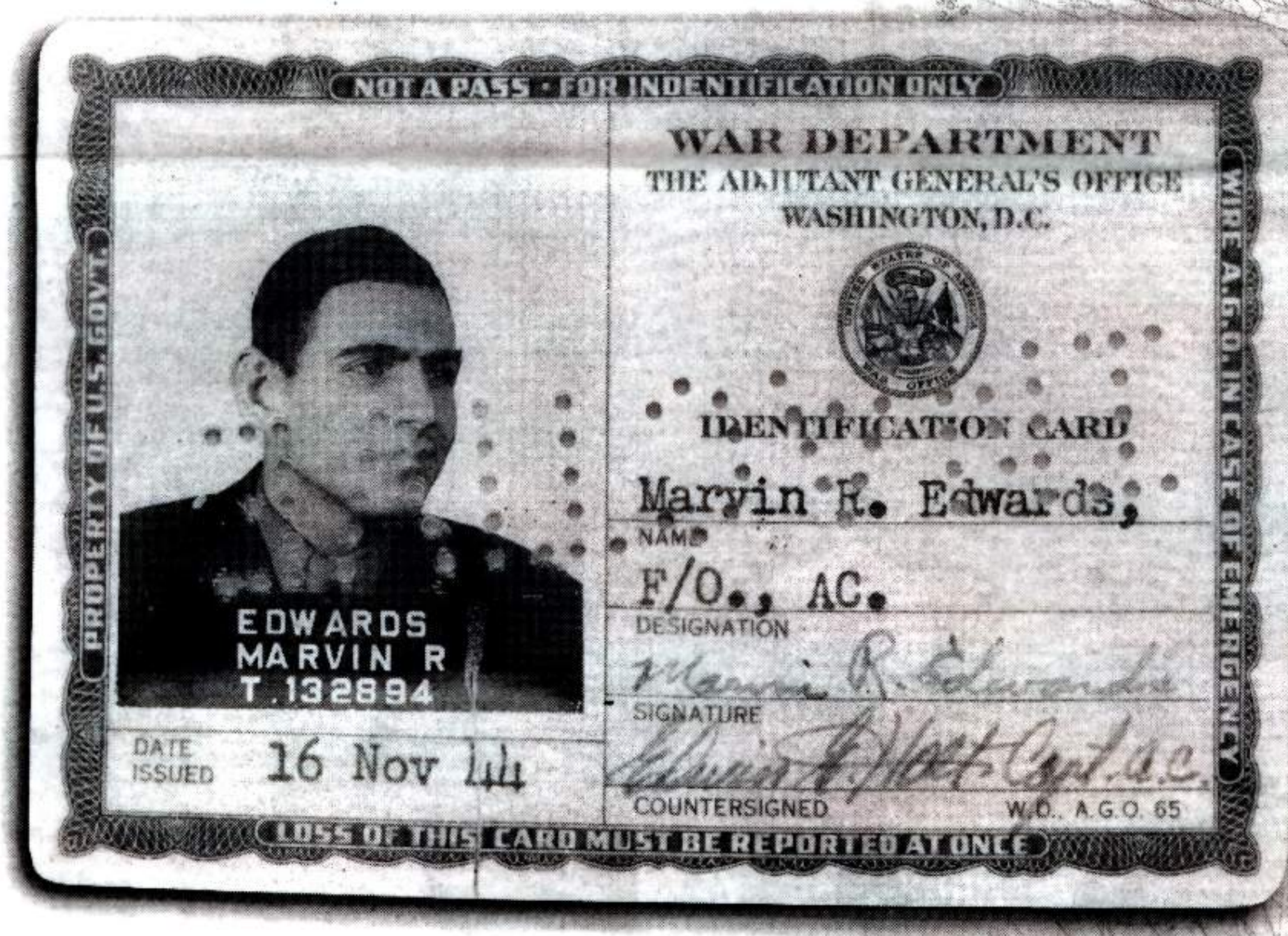

by marvin edwards

We were flying over Germany, past the flickering lights of the front lines and into the black of night. It was late April 1945, and we were alone. Our plane, a deHavilland Mosquito, flew unescorted into enemy territory. Our flight plan called for us to climb to 40,000 feet at a speed of more than 400 miles per hour: not bad for an airplane made primarily of wood. To reach that lofty altitude, the plane had to be stripped of unnecessary equipment, including all of its armaments. The mission was classed as "highly secret," and it carried the code name "Red Stocking." I was the navigator.

Our objective was to contact an American OSS (Office of Strategic Services) spy who had parachuted deep inside Germany, near Munich. The 492nd Bomb Group, to which I was attached, was the air-arm of OSS, the wartime precursor of the Central Intelligence Agency. The group's official title was "Carpetbaggers" (because we intruded in an area we weren't wanted), though we were nicknamed the "Scarlet Pimpernels of the Air" (after a Leslie Howard movie of the day about an Englishman's heroics during the French Revolution). Our base was located at Harrington in the English Midlands.

The British-made, propeller-driven aircraft we flew in was affectionately known as the "Mossie." It was painted a gloss-black and was powered by two Rolls Royce Merlin engines. The Mossie was equipped with a supercharger that automatically kicked in at an altitude of 20,000 feet, allowing us to reach our desired altitude.

I shared the cockpit with the pilot, while an OSS operative occupied a specially designed space in the belly of the aircraft. His job was to converse with the agent on the ground, known as a "Joe." He would record the conversation using newly developed radio communications equipment that could not be picked up by the Germans. It was a major scientific breakthrough that was named the "Joan and Eleanor" system. Though we didn't know it at the time, the information we gathered that night influenced the course of the final days of World War II.

At 40,000 feet, the Mossie flew above the range of German anti-aircraft guns, and only a handful of German jets could catch it. Germany's air minister, Herman Goering, said of the Mosquito, "I turn green and yellow with envy when I see a Mosquito. The British knock together a beautiful wooden aircraft that every piano factory over there is building."

Our mission was to uncover the truth about rumors of a planned continuation of the war by heavily armed and fanatical SS troops. Despite word that the German General Staff was preparing an unconditional surrender, intelligence officers were fretting over reports that SS troops had decided to make a last stand in the Bavarian Alps. They were allegedly building underground fortifications and factories connected by tunnels in the mountains that would be almost impregnable. If true, the SS could have extended the war for months.

Allied commanders needed answers, and our Joe on the ground held the key.

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Our deHavilland Mosquito spy plane could climb to 40,000 feet at a speed of more than 400 miles per hour: not bad for an airplane made primarily of wood. The British-made, propeller-driven aircraft was affectionately known as the "Mossie." It was painted a gloss-black and was powered by two Rolls Royce Merlin engines.

It's been 55 years since I flew my last secret mission for the 492nd Bomb Group. I've always been an avid historian, and my bookcases are filled with books about World War II. Despite all I've learned about the war and its aftermath, I'm still baffled by an essential question: Why was I chosen to work for the OSS?

In late 1942, I was a senior at New York University's School of Commerce, Accounts and Finance when I enlisted in the Army Air Force. I reported for active duty at Moody Air Force Base in Valdosta, Ga. in the spring of '43. It was my first stop in a training regimen that took me across the country and back again.

After a short stay in Valdosta, I was sent to Keesler Field in Biloxi, Miss. for four weeks of basic training. Today, Biloxi is a busy gambling community, but in 43, the city — and, in particular, Keesler Field — was a hellhole. Everyone in our squadron developed a bad cough that lasted until we left. We joked that Keesler was the only place in America where you could be knee deep in mud and have sand blowing in your face.

My next assignment was a college training detachment at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pa. While there, I took refresher courses in algebra and trigonometry and preliminary courses in astronomy and meteorology. Finally, I began flight training in a Piper Cub aircraft. While at Dickinson, I wrote a war analysis column for the station's newspaper. Before I left, I became editor. The major in charge was associated with the Hoover War Library at Stanford University in Palo Alto, Calif. He had copies of the paper sent there. He was happy to have his picture taken each time dignitaries visited the detachment. We became good friends, and I was granted off-base passes in appreciation.

From Carlisle, I traveled to Maxwell Field in Montgomery, Ala., where I received additional schooling prior to going to the Mississippi Institute of Aeronautics in Jackson for more flight training. During rolling maneuvers on a practice flight, I developed vertigo and was advised that I would do better as a navigator on a bomber than as a fighter pilot. With that recommendation, I was transferred to a reclassification center at Nashville, Tenn., where I took a series of tests that qualified me as a navigator. I attended navigation school at Selman Field in Monroe, La.

Navigation school involved a four-month course, which included flight missions to practice what we learned. We were trained in celestial navigation, which is fine for ships at sea but not very practical for fast-moving aircraft. When I arrived at Harrington, I found out that both the Germans and the British had been using radar for navigation for some time. During my entire stay in Europe, I used celestial navigation only once, when the radar on our B-24 failed over Germany and I had to get a fix on the stars to find the way back to England.

My tour of military bases continued. After graduating as a navigator at Selman Field, I was put on a train to Lemoore Field in Fresno, Calif., where I met

my B-24 crew: a pilot, co-pilot, bombardier, engineer, radio operator and two gunners. After a brief stay, we were transferred to an air force base at Walla Walla, Wash. We were a tight-knit unit by the time we were cleared for combat duty.

Near our base was a Navy fighter air field. The Navy pilots loved to buzz our bomber base, flying in at treetop level. One day we decided enough was enough. We loaded toilet paper in the bomb bays of several planes and unloaded them when we were over the

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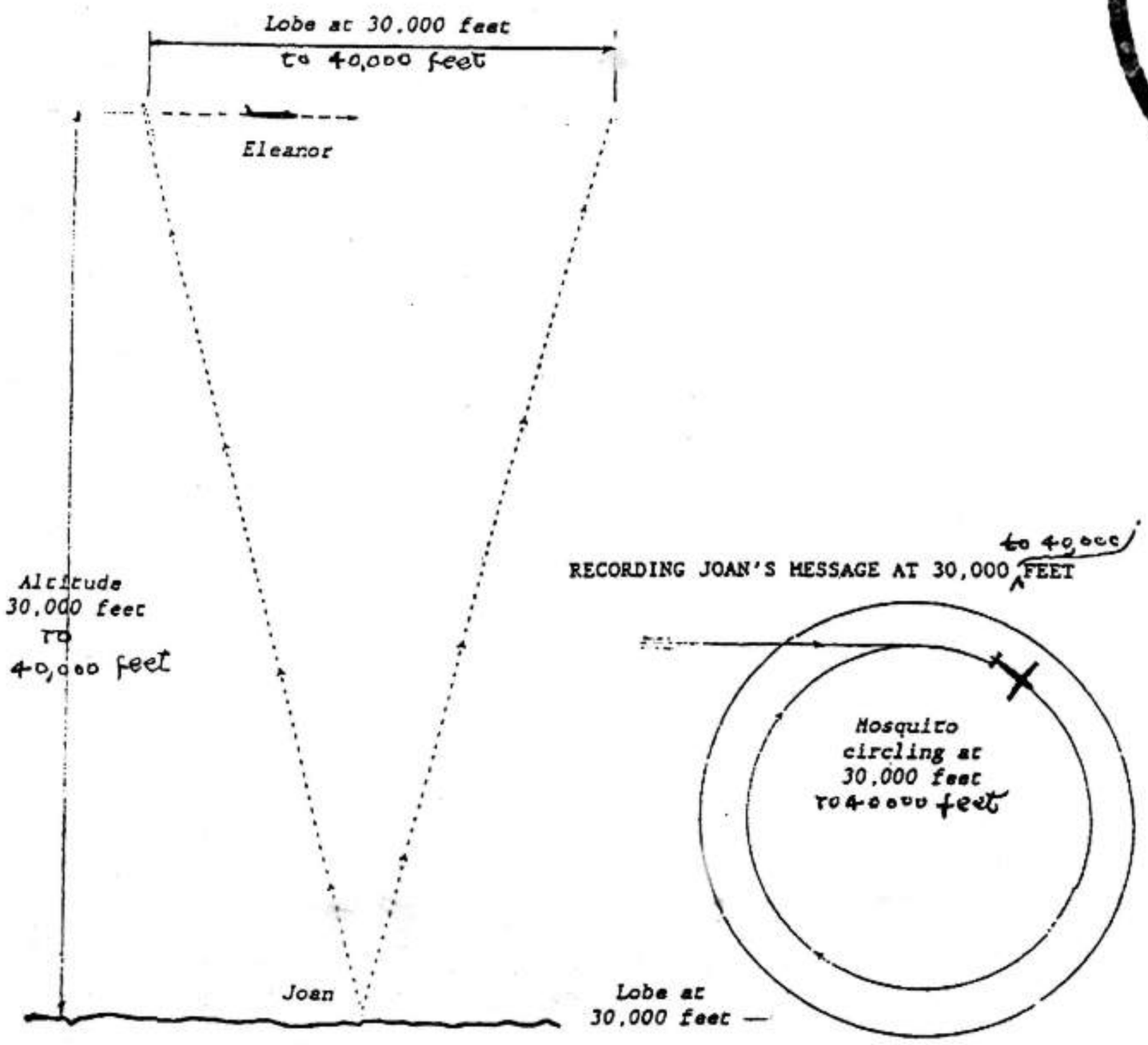


The Joan transmitter used by the agent on the ground shot its signal skyward, where it was picked up by the Eleanor receiver in the Mosquito. While the transmission could be picked up across a 60-mile circle at 40,000 feet, the signal cone narrowed to just a couple of feet at ground level. Therefore, the chance of the conversation being picked up by German direction finders was almost nil.

center of the Navy base. The stunt almost got us in serious trouble. The day of our toilet paper bombing, a top Admiral was visiting the Navy base. He filed a formal complaint, but the rivalry between the services saved us. Instead of rebuking us, our commanding officer said the Navy got what it deserved.

After completing two months of training as a crew, we were assigned to Hamilton Field in San Francisco. Being stationed at a port of embarkation on the West Coast, we assumed we would end up in the Pacific Theatre of Operations to fight the Japanese. Instead, we were put on a train for a seven-day journey to Camp Kilmer, N.J. After a one-week stay, we boarded the Dutch cruise ship, the New Amsterdam, where we were joined by a handful of air crews and 10,000 members of the infantry. Because of the speed of the ship, we did not join a convoy, choosing instead to zigzag across the Atlantic unescorted. The weather was very stormy, and the ship's captain said that was a blessing. The rough water reduced the risk of an attack by a German U-Boat. A ship several hours ahead of us had been torpedoed. We sailed up the Firth of Clyde in Scotland to the port of Gourock. From there we took a train to Kettering, the closest city to the 492nd Bomb Group air base at Harrington.

While in Harrington, I corresponded with several friends in the Army Air Force. Prior to leaving on the night of my first mission, the mail contained a returned letter I had written to a fellow navigator in the Eighth Air Force. Across the front was stamped, "killed in action." It was not what I needed just before going into combat.

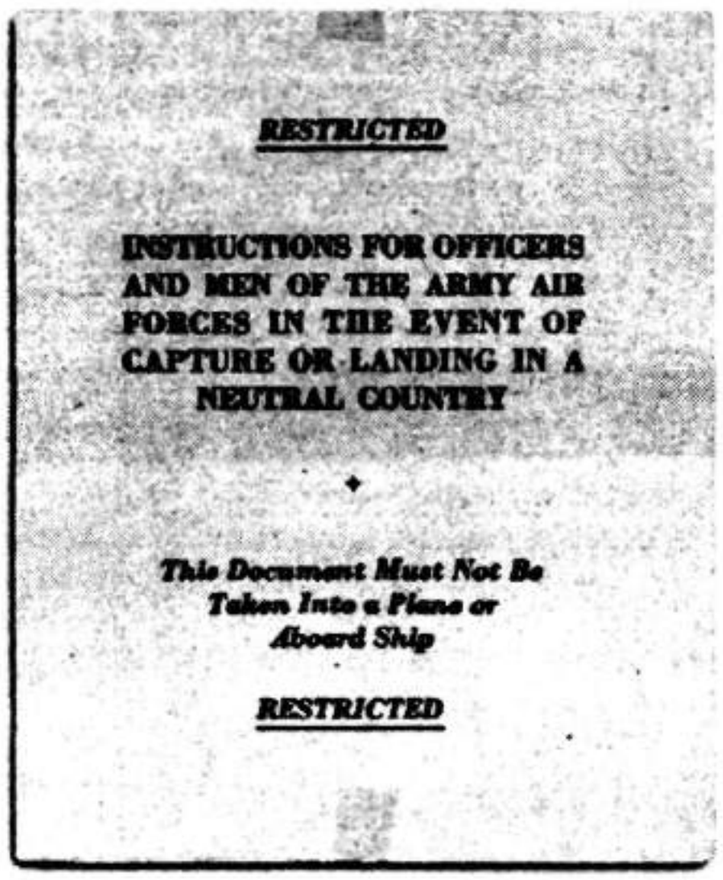
My first B-24 bombing mission targeted Emden, a city located on the North German coast. To avoid enemy flack, we flew over the North Sea, then turned south toward our objective. As we approached the target area, the plane suddenly lit up with flashes bright enough to read a newspaper by. I told the pilot the Germans must have very powerful flood lights. Then the plane started bouncing. The pilot said, "Those flashes aren't lights, that's from anti-aircraft fire." When the bombardier signaled we were over the target, we dumped our payload and got the hell out of the area as fast as we could. Not all our aircraft were so lucky. It was the first of several close calls.

On another Mosquito mission, I was scheduled to fill in for a sick navigator. At the last minute, as I was in the briefing room getting flight instructions, he reported he was feeling better and could take the flight. Later that evening, I learned the plane had developed engine trouble and crashed. The escape hatch was located on the navigator's side of the cockpit, thus the pilot could not get out until the navigator jumped first. For some unknown reason, the navigator failed to buckle the leg straps of his chute. To save the pilot, he jumped anyway. The pilot survived, but the navigator fell out of his chute and died.

On a different bombing mission, two generators shut down as we were flying over France on the way to our target. The trouble developed after the bombardier had already removed the safety pins from the 2 1/2 tons of bombs we were carrying. We were afraid to drop the bombs in the English Channel, fearing they might hit a British ship. So the bombardier carefully reinserted the pins, and we turned for home. As we approached our base at Harrington, the entire runway was cleared. If the pins weren't properly reinserted, the force of the landing could have detonated the bombs. Under extreme pressure, the pilot landed the B-24 so smoothly we hardly knew we had touched the runway.

Fate works in strange ways. There were three flying officers at Harrington with the last name of Edwards. When the war in Europe ended, I was the only one left.

The story of the 492nd Bomb Group would make a great spy movie, with plenty of suspense and intrigue. The group was separated from the rest of the Eighth Air Force in England. The major operation of the Eighth was daytime bombing and strafing of military targets in both Germany and occupied Western Europe. But the 492nd Bomb Group only flew at night.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After the war, I returned to the States to finish my studies at New York University. Because OSS operations were top secret, few Americans even 55 years later are aware of what they accomplished under highly adverse conditions.

The activities at Harrington were classified "top secret." As with the Mosquito, all aircraft at the base were painted black. When our aircraft took off, whether individually or in a group, we were often surrounded by British Royal Air Force Lancaster bombers headed for Germany.

Most of the planes at Harrington were B-24 Liberators. Other aircraft present were the Douglas A-26, a twin-engine fighter-bomber, the C-47 transport Dakota or Skytrain, and the Mosquito.

The B-24 served two purposes. First, it was part of a diversionary force that tries to deflect attention away from the Royal Air Force's main bomber group. On one occasion, our B-24 group numbering 10-15 planes jammed German radar by dropping aluminum foil over the city of Emden. While the Germans were led to believe Emden was our primary target, the main bomber force of up to 1,000 planes hit Hamburg, literally leveling the city.

The B-24 was also used in solo missions that dropped spies and all types of supplies to resistance forces operating behind German lines in Western Europe. On one such mission, our cargo was a beautiful French girl. She was a Joe to be dropped over a part of German-occupied France. She spoke excellent English, and joked with us before the plane reached the rendezvous point. Then she parachuted into the night air. To this day, I wonder what happened to her. If the Germans caught her, they would have shot her on the spot.

The place and time for the rendezvous were often carried by the British Broadcasting System in coded messages.

Some years ago, Allan A. Mitchie wrote in Skyways Magazine, "Casual listeners to BBC newscasts were surprised to hear announcers say, 'Uncle Jean has two shillings in his pocket,' or 'Tell Marie to wear her galoshes.' These were coded signals to some French underground radio operator, often meaning that a plane would be over a certain landing field that night to drop arms and supplies, or perhaps drop saboteurs.

"At Harrington, some 3,000 officers and ground crew men weren't told what was going on," Mitchie wrote. "[T]he American 492nd Bomber Group delivered arms, ammunition, radio sets, food and sabotage equipment to the undergrounds of Europe ... For the Norwegians they dropped skis and sleighs; for the French Marquis, jeeps, bazookas, mortars, bicycles and tires, made in England but with French trademarks ... These Scarlet Pimpernels of the Air transported hundreds of Allied spies, underground agents, saboteurs under the very nose of the Gestapo."

Prior to taking off on the "Red Stocking" mission to Munich, the pilot, the OSS agent and I were given a special briefing. The base commander and OSS officials outlined the flight plan we were to follow, including the rendezvous point and the various altitudes we were to fly. Then the base meteorologist advised us on the route's weather forecast: temperature, wind speed and direction, icing conditions and visibility.

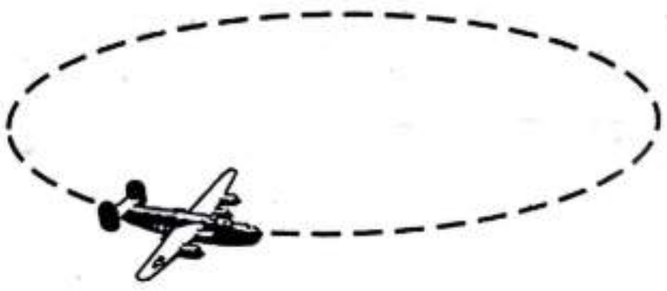
The small Mossie cockpit had just enough room for the pilot and navigator. Though we pushed the wooden plane to its limits, the ride wasn't all that uncomfortable, especially when compared to the B-24. While the B-24's engines emitted a deafening roar, the Mossie's two Rolls Royce engines seemed to purr by comparison. Although we had to wear oxygen masks due to the altitude of the Mossie's flight, we didn't have to don the heated suits and gloves that were standard for B-24 flights. Despite the deadly cold outside, heat piped in from the engines kept the Mossie's cockpit at a comfortable temperature.

Only a handful of American pilots flew in the Mossie. Those who did had some initial problems that required practice to correct. Most American twin engine aircraft had propellers that spun in opposite directions. On the Mosquito they rotated in the same direction.

While cockpit conditions were acceptable for the pilot and navigator, the same could not be said for the OSS operator stationed in the fuselage. He worked in a crawl space with little heat, making his life on the flight quite miserable. We later learned that the Mossie wasn't designed to carry people and equipment.

Radar navigational equipment was key to finding the rendezvous area where the Joe on the ground was located. Upon leaving England, we used a British developed system, called "Gee," that allowed me to fix the plane's position even in the black of night. The "Gee" measured the relative time it took radio impulses emanating from towers located in different parts of Britain to reach the plane. It was extremely accurate flying over Britain and France, but less satisfactory over Germany.

The United States needed a longer-range system for the war in the Pacific, where distances were far greater than in



In 1993, the annual reunion of the 492nd Bomb Group took us to England and France. The French government honored us with a special ceremony at the Arc de Triomphe, where I (center) signed the register. (Below) My first glimpse of New York Harbor on the way home.

the European Theatre. To meet this need, a system called "Loran" (short for Long Range Aid to Navigation) was developed. Our Mosquito was equipped with Loran, which used a series of synchronized signals (several "slaves" and one "master"), which I charted on an oscilloscope. It took about two minutes for me to determine our location using Loran.

As the navigator, I was responsible for getting the aircraft to the rendezvous point. It was the OSS agent's job to direct us to the exact location of the "Joe," using a special directional antenna to locate the spy on the ground. Once contact was established, I then had to keep the plane in an orbit not to exceed 60 miles in diameter. The winds at 40,000 feet topped 100 mph that night, making it difficult for us to hold our position. Even a temporary loss of contact with the Joe on the ground could have compromised the mission, so I had to constantly instruct the pilot to make repeated turns and corrections to keep within the required distance.

Happily, we established contact and circled while the OSS agent spoke with the Joe using the Joan and Eleanor radio system. The essential component of the Joan and Eleanor was a small ground transmitter/receiver built to fit inside a small suitcase. It was invented by two RCA engineers, Lt. Cdr., Stephen H. Simpson and DeWitt R. Goddard. (The device was named in honor of Women's Air Corps Major Joan Marshall and Goddard's wife, Eleanor.)

The radio equipment was battery operated. The Joan transmitter used by the agent on the ground shot its signal skyward, where it was picked up by the Eleanor receiver. While the transmission could be picked up across a 60-mile circle at 40,000 feet, the signal cone narrowed to just a couple of feet at ground level. Therefore, the chance of the conversation being picked up by German direction finders was almost nil. The conversation that took place that night was recorded by the OSS operator on a wire spool.

Our jet-black Mossie circled over enemy territory undetected for a half-hour. When the OSS agent gave us the signal, I plotted our return to England. We arrived at Harrington and turned over the recorded conversation to OSS headquarters, which quickly passed it on to U.S. Military Intelligence officials. On a subsequent trip to OSS headquarters in London, I learned that, thanks to our Joe, OSS officials concluded that German forces in Bavaria had no plans to continue to fight. If the German General Staff agreed to capitulate, the war would be over.

Less than a month after our mission, that's exactly what happened.

Members of the 492nd Bomb Group have an annual reunion, the most recent in Cincinnati. In 1993, the reunion took us to England and France. The French government honored us with a special ceremony at the Arc de Triomphe, and the following day the Mayor of Paris hosted a reception for us at City Hall, with many dignitaries present. We spent a week traveling to small towns in the Lyon area where flights of the 492nd aided the French resistance.

The French built memorials at sites where our aircraft crashed, with the names of the crew members carved into granite. On one monument near the French village of St. Cyr de Valorges is carved the inscription: "In memory of five American airmen found dead under the debris of their aircraft, shot down in flames at this place April 28, 1944, whose mission was the parachuting of arms to our secret army for the liberation of France and the restoration of our ideal." Both French and American generals participated in the ceremonies. Needless to say, these were emotional affairs, bringing back memories of the struggle that took place almost 50 years earlier.

The "Red Stocking" missions using Joan and Eleanor were only a small part of the overall OSS operation in Europe. But without it, much of the information obtained by our agents on the ground in Germany would have been wasted. There was no other way to bring their up-to-date analyses of what the German military forces were doing back to the Allied High Command in England.

The "Joes" (both men and women) on the ground behind German lines were the real heroes. Their lives were at risk every day. Many were caught and were either killed or sent to concentration camps. They played an important part in saving lives — and in shortening the war in Europe.

Because OSS operations were top secret, few Americans even 55 years later are aware of what they accomplished under highly adverse conditions. The thousands of men and women who never returned from these subversive operations should not be forgotten.*