

THE STORY OF A PHOTO RECONNAISSANCE PILOT DURING WORLD WAR II
by John G. Weeks

~~The following contains excerpts from an article that I wrote~~
at the request of Jaromir and Martin Kohout in a letter to me Dated October 2, 1994. I gather that they head a museum in Plzen, Czech Republic which is very active in gathering artifacts, information on World War II historical events that took place over their country -- and the fate of air men that were killed and perhaps missing in that area. They got my name from my former Commanding Officer, Mr. George Lawson now located in Florida. These men were particularly interested in a mission I took on April 26, 1945 -- which may very well have been the last photo reconnaissance mission of the war. I'm not sure why they were so very interested in that particular mission, but I have the feeling that one of them may have been flying one of the jets that attacked us on that mission. I asked for information about that, but have not yet heard back from them.

My home where I was brought up was in Western New York State in a little town called Lyons. My father was a fruit farmer there and I worked on the farm, of course.

After being graduated from Lyons High School, I attended Grove City College in Grove City, Penna. where I majored in Industrial Engineering -- which was a combination of business and engineering.

I was playing bridge in the college dormitory when the announcement of Pearl Harbor came over the radio.

Shortly thereafter, after being turned down by the Marine Air Corps and the Navy Air Corps because of a misalignment of my back teeth, I was accepted and enlisted in the Army Air Corps. I was sworn in at the Post Office in Pittsburgh and immediately left for Basic Training at Miami Beach, Florida -- where I had my first introduction to the war. We lived in one of the big hotels on the beach and every morning when we got up there would be black smoke on the horizon as we looked out over the ocean. It was a little sobering to learn that that smoke came from ships that the Germans had torpedoed the night before out in the Gulf Stream right off the coast of Florida.

After about six weeks in Florida, we were shipped to Wittenberg College in Springfield, Ohio. We spent about two months in Wittenberg where we took a concentrated course -- mostly in mathematics -- from arithmetic through calculus. I have never worked so hard on academics before or since. Many of the budding cadets washed out at this point.

From Wittenberg, we went to Santa Ana Army Air Force Base in

California. We spent about six weeks here with great concentration on Astronomy (for celestial navigation) and aeronautical engineering -- including hydraulics, electrical systems, aerodynamics, navigation, etc. We also went through altitude chamber training where they put you in a tank and sucked the air out to assimilate altitude -- as well as other equipment training.

Then we went to Ryan Field in Tuscon, Arizona -- where we were going to learn to fly at last. I have never had such a thrilling good time in my life. We flew a Ryan PT-22 which was originally designed in 1930. We had to have 9 hours of instruction before we could solo -- I had 9 hrs. and 3 minutes. What a thrill. I just loved it. We also had a heavy concentration of ground school at Ryan which emphasized engine management, navigation, engineering, etc. I had really found a home in the Air Corps -- I loved it!

Then we went to Marana Air Force Base in Marana, Arizona where we flew BT-13's. The was affectionaly known as the "Vultee Vibrator" because it shook so hard in a spin. I never liked the airplane very well, but I don't think many other cadets did either. It was very poor in acrobatics, but I enjoyed them anyway.

From Marana, I was sent to Williams Field in Chandler, Arizona for my final phase of Cadet training -- "Advanced". Here we flew the AT-6 which was a delightful plane to fly -- very good at acrobatics. We also took a heavy concentration of ground school at Williams Field -- we had already been assigned to fly the Lockheed Lightning P-38 -- which simply delighted me. That was the plane I wanted. So ground school concentrated almost exclusively on the various systems on the P-38.

After a couple of months at Williams, I was graduated as a bright new Second Lieutenant and had a very coveted pair of Pilot's Wings.

I stayed right at Williams Field for my transition training -- into the P-38. We flew lots of lesser airplanes to get used to handling two engines -- At-9's, C-45's, UC-78's, B-25's, etc. Because the P-38 was a single place plane, the day finally came when they put you in one and simply said, "Go!". And it was quite a transition from 600 horsepower to 3,500 horsepower and from 160 miles per hour to 400 miles per hour in one jump -- and all alone!

After Williams we went to Will Rogers Field in Oklahoma City. Here we learned how to preform our specialty -- photo reconnaissance -- most of which was done at high altitude --

25,000 feet or higher. Our training here was a combination of pinpoint navigation and high altitude photography. I think I photographed every tiny little town in the mid-west ~~any place that was hard to find.~~

From there we went to Coffeyville, Kansas for our combat training. You see, our mission was much different than that of the ordinary fighter pilot -- we flew all alone in planes with no guns -- only cameras -- and had to survive only on our skill as a pilot and the speed of our planes to evade the enemy. I thought I was a pretty good pilot until I got to Coffeyville, but here our instructors were all pilots who had completed their combat missions and had returned to the States as instructors. They were really good. We practiced day after day doing nothing but evasive maneuvers and mock combat. It was very hard work.

Our training was cut short, however, because the losses of reconnaissance pilots in Europe was so great during the Normandy invasion that they needed replacements badly.

We were rushed overseas on the ocean liner Isle d'France which made the crossing, unescorted, in five days landing in Glasgow. We were processed very quickly and rushed to Mt. Farm air base near Oxford, England. The reason for the rush was immediately evident. The 13th Photo Recon squadron, to which I was assigned had only 13 pilots left out of a full compliment of 25. And those 13 were exhausted. There was only five of us replacements -- which meant that even with us, the squadron was still far below its full compliment.

Our training time was brief (out of necessity) and consisted of very little flying. It was assumed that you knew how to fly and that you knew how to navigate and take pictures, so most of our time was spent talking tactics with the more experienced pilots. Because we flew alone everybody developed their own tactics, so from talking with them, you sorted out what you thought made the most sense and determined to follow that course.

We were also quite short of planes because whenever you lost a pilot, you lost a plane. I was assigned an older P-38J Number 705 which still had its invasion stripes painted on it. I never liked the plane -- it was slow and was not equipped with dive breaks like the newer models.

Because the losses of reconnaissance planes was so consistantly high, the army tried to keep us equipped with the very latest model planes and equipment. Our early missions were shorter and less dangerous so that we could get the feel of things. Early on I got a brand new P38-L Number 226, with larger engines, dive flaps, rear facing

radar -- the whole ball of wax. It was a wonderful airplane -- very fast, very maneuverable and quick to handle.

Let me explain a little about the dive flaps. The P-38 was so powerful, heavy and streamlined that it would, in a dive, quickly go into compressibility, which made the plane "curl under" and eventually tear the tail off. Once it got into this condition, there was no recovery. The dive brakes were under the leading edge of each wing and were only about two feet long and about two inches wide. When extended with a push of a button, they would immediately pull the nose up and out of compressibility. They had an added bonus too. In combat, if you were in a tight turn with an enemy plane, the turn would tightened markedly when you popped these brakes. I'm sure that scared the devil out of many enemy pilots because he didn't know for sure whether you had guns or not and that maneuver put us right on his tail.

I mentioned that each pilot developed his own tactics. Mine developed gradually, of course. I would fly as high as possible with my limit being 39,000 ft. and/or the bottom of the jet trail level. (You didn't want to pull a jet trail because it would point right to you.) 39,000 ft. was my personal limit -- the plane could go higher. Our cockpits were not pressurized, so my body would swell and get very uncomfortable because of the lack of air pressure. My legs would fill out my pants completely, my stomach would become very extended and my neck would fill up my shirt even with the top button undone. Also, it was dangerous because even though we had a pressure oxygen system, if anything went wrong with it, you wouldn't be able to stay conscious but a very few seconds and would never have time to get down to a safe altitude. On the plus side, there were very few enemy planes that could get above you and flak couldn't even reach that high. So while it was uncomfortable and dangerous, I felt most secure being way up there.

It became more and more precarious as the war proceeded, however. First the Germans developed the Messerschmitt 163 (Komet) airplane solely for purpose of shooting down photo reconnaissance planes. This was an amazing rocket powered plane that could climb at 40,000 ft. per minute at a 70 degree angle and was very comfortable above 39,000 ft. The one saving grace was that it only had an eight minute fuel supply which meant that it could fly only by using its engine in short bursts, and had to land without fuel. It was very vulnerable to our fighters in its glide mode. I was never attacked by an ME-163 and only saw one at a distance a couple of times.

The only time my plane was hit by enemy fire was on a mission

to the Hanover area. If I was lucky enough to have thick clouds at high altitude, my tactic would be to fly just above the tops, so that I could quickly dive into them in case of "trouble". That was the situation on this day. When I was well over enemy territory, I saw a single plane off to my right going in the opposite direction. The British flew Spitfires on photo recon missions all alone just like we did. I thought probably that was what the plane was. But it was a long way off and German Me-109 fighters looked a lot like a Spitfire at a distance. I didn't want take the chance that it was an ME-109 trying to circle around behind me, so I watched him very carefully -- too carefully. All of a sudden I saw tracer bullets going by my canopy. I looked up in my rear view mirror (which was fastened to the canopy about three inches above my head). There was a plane firing at me from behind. I saw him for only a fraction of a second when my rear view mirror disappeared -- it had been shot off. I quickly dove into the clouds right below me and made a turn. I flew along for a while and came up for a "peek" and my adversary was no where in sight. Needless to say, I was much more careful to look all around all of the time after that.

About this time, things got really bad because the Germans had come out with the ME-262 jet fighter. This plane was much faster, could climb much faster and much higher than our P-38s. Our losses increased alarmingly -- mostly to these new jet fighters. It was at this point that the Air Corps provided us with P-51 fighters to escort the P-38 recon planes. They did not provide us with trained fighter pilots, but told us we would have to do our own escorting. So some of the recon pilots elected to fly the fighters as escort rather than fly the P-38 recon planes. They trained themselves. I didn't like the P-51, so elected to stay with the P-38 flying recon. We used to laugh that the self trained fighter pilots really weren't all that good, but I'm sure they looked formidable to the enemy.

The enclosed photo shows myself (in the middle) with four of the self trained fighter pilots after the first escorted recon mission to Berlin. By the way, only the man to my right survived the war.

My worst mission was taken on Christmas Eve 1944. This was during the Battle of the Bulge. The weather had been very bad for about two weeks, and the troops were taking a terrible beating on the ground. On the day before Christmas, the sky cleared completely. Both sides had had two weeks to make repairs on all of their planes, so when things cleared, it was a maximum effort on both sides. It has been estimated that there were 7,000 planes in the air on that day. My mission was to Cologne and then back to the Bulge area. I was alone and was jumped six times on that

one mission.

Sometime after this, I was made Commanding Officer of the ~~13th Squadron~~. Now why would they make a young kid like me Commanding Officer of an outfit of 2,500 men? The answer is that regulations required that the Commanding Officer of a combat squadron be a pilot, and at the age of 22, I was the oldest and most experienced pilot in the squadron.

On April 26th Headquarters (8th Air Force) ordered us to send a mission to the Prague, Czechoslovakia area. We took missions in rotation and my name was up. The idea didn't appeal to me at all because we all knew the war was just about over. But we had to go. So I, along with four fighters took off. Things went along very well until we got over Prague. I was lining up to photograph an airfield when I saw two planes taking off from that field. The runway had black streaks on it -- which meant that it was a jet fighter field. I called them out to my fighters and we all kept a very sharp lookout. In a surprisingly short time, I saw two specks in my rear view mirror at our altitude. I called them out to my fighters and said that when I said "break", we would all turn into them and try to ram them. This isn't quite as dramatic as it sounds because I knew that with our combined speeds of over 1,000 miles per hour, the chances of hitting them were extremely remote. On the other hand, it was very important that we convince them that we were trying to hit them because if we didn't scare them off, they could make mince meat of us. I counted on the fact that they knew the war was almost over, and that they were not anxious to get killed at this point either. It worked. We came awfully close to them and they turned, dove under us, and that was the last we saw of them.

The three most frequently asked questions asked of me about the war are: "Were you scared?", "Did you pray?" and "Were you ever a hero?"

To answer the first question, I usually answer that if you can think how scared you were when you woke up from the worst bad dream you ever had and multiply it by 100 -- that's how scared I was all of the time -- not just when I was on a mission, but 24 hours a day. I lost friends sometimes daily, and you couldn't help but wonder if you would be next.

Did I pray? You bet I did. I probably got my most comfort from the 23rd Psalm. I would say it over and over again particularly when crossing into enemy territory. Right there the part about "the valley of the shadow of death" was particularly meaningful. And, I would pray hard that I

didn't panic in combat -- if you did, you were dead. It was extremely hard to do.

Was I ever a hero? About the closest I came to becoming a hero was while returning from a mission in the vicinity of the Rhur Valley area I was flying quite high -- as was my practice. As I approached the Shelds Islands in Holland, I noticed a B-17 bomber straggler with one engine smoking heading for a cloud over the English Channel between Holland and England. Behind and above him in hot pursuit was a German FW-190 fighter. I remember I was surprised to see a German fighter that far west. I was well above and a little behind the fighter, so I dove at very high speed toward him hoping he would see me before I got there. Of course he didn't know I didn't have any guns. It worked. He saw me coming and broke away and went home. The bomber went on and presumably landed safely. I really wasn't much of a hero because if he hadn't seen me, I would have gone behind him and I was going so fast, he never could have caught me.

When the war ended, I just can't explain the relief I felt. But it was years before I got my nerves fully under control.



THE FIRST FIGHTER ESCORTED PHOTO RECON MISSION TO BERLIN

(L to R) Lt. Schultz, Lt. Belt, Lt. Weeks, Capt. Batson,
Lt. Davidson

13th Photo Recon Squadron -- Mt. Farm Airfield, England

HISTORY

The 13th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron was activated at Colorado Springs, Colorado, on June 20, 1942. The Headquarters were in Hagerman Hall on the Campus of Colorado College until the Squadron was moved to Peterson Field, six miles from Colorado Springs, in August.

Major James G. Hall assumed command of the 13th on September 10, 1942, and remained as Commanding Officer throughout the training phase in the States, movement to England, and the period of operational training in the theatre of operations.

After intensive training at Peterson Field the Squadron entrained for Fort Dix, New Jersey, on October 17, 1942, arriving there three days' later, October 20, 1942. While at Fort Dix the men underwent more field exercises, drew the last of their equipment, and in general received their last instructions before embarkation.

On November 23, 1942, the men went up the gang plank of the Queen Elizabeth in New York Harbor and sailed for Europe, arriving at Greenock, Scotland, November 30, 1942. The next day the Squadron went ashore and to their first Base in the U.K. at A.A.F. Station 109, near, Wollaston, Wellingboro, and Bedford. The base was not entirely completed, and Major Hall, after many efforts, succeeded in moving the 13th from A.A.F. Station 109 to an Air Base known as Mount Farm, near Oxford, England. Mount Farm remained the Squadron's home until early in April, 1945, when it moved a short distance to a larger Base near the small village of Chalgrove.

The 13th Squadron was the first Photo Squadron to arrive in England, and during the period of final training for operations against the enemy underwent many trials. Among other things, notwithstanding the weather, the personnel experienced difficulty with communications, supply, different procedures, language, and in general was called upon to display a great amount of ingenuity and resourcefulness, both in becoming settled at the Base and acquiring necessary equipment and supplies to become Operational.

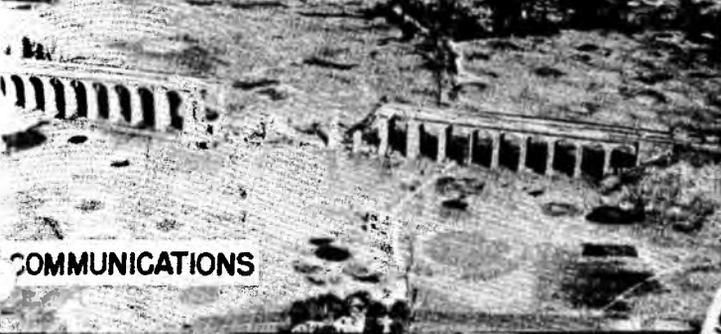
After much preparation and training the organization was rigidly inspected by General Eaker on March 27, 1943. The General expressed his pleasure at the results accomplished, praised the morale of the Squadron and gave the long-awaited 'go ahead' signal. The next day, Major James G. Hall, Commanding Officer, flew the first Photographic Reconnaissance mission of the U.S.A.A.F. in the European Theatre of Operations on March 28, 1943. Major Hall's successful mission was the forerunner of 1,367 other missions which were flown by the Squadron.

The 13th was followed within a few months by three more Squadrons, the 14th, 22nd, and 27th Photo Squadrons, and the 7th Photo Group was formed. The 13th contributed heavily both in men and materials to this organization.

In addition to flying the first Photo mission the Squadron accomplished many other 'firsts.' Among these were the first Photo shuttle mission to Russia in which Captain Kendall took part, the first A.A.F. reconnaissance of the Paris Area by Major Hall, and the first photo of a V2 rocket trail by Lt. Donald A. Schultz and Lt. Charles M. Crane, jun. Always a leader in maintenance and production standards as well as missions, morale was also carried at a high level. Many men destined to lead the field of Photo Reconnaissance were among the original members of the 13th Squadron.



AIR FIELDS



COMMUNICATIONS



AIRBORNE INVASION



'V'-2



'D'- DAY
NORMANDY



'VE' DAY
BERLIN



WEATHER

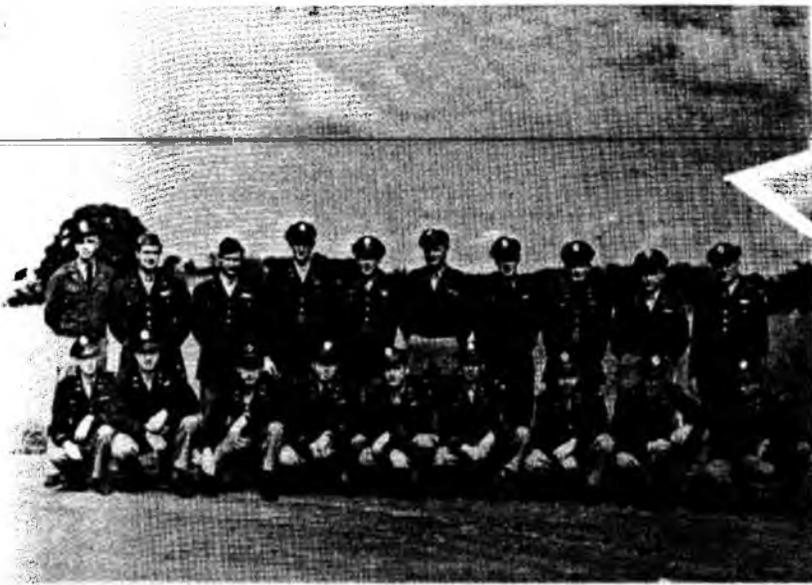


FLAK



'U'- BOATS





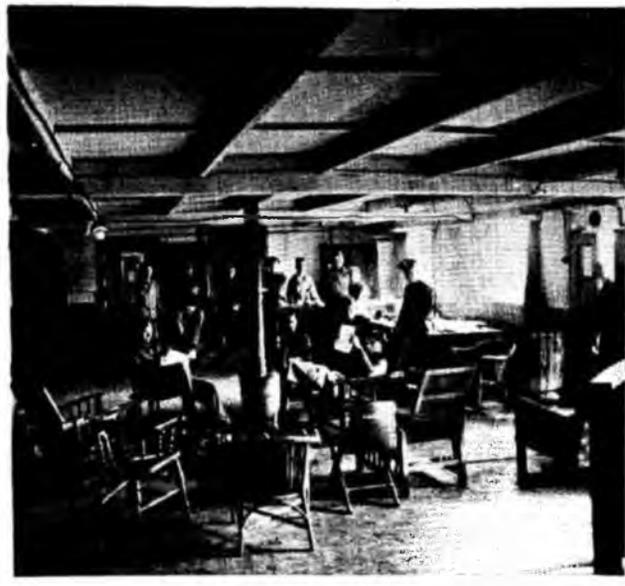
L TO R, BACK - LT R. MADDEN, LT. W. C. REED, LT R. D. CAMPBELL, LT C. H. COLE,
 LT. COL. B. F. KENDIG, CAPT. R. E. MOSS, LT W. E. BICKFORD, LT R. W. RILEY,
 LT. J. G. WEEKS, CAPT. E. H. HELLER
 L TO R, FRONT - LT. J. L. N. CLARK, LT. H. B. CATE, LT S. M. DONNELL
 LT. W. V. MALONE, LT. W. G. GOODISON, LT. C. E. HITT,
 LT. C. B. DIGGS, LT. W. J. HARKINS,
 LT. B. Q. SPRINGER

PILOTS



PILOTS' LOUNGE

NAVIGATION





LT. BERT E. SEARS
AIR MEDAL - 1 CLUSTER



LT. IRVING L. RAWLINGS
AIR MEDAL - 2 CLUSTERS



LT. FRANK M. SOMMERKAMP
PURPLE HEART - AIR MEDAL
WITH 4 CLUSTERS



LT. BERNARD Q. SPRINGER
AIR MEDAL



CAPT. WALTER Y. TOOKE
AIR MEDAL - 3 CLUSTERS



LT. HERSHEL L. TURNER



F.O. EDGAR L. VASSAR
AIR MEDAL



LT. THOMAS D. VAUGHAN



CAPT. HARVEY D. WAGNER
AIR MEDAL - 1 CLUSTER



LT. ARTHUR S. WALDRON
AIR MEDAL



LT. JOHN H. WATTS



LT. JOHN G. WEEKS
AIR MEDAL - 1 CLUSTER



LT. GLEN E. WIEBE
AIR MEDAL - 1 CLUSTER



LT. FRANK T. WIGTON JR.



CAPT. HARRY A. WITT
AIR MEDAL - 2 CLUSTERS



MAJ. JAMES S. WRIGHT
D.F.C., AIR MEDAL - 1 CLUSTER

ONCE THERE WERE
... Cities



BREMEN



THE UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20250



Railroads



Marshalling Yards at ULM

Bridges!



FRANKFURT - AM - MAIN