

## CATCH 52 by F. Leland Davis

The faded gold leaf, stamped on the wrinkled, red leather binding read "DIARY, 1944". I had stored it away long ago in the attic, along with a pair of silver wings, an air medal, photographs, a small, ragged Bible and miscellaneous other memorabilia of World War II. Dear God. How did I ever survive, I thought, as I flipped through the yellowed pages, each describing what happened on a day of combat flying ....

Sunday, April 12, 1944. Shivering in the damp, freezing darkness of early evening, I stood in line with several hundred members of the 816<sup>th</sup> bomb squadron, 483<sup>rd</sup> bomb group, 15<sup>th</sup> Air Corps. Our base is in a countryside in Southern Italy, and we waited, mess kits ready, to go through the outdoor chow line. I had just returned from my first mission, one of fifty I am scheduled to fly as a radio operator gunner. I stood in line immediately behind another airman who was expressing with great relief and joy the fact that on this day he had completed his 50<sup>th</sup> and final raid, and was going home.

I have only 49 more to go. 49? The prospect of 49 more missions, fending off German fighters and dodging flak with the odds against ever seeing home again did not exactly enhance my appetite. My thoughts and feelings are in turmoil as I record them here in my diary.

We are located at a base only a short distance from where the Allied armies are driving the Germans northward. Our squadron of 25 bombers is parked close by our tents where we sleep. "H" hour, or the time when crews are awakened on raid days, is as early as 2 AM depending on the distance we need to fly to targets in Northern Italy, France, Austria, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Germany and Rumania.

Sunday, April 23, 1944. Target today was an aircraft factory in Weiner Neustadt, Austria. Ju88 fighters attacked us coming in at 7 o'clock high, my area to cover. Flak over the target was very heavy and accurate, exploding with a crunch above and below us and just outside our starboard wing. Shell fragments ripped through

our wings, tail, nose, tires and gas tank. We had just enough gas to get home. I am terrified at the prospect of trying to get Mo Boshert, our ball turret gunner, unlocked and out of his cramped space should we take a direct hit and are going down. Mo is my best friend. We wouldn't have much time.

Saturday, May 12, 1944. Mission to Northern Italy, near Verona. We had P-51 American fighter escort today. We flew lower box, with several hundred B-17's above and in front of us. I was horrified when just before we hit the target area as I was charging my gun I accidentally locked a shell in the chamber and set off a two second burst, sending a stream of tracer bullets slicing upward between our own planes in the formation above us. Nobody hit, thank God, but I sure caught hell from Lt. Smithers, our pilot.

Wednesday, May 17, 1944. Everything else dwarfed by P-38 fighter crash this afternoon. We had already landed when he flew low over our tent, his engine sputtering and somehow lost flying speed, spiraled straight down and blew up as he hit. I saw his body, charred and flaming, dragged out. He had been part of our fighter escort on an extra-long mission and simply ran out of gas on his final approach to the runway. I saluted and whispered softly, "Thank you, God bless you," as the ambulance drove away.

Friday, May 26, 1944. Flew to St. Etienne, France. Bombed marshalling yards. An 8 ½ hour trip. On way up we flew right over Anzio beach where a major battle was raging. The most hilarious thing happened when Carl Montgomery, our tail gunner, stumbled forward to the radio room where I sat just aft of the bomb bay. Now there are no toilets on a B-17, and Monty desperately needed to take a leak. The only receptacle provided was a flexible tube in the bomb bay emptying out under the plane. We were at 35,000 feet and the temperature inside that bomb bay was about 50 below zero. I laughed 'til I cried as Monty, his face covered with a portable oxygen mask unzipped the fly on his heavy flying suit, groped to find his shrunken pecker and placed it in the tube. Almost as the stream began it froze solid at the tip. In obvious pain Monty whacked that suffering appendage against a bomb frame to dislodge the ice. The sorry cycle had to be repeated several

times before he got relief. Needless to say he'll be a little sore down there for a couple of days.

Friday, June 2, 1944. Briefing at 2 A.M. for first time ever shuttle raid, hitting target in Romania and continuing on to land in the Russian Ukraine. Were told how important it is that we comport ourselves respectably while there for two days. As we approached our destination Russian anti-aircraft opened up on us, misunderstanding coded signals which were to assure us a safe entry. I guess that's what you'd call "friendly fire." What a misnomer. We had to return to altitude and circle the area for an hour before we were cleared to land. Welcome to Russia!

Saturday, June 3, 1944. We have been assigned to Russian army barracks where female Russian pilots are also billeted, using the same latrines, etc. as the men. We are to be here several days. The food is lousy, especially the black bread which has grit in it.

Sunday, June 4, 1944. This is a very small Ukrainian town called Myrhorod. Mo and I were surprised to find a church service in progress as we walked down unpaved streets. We went in, nothing but straw in the floor and no seats. About 20 women in babushkas were kneeling. Strange. I thought they outlawed religion in this country.

Monday, June 10, 1944. We are to prepare for departure tomorrow to hit target in Romania on way back to our base in Italy. Tonight after chow I went out to the airstrip to check my gun. As I took the first step on the runway a shot rang out and a bullet flew about two feet over my head. I turned, and down at the end of the runway a Russian soldier gestured with his rifle for me to step back. We had not been told that they had orders to guard our planes and not let anybody near. These guys don't mess around.

Sunday, June 11, 1944. Return flight to base in Italy, bombing Bucharest, Romania, on the way. Bomb bay doors would not retract after the drop and we

flew nearly home with them open. Couldn't land with them that way so with Mo grasping one of my legs and Steve the other, I hung upside down in under the bomb bay and released a bracket that was jamming the doors open. Hanging head down under the plane in the open air gives you a kind of different view of the Italian countryside!

Monday, June 12, 1944. H Hour at 3:30 AM. At briefing we were told to expect very heavy flak as there are over 100 anti-aircraft heavy guns surrounding the target, which was Vienna, Austria. As we approached the city the flak became so thick it seemed like we could walk on it. The sky ahead immediately over the target was almost solid black from booming, bursting shells and we had to fly right through it all. The noise was horrendous. The plane recoiled violently from concussions caused by explosions just beneath us sending chunks of flak ripping through our wings and fuselage. I was absolutely terrified as the intensity increased the closer we came to the center of the city. I felt trapped, smothered, slowly paralyzed. I simply could not move. And then something occurred so wonderful I can hardly describe it. Right there in the midst of all that chaos and I suddenly felt the most calming sense of peace wash over me the like of which I have never ever felt before. It was like the presence of God Himself standing right there beside me and I knew I was in divine hands, no matter what happened. Every trace of fear left me even though we had the worst of the flak ahead of us and several hundred miles of enemy territory to fly over on our way home. Tonight I re-read the 91<sup>st</sup> Psalm and underlined "I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God: in Him will I trust." This is a very special passage for me since for today our plane was indeed what it is called: a Flying Fortress.

Thursday, June 22, 1944. We were briefed on a so-called "milk run" to northern Italy. On the way home we were surprised by the heaviest, most accurate barrage of flak we have run into so far. One chunk ripped through the bottom of the plane, shredded Beeler's chute and sliced up Burnham's face. From now on I'm gonna wear two chutes, one seat and one chest. Beeler's chute would have been worthless if he had to bail out.

Tuesday, July 4, 1944. Raided oil fields in Ploesti, Romania. Two Focke Wulf 190's and a Messerschmitt 109 made passes at us. No hits.

Friday, July 7. Flew to Germany. Bombed synthetic oil and rubber plant. Flak at target and enroute. Two Focke Wulf 190's cut right smack dab through our formation, between our ship and one on the left wing. I could see crosses on wings and pilot's faces. What the hell. The planes had no props. Must be the rumored fighters called jets. This was the first we've seen.

Friday, July 14, 1944. Budapest, Hungary. Flak accurate and intense. Lewicki had legs shot up pretty bad -- I understand they may have to amputate. Both of them. Beeler just missed by a missile that would have laid his skull open. We took 111 direct hits most caused I guess by our making two passes over the target. Lead plane signaled to withhold bombs on first run since we were slightly to the left of the target. What a gut check I felt when, after taking the punishment we took on the first run, our engines whining as we banked sharply to get out of there, I realized that we were going to have to go around again.

Tuesday, July 18. Today every one of the ships in our squadron was shot down. Were intercepted by over 200 enemy fighters lobbing 20 millimeter rockets into our formation, just out of range of our 50 caliber guns. Smithers and Burnham were the only members of our crew scheduled to fly, the rest of us stood down. Entire 816<sup>th</sup> bomb squadron, 25 planes, gone. Other squadrons in the 483<sup>rd</sup> were shot up pretty bad but ours was the only one completely wiped out. A most crestfallen camp was ours this evening, although some of the surviving crews in the other squadrons reported seeing some chutes. I sure hope Smithers and Burnham were among them.

Wednesday, July 19. 1944. Very bad hangover this morning. We all got drunk last night. We drew our ration of rye whiskey which amounted to three fifths accumulated by each of us passing up his prescribed shot after each previous mission. We were saving it for a party. But this was no party. It was a wake.

Eight of us drained all three bottles with nothing but warm grapefruit juice to cut it.

Sunday, July 23, 1944. John Ellis and I flew to Tarquinia and hitch hiked to Rome. Got hotel room and good meal at rest camp restaurant. Walked around the city. Met 2 pretty girls and walked them home. Made a date for tomorrow.

Tuesday, July 25, 1944. Went to St. Peter's Cathedral where we were part of an audience with Pope Pius XII. As he came down the visitor's receiving line and held out his hand with the Papal ring, most of the visitors who were Catholic would genuflect and kiss the ring. Not being Catholic, I sweated it out as he approached me, since I didn't know the etiquette required for a non-Catholic. "How do you do, Father," I said as I grasped his hand and shook it like an ordinary handshake. He smiled slowly, asked my name and where I was from. When he heard, "Cincinnati, Ohio" he said "Ah yes! Cincinnati. I visited your city when I was Cardinal Pacelli and dedicated a school there." Wow. Here I am in the Vatican in the middle of a war talking to the Pope and he tells me he dedicated Cardinal Pacelli school in Mt. Lookout. Small world.

Friday, August 4, 1944. Due to combat fatigue our crew has been assigned a week at rest camp on the Isle of Capri. Today we flew to Naples. Caught boat for Capri. Assigned to beautiful hotel room overlooking the Mediterranean. Opens up on a tiled balcony. Ate dinner on porch at Metropole Hotel. Music and danced with some Italian babes.

Before embarking from Naples we were required to attend a lecture by the flight surgeon on venereal diseases. Four-color slides of the most god-awful shankers and various sores imaginable. He concluded by telling us that there were about 4 whores per square foot on the island, so be careful and remember that there is a prophylaxis station maintained 24 hours a day in the basement of City Hall where medical corpsmen would treat us if we got laid. Then our chaplain spoke and cautioned us to avoid the occasion of sin, the occasions of which were plentiful on Capri. I'll never forget however what the captain in charge of our group said, his

hat cocked at a rakish angle, as he concluded the session: "Now fellas, the chaplain has told you what you shouldn't do, the surgeon has told you what to do if you do, now I'm gonna tell you where to go if you want to. There are about 50 ladies who hang out in a bunch of houses just up the hill from City Hall . . ."

Now the hormones are raging just as much in me as in any other 20 year old, but there is no way I'm gonna be messing around with any of these babes while I'm here. I'm a bit of a nut about germs and diseases anyway and seeing those awful slides, in color yet, was like a permanent ice cold shower.

Saturday, August 3, 1944. Went swimming. Mo and I rented a kayak and paddled around the island and into the Blue Grotto, which is entered through small entrance at the bottom of the island. Once inside, there are caves throughout and the water is florescent. Your hands glow when you put them in the water. Some of the ladies the captain spoke about hang out in these caves, and called to us as we paddled around. "Hey, Joe! Want to have a party? Only hundred lira!" they would call as we glided by.

Sunday, August 6, 1944. Tonight 4 of us visited a bar and while the others sat there getting slowly tanked, I nursed a beer, carefully wiping off the edge of the glass, before drinking, still in shock after the lecture on the prevalence of VD on the island. Suddenly a voluptuous Italian hooker plunked herself down on my lap, smiled, threw her arms around me and said, "Wanna have a party?" I froze, tried to pull away and said, "Oh, thanks very much, but I think I better look out for my friends here." With that she aimed a moist kiss for my mouth but missed as I turned my head quickly and hit me squarely in my right eye. Now the last color slide in the VD lecture was a revolting close-up of a grisly-looking shanker on some guy's right eye. I shoved her off my lap and took off in a dead run for the pro-station where about 10 guys were waiting their turn. When the medical corpsman finally got to me and said, "All right, drop you pants" I said, "No, not there. In my eye." "Excuse me?" he said. "My eye, my eye!" I said. "She got me in my eye." "Very interesting," he said, laughing as he swabbed out my eye.

“Hey, Joe!” he called to another medic. “This guy got it in the eye! Tell us all about it,” he said, laughing.

Wednesday, August 9, 1944. Went to the beach this afternoon with WAC. Saw and spoke with Andre Kostelanetz and Lilly Pons. Got their signatures on my short snorter bill. My eye looks OK.

Friday, August 11, 1944. Took off at 3 AM for coast of southern France. At briefing learned that invasion would begin in morning and we were pre-invasion bombing forces. Saw a terrific number of boats approaching coast, the actual invading forces.

Sunday, August 20, 1944. Bombed oil refinery in Poland. Intercepted by 25 ME 109's. We had had P-51 fighter escort, all black pilots, but they had to leave us several hundred miles before reaching target as their fuel capacity is inadequate to go all the way on these long raids. Oh how anxious we are to finish and go home.

Thursday, August 24, 1944. Took off but turned back when we discovered no fuel in #4 tank. Oh how very exasperated we all felt as this was supposed to be a milk run. Johnny and crew chief got busted for not checking tanks. Allies took Paris and Marsailles.

Friday, August 25, 1944. Target in Czechoslovakia. No flak or fighters. This gives me 49 now. Oh, Lordy, am I sweating out tomorrow. It's not that I'm afraid—it's just that I'm so awfully anxious to get through! Am smoking too much.

Saturday, August 26, 1944. This was a day I'll never forget as long as I live. Our destination on what was supposed to be my 50<sup>th</sup> and final combat mission was in southern Germany but cloud cover forced us to go to a secondary target which was also not visible. It was a long and exhausting trip, but when we landed we were told that the mission did not count because we couldn't hit target. Dear God. I thought this was to be my last, and now we had to go through all the



sweat of one more raid, being so close to having it all over with. However when I went down to operations after dinner to check on H-hour for tomorrow's flight, there was a bulletin from Group Headquarters. They had reversed the ruling on today's mission and given us credit for it. I was ecstatic. I was through. I was going home. The relief that swept over me was indescribable. I headed directly to an old barn which had been converted into a chapel, got down on my knees and said, simply, "Thank you, God."

Sunday, August 27, 1944. Slept late, blissfully ignoring H-hour. Laid around all day relishing the thought of no more missions. After dinner, while watching a movie, I was called outside by Colonel Barton and asked if I would be willing to serve as radio operator on a trip to the U.K. to ferry some P-38 pilots transferred to the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force. He said it was absolutely voluntary since I already had flown my required 50 raids and besides we would not fly over any enemy territory, our route being west over the Mediterranean and north up the western coasts of Spain and France to England. Besides, he said, I would have a 3 day pass while in London and my orders to return to the states would be waiting for me when we got back to Italy. Sounds good to me.

Tuesday, August 29, 1944. We took off at midnight after I had been briefed by British communications officer providing me with the codes I would need to identify our plane as we approached the U.K. I was amused when he pointed out some key differences between British and American code terminologies one of them being the substitution of the American term "emergency" for the British "most immediate." About 3 AM, somewhere I guess over Sardinia, weather turned very nasty. About 4 AM, Colonel Barton, our pilot, called me and said that he had changed plans due to the weather and that instead of going up the Atlantic Coast we were turning to fly directly north over occupied France. "We are going to altitude so go on oxygen and douse all lights. There are German fighter bases down there," he said. I didn't have to go on this trip and here we were, one lone B-17, flying smack over hostile territory, and no fighter escort. It was the longest night of my life. Coldest, too. There's no heat in a B-17.

About 7:30 AM. I tuned to the assigned U.K. frequency as we were approaching the English channel and started pounding out the code identifying us as friendly since by now the British anti-aircraft radar was about to pick up our approach and would identify our plane as hostile unless I could get us identified as friendly. Dit da dit dit da dit dit da dit da da da da I tapped away. Nothing. No answer. Nothing but static. Once again, I tapped out dit da dit dit da dit dit da dit da da da da. Again, nothing but static. I rechecked the response code which would clear us for entry. There it was, right there in my notes from the briefing. Dit da dit dit da dit dit da dit da da da da I pounded out again. Same thing. Nothing but static. By now we're almost in range of the English coastal batteries and certainly by now their searchlights must be sweeping the sky. The colonel was getting extremely upset since very shortly we would simply have to ditch in the channel to avoid being blown out of the sky. Once more I pounded out dit da dit dit da dit dit da dit da da da da. By now my hands were so sweaty the key was slippery under my finger. Still no answering code and nothing but that insane crackling static. Finally, squeaking through the nightmare of all that interference came the sweetest sound I've ever heard in my life da da da da dit da dit dit da dit dit da dit. It was the response I had been praying for, clearing us for safe passage into England.

Wednesday, August 30, to Wednesday, September 6. The three-day pass in London turned into six days since our departure was constantly delayed due to terrible weather. Spent the time enjoying the town fully, seeing all the sights - - Buckingham Palace, Westminster Abby, etc. Attended dances every night, English hostesses. Very nice. Took off at 9 AM today and landed back at base at San Severo at 5 PM this time thankfully avoiding enemy territory by flying south along the French and Spanish coastlines then east across the Mediterranean and back to Italy. Well, what do you know. On landing I found that I had been credited with 2 more missions due to the hazardous trip to the U.K., a trip that wasn't supposed to be hazardous and a trip I wasn't required to take. I had completed my tour of 50 and here fate slipped in an extra two.

What a mountain of memories surfaced while reading through these pages. One of the truly great novels about World War II was *Catch 22* by Joseph Heller. Looking back, I see some real similarities between Yossarian, the leading character, and me in our grinding frustration with the Air Corps in their maddening and regular increase in the required number of missions. 20 was the number at the beginning of the war, then moving up gradually to 50 by the time I got into combat. Anyway, Heller's book gave me the idea for the title of this article: CATCH 52.