

# Was It Really Fifty Years Ago ?

*By John Best (453rd)*

We were 19, 20, and 21 years old. Old enough to be at Old Buck but too young to be afraid or to fully understand the dangers of war or the seriousness of our jobs. We knew little of the geography of Germany and had never heard of Castrop-Rauxel in the Ruhr Valley, but in early November of 1944 we flew our Liberator over that city and bombed an oil refinery. We were introduced to war and to flak, which left several holes in our plane and a rather impressive hole in the upper arm of our flight engineer, Otto Scharmacher. Our tail gunner Charlie Hiskey also got hit that day and our innocence was gone. Otto didn't fly with us again until February 23, 1945.

We visited much of Germany in the following five months – more cities we had never heard of – Gelsenkirchen, Minden, Rheine, Bingen, Altenbeken, Bebra, Hanau, Junkerauth, Bitberg, Neunkirchen, Euskirchen, Zweibrücken, Ehmen, Reutlingen, Salzuflen, Giebelstadt, Arnsberg, Paderborn, Wetzlar, Gardelegen, Achmer, Neuberg, and Wesel. We saw some that we had heard of too – Berlin, Hamburg, Dortmund, Hamm, Magdeburg, Nuremberg,. A geography lesson and a lesson in war – its reality and its harshness.

When you are nineteen, its frightening to be flying a mission to bomb a place called Junkerauth and it's the day before Christmas Eve and you see one of your bombers explode directly in front of you and only one man is seen bailing out. Its frightening when you are on the flight line ready to take off on another mission and its two days after Christmas and you watch as the lead plane tries to take off but immediately after becoming airborne the Liberator crashes and explodes and you know you have lost some good friends.

We lost some more good friends when a Liberator went down in front of us on a March 3 mission to Magdeburg and only three chutes came out of that plane, and we saw a P-51 go down in heavy flak. Speaking of P-51s – they were beautiful to see. Along with the P-47s and P-38s they made the most welcome sight as they protected us on our missions. I still say a prayer of thanksgiving for those fighter pilots who flew cover for our bigger, slower Libs.

On March 22 we bombed an airfield at Giebelstadt. When we returned to Old Buck, we heard that Bartlett's crew was shot down by the Russians a few days ago and only eight of the men bailed out – hard to believe! Our last combat mission, #35, was different. We carried supplies for British paratroops and dropped in a field just outside Wesel on March 24. We were close to the ground when we dropped the supplies and most of the enemy fire came from roof-top machine gunners. Most of the Germans we saw were not shooting, they were running.

In the Summer edition of the JOURNAL, Don Parcells of the 453rd BG wrote of his return to Old Buck 10 years ago. I too, returned to Old Buck a few years ago, and I stood where the runways were and I wept. I wept for the men who couldn't return because they never left. I wept as I remembered the men, the very young men, who were with me in 1944 and 1945 and who flew so many times from that field to bomb targets in Germany. I wept aloud when I recalled a Liberator exploding on takeoff with our bombardier aboard. His name was Gerald Archibald, and he died that morning, December 27, 1944.

WE were still 19,20, and 21 when we finished our tour, but we were much, much older and much more aware of the horror that is war.

