

WALTER J. STELKOVIS

I was born in Rowayton, CT on August 23, 1924. After graduating from Norwalk High School on June 15, 1942, I learned through the National Ski patrol about the Ski Troops in Colorado. I had always wanted to learn to ski and thought this sounded like a good idea, so I enlisted in Norwalk, CT and chose the ski troops. I worked at Frank Lauder Jewelers from June until the Christmas rush and was inducted on March 4, 1943 in Hartford. I was sent to Camp Devins in MA, where I found my paperwork marked with an "N" for Navy. I explained their mistake and they agreed that I could train for the ski troops. One day while on the rifle range during basic training at Camp Croft in Spartanburg, SC, I was ordered to report to quarters and was put on a train and sent to Colorado in April 1943.



Camp Hale was located near Pando, CO, a railway stop on the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad, located around 10,000 feet above sea level. When on maneuvers with the 10th Mountain Division, I was assigned a mule with two forty-five pound spools of wire that I had to string out. One day when riding on the laundry truck going into nearby Leadville, it was almost impossible to see because of the smog from the burning of soft coal. The snow ski season was pretty much over. During training, I received a wound on my leg, contracted influenza in July and pneumonia

in August. After that I was put on light duty and served as the bartender in the officers club—and I don't drink!

In December, I learned there was a shortage of navigators, bombardiers, pilots and co-pilots. I signed up and was sent to Jefferson barracks, located in Forest Park in St. Louis, MO. Our tents were on wooden platforms and it was very cold in January and February. Each tent had a coal stove as the only source of heat. Finding out that those jobs required a year of college, I ended up doing gunnery school instead, which sounded better to me than the mountain infantry in the ski troops. Later I reflected on this change I had made, when I learned that many of the ski troops got clobbered in the mountains of Italy. I did more marching, running and riflery until August when my gunnery orders came through and I left for Tyndall Field in Panama City, FL. After graduating, I was sent to Westover Field in Chicopee Falls, MA.

Our crew trained flying the "Bangin' Lulu" from September to January of 1945. To practice our accuracy, someone in another plane would trail something that we would shoot at. Part of our training included learning to assemble and disassemble our fifty caliber machine guns blindfolded. We had to wear silk gloves under heated gloves or our fingers would have stuck to the guns.

Then in January, we left for Mitchell Field in Long Island and then spent a few days at Camp Kilmer in NJ, a point of embarkation for the Army and Army Air Corps. Our boat landed in Gourock, Scotland and from there we took a train to our base in Norfolk county, called RAF Bungay (also known as Flixton.) There were many airbases within fifty miles. Earlier raids had gone to France, but by the time we arrived the forays were into Germany.

After waiting for action since January, when our crew first arrived in England, my first three (of ten) missions took place on March 9, 10 & 11, 1945. Our targets were Rheine, Paderborn and Kiel. Targets were railroad marshalling yards and the Kiel submarine pens, (similar to the U.S. sub base in Groton, CT.) Kiel was the only one that provided opposition and even that was graced with good luck because there was heavy cloud cover so that we could not see each other. We threw out chaff, similar to Christmas tree icicles, to confuse the radar— so if you were unable to find aluminum icicles to decorate your Christmas trees you now know the reason. So there was some anti-aircraft (ack,ack) fire and visible flak which put bumps around us, but it was not accurate. Not long ago, I read a book by General Omar Bradley in which he mentions Paderborn as an important tank training center. So I don't know if it was already destroyed before we bombed the marshalling yards? Maybe some day I'll do a little research. Bottom line, we had two more missions in March and five more in April, and then on May 8, 1945, Germany surrendered.

By June, 1945, I was home on a 30 day leave in Rowayton, CT. Unfortunately, I have no idea what happened in those thirty days. Come to think of it, I probably spent a lot of time at the beach. Suffice it to say the only reason we got back to the U.S. then

is because Japan was still an issue. The B-24's we had flown over France and Germany were obsolete for use in the Pacific Theatre, so we had to be trained for the larger, faster and farther reaching B-29 bombers. At the time, we had no inkling of when VJ day would be. We thought that there would be a long and bloody war as we prepared to invade Japan.

I almost forgot, another reason I came back early with insufficient points (one needed fifty points) was because there was a shortage of radio operators. To speed up the process, a plane had its regular crew of ten plus ten passengers. So I took a two week refresher course and was assigned to another crew which lacked a radio operator, and presto! I was a complete stranger to 19 guys.

While I was stationed in Sioux Falls, SD, I went to work on local farms harvesting oats. I got fed a nice homemade farm lunch every day! Another job was "shocking oats," gathering the bundles of harvested wheat into shocks. I figured the term referred to the shock you got when a "splinter" from the oats got in your hand.

My last assignment was Biggs Field in El Paso, TX, where I worked at the camp Post Office. There were so many volunteers there that all I had to do was sort letters for names starting with A's and B's. On November 10, 1945, I received my honorable discharge after serving two years, eight months and seven days. I gave away my military overcoat, figuring I would no longer need it and hitchhiked to Pueblo, CO to visit a pen-pal girlfriend. When I got there, it was freezing cold and it was clear that the girl's parents were not at all interested in me!

There it is folks—it's amazing how much the brain can retain from 66 years ago! (Gee, what was it I was supposed to do an hour ago?)



Standing, left to right—

Joseph J. Stepan, known as JJ, was from Minnesota. We were the last two remaining members of the crew and now I am the only surviving member. JJ was the waist gunner, with two fifty caliber machine guns, one on either side of the plane.

Jesse Spencer was from Missouri. He was the tail gunner with two fifty caliber machine guns.

Robert Fisher, from Ohio, was our engineer and top turret gunner. He stayed in the Army Air Corps after the war and died in a training accident on a B-29.

Walter J. Stelkovich was the nose gunner with two fifty caliber machine guns.

Sam Nastri, who was known as "Pop" because he was thirty-five years old, came from Brooklyn, NY and was our radio operator.

Louis Schiesser, from Baltimore, was the armorer and ball turret gunner. It was helpful that he was shorter because he had to spend each mission in the fetal position to operate the ball turret which is under the plane and rotates 360 degrees. His father owned a bar near the Navy yard in Baltimore and received a weekly allotment of a box of fifty cigars from the government which he sent to Lou, who always shared them with the crew!

Officers are in front kneeling—

Wayne Johnson was our co-pilot.

Mark Reed was our pilot.

Calvin Furfari was from Pennsylvania and was the navigator and bombardier. During the war, I thought because he was an officer that he seemed superior, but Joe Stepan told me that he was really approachable and later he became a good friend of mine.