

The End of the War in Europe

It was a grand day: May 8, 1945. The war in Europe was officially over. Tom Henderson and I, both lieutenants, were on a “liberated” motorcycle slowly cruising around the airfield at Erfurt in East Germany, monitoring the enemy aircraft flying in to escape the Soviets in the east. One after the other, they would land, taxi up to a group of American officers, exit their plane, and hand over their side-arms. After a stiff salute, they were led into captivity as prisoners of war.

It was ironic that we happened to be in Erfurt at war’s end. Erfurt was the home of Topf & Sons, who supplied gas chambers and cremation furnaces for the Nazi death camps at Auschwitz and Birkenau.

I was part of an Air Service Group whose mission was to support the 10th Reconnaissance Group by supplying transport, mechanics, ordnance, etc. The 10th did photo reconnaissance for General Patton’s Third Army. We were stationed at an airfield at Doncourt, France, about 12 miles west of Metz and near enough to the Battle of the Bulge to hear the artillery fire in the north.

In the latter part of December 1944, troops of the Third Army came through the village of Doncourt in the dead of night in a long convoy of open trucks, sitting huddled in the dark sleeting icy rain. They were riding north to reach their jump-off point and immediately go in battle to relieve our men surrounded by the Germans at Bastogne.

The 10th Photo Recon Group had P-38 and P-51 planes for their main mission but were also trained as air fighters and in ground attack. The sun shone for the first time in

the battle on the day after Christmas in 1944, and our fighters were effective in pounding the German positions. The enemy was defeated and US forces began an advance deep into Germany.

Our Group entered Germany on March 27, 1945, stopping at Trier (Treves) and continuing through a sea of white flags hanging from windows in one village after another. On April 12, 1945, we were encamped at Mainz, on the Rhine, when our lunch mess was interrupted by the solemn announcement of President Roosevelt's death. Our ultimate destination was the airfield at Furth, near Nuremberg, where forward elements of our headquarters had arrived on May 1, 1945. We arrived soon after and quickly settled in. Soon we were being assisted in daily details of life by displaced persons (DPs) and German civilians.

The big concern for us now was the progress of the war in the Pacific, because we were facing the possibility of transfer to bolster that ongoing conflict. But the major part of the summer passed uneventfully. I was able to have a Riviera vacation at the Martinez Hotel in Cannes. The beach and surrounding countryside were rewarding, and I came back refreshed -- although our plane had a difficult time climbing the Alps in fog on our return trip at night.

On August 2, 1945, I was ordered on temporary duty to Innsbruck, Austria, for four days of Information and Education ("I and E"). I was sent there to learn how our erstwhile allies, the Soviets, were now behaving badly and bring back the message to our Group. When I returned to Furth, I learned that the U.S. Army Air Force had a new device that could deliver the power of a 20,000 ton bomb and had been successful in dropping it on Hiroshima, inflicting some 80,000 casualties. On August 15, the Emperor

of Japan broadcast his decision to surrender. This news was an occasion for a boisterous celebration by many of us, who were otherwise destined to participate in a planned invasion of Japan in November of 1945.



The War is Over!