

Ready, Willing and Able

Research of Great-Uncle's Past Leads to Honors in Italy

By Doug Tomas



How often have we seen the start of a project with pretty casual expectations, but it turns into something you never could have imagined?

In 1981, I started researching my great-uncle, TSgt. Charles L. Berg, who had been shot down and killed in action over Italy in 1943. As a World War II aviation buff, I had only intended to find information on what group, squadron, and aircraft he was in to confirm or correct our family stories. My initial research was not successful. But after seeing the Collings Foundation's B-24 in a

fly-by during the EAA AirVenture air show in Oshkosh, on August 1, 1993—in commemoration of 50 years since the infamous Ploesti raids—I started again, in earnest, and this little project suddenly took on a life of its own!

Charles (better-known as “Bub” or “Bob” by his family) was a production clerk at Gisholt Machine Co. in Madison, Wisconsin, when he enlisted in the US Army Air Corps on May 20, 1942 in Milwaukee. He was sent to the Curtiss Wright Technical Institute in Glendale, California, and then on to the Consoli-

dated Aircraft B-24 School at Wendover Field in Utah. In August 1943, he earned the rank of tech sergeant.

Tsgt. Berg became the flight engineer of Ralph Jackson's crew on aircraft no. 36, B-24D serial number 42-72768, which the crew named *Ready, Willing, and Able*. At age 32, my great-uncle was much older than most of the crew, which earned him the nickname “Pappy” by some of his younger crew members.

They left the United States in mid-August 1943, to join the 512th Squadron, 376th Bomb Group (heavy), the

“Liberandos,” in Benghazi, Libya. They were needed replacements for those who had been lost during the raids on the Ploesti refineries on August 1, 1943.

Prior to beginning my research, I was familiar with another B-24D assigned to the 512th Squadron, at that time, named *Strawberry Bitch* (due to the pink hue of the desert camouflage paint). I did not know I would find a personal connection to this airplane. This aircraft has been on display in the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force, in Dayton, Ohio, since May 1959. Later, I found a mission report where Berg and his crew flew a combat mission in that airplane on the 14th of December, 1943. In June 1995, the Air Force Museum was gracious enough to allow me to make arrangements to get inside *Strawberry Bitch* for photos and a chance to be aboard an aircraft where my great-uncle and his crew had served.

Sadly, *Ready, Willing and Able* was shot down on a mission over Vicenza, in northeastern Italy, on the 28th of December 1943. A day that again hit the 376th Bomb Group very hard.

On that mission, three squadrons of the 376th Bomb Group, with a total of 17 B-24s, did not join up with another bomber group and fighter escort as planned. But they continued on, and before getting to the target, were attacked by a large number of German fighters that had not been reported from previous missions. They shot down all six aircraft of the 512th Squadron, and two each from the 514th and 515th Squadrons, leaving only seven aircraft able to return to base. Berg, along with seven others, were able to bail out of the aircraft, but he and four others of his crew died that day, and five crew members survived. I was fortunate to be able to contact all five survivors.

In a letter to Berg’s mother in February 1945, from Brigadier General Vincent J. Meloy, the commander of the Army Air Forces base at Truax Field in Madison, a training base for AAF airmen at that time, described how one of the streets on the base would be named after Berg in honor of his supreme sacrifice. An article in the *Wisconsin State Journal* on Monday, May 27, 1996—Memorial Day—helped me locate the street, as well



Facing page: The crew of *Ready, Willing and Able*: Standing L-R: 1st Lt. Ralph S. Jackson-Pilot; 2nd Lt. Ernest A. Clark-Navigator; 2nd Lt. John A. Crosby-Co-pilot; 1st Lt. Denton R. McAfee-Bombardier. Front Row L-R: S/Sgt. Albert F. Everman-Waist Gunner; S/Sgt. Robert G. Duffy*-Tail Gunner; S/Sgt. Maurice Schulman*-Waist Gunner; S/Sgt. Wilton W. Hamilton *-Belly Turret; T/Sgt. William H. Linton*-Radio Operator; T/Sgt. Charles L. Berg*-Engineer. *KIA

Above: Doug Tomas’ Great-Uncle, Charles Berg.

as information about the others whose names are assigned to streets still there.

Along the way, I was contacted by Giuseppe Versalato in Vicenza, Italy, who was researching the bombing missions over his city. We became good friends and pen pals, and exchanged quite a lot of information over the years. Giuseppe has written several books on aviation in that area of Italy, and is in-

involved in maintaining a small aviation museum in Vicenza.

Not long ago, Giuseppe informed me they had determined a known B-24 crash site from the 28th of December 1943 was that of my great-uncle Berg’s aircraft, based on information I had provided him about the crew, and the notes in a priest’s diary, who had gone to the crash site to attend to those who were still onboard.



Left: TSgt. Charles Berg, ca 1943. Right: A large procession of officials and local citizens took part in the commemoration ceremony.

Then in the spring of 2011, Giuseppe informed me that they had arranged with the mayor of the City of Arcugnano, (approximately 9 km south of Vicenza) to dedicate a memorial plaque on the crash site, on the same date, 28 December 2011. I now had my excuse to go to Italy to visit the area, and started making my plans. It would turn out to be a wonderful ceremony in memory of my great-uncle's crew, and all those who were involved on that terrible day.

The morning of December 28, 2011, when Giuseppe picked us up at the hotel, he handed me the Vicenza newspaper. Inside was a full-page story about the mission and crew, complete with photos of my Great-Uncle Berg and crew. Already I was overwhelmed. He then took us to the cemetery in Vicenza where the Germans brought the bodies of dead Allied crewmen to be buried. Prior to WWII this had been the city of Vicenza's Jewish cemetery. It had been converted by the Nazis to a German military cemetery. The US and Allied dead were buried outside the cemetery walls.

Prior to the ceremony, we met with others in the town square of Arcugnano. I knew of one gentleman who Giuseppe had told me about. As a young boy, he had been a witness to the air battle over-

head that day. I was looking forward to meeting him. But to our surprise, two other gentlemen came forward who were also witnesses on that day.

The crash site is in a park area south of the city in farm fields near a lake. As people assembled for the ceremony, I was quite surprised by the number of people who attended. This included the Arcugnano police chief, the mayor of Arcugnano, Paolo Gozzi; and Col. David Buckingham, commander of the US Army garrison in Vicenza. The Alpine Soldiers veterans, the Italian army division for the area, provided the color guard. The procession to the site was something to see, and they included me and my traveling companion in the procession.

At the site, Mayor Gozzi presented his remarks. Col. Buckingham also provided remarks, and Giuseppe Versalato spoke as well. Then Giuseppe asked me to join them. I had no idea what was coming next. He presented me with a black gift box. As I opened the box, I found a piece of twisted metal, which had been a part of the aircraft *Ready, Willing and Able*. This piece had been recovered by the priest mentioned earlier, and had been saved until finding its way to Giuseppe. They asked me to say some-

thing, for which I was very poorly prepared.

The Alpine Soldiers then laid a large wreath at the base of the plaque while the Italian and United States national anthems were played.

The plaque (in Italian) reads:

*In Memory Of the Fallen Crew
Of The American B-24
In The 376 Group USAAF
Shot down here
In the 2nd World War
On 28 December 1943*

*The City Of Arcugnano
Placed This On*

28 December 2011

The following day, the Vicenza newspaper carried a nearly full-page story about the ceremony with photos. It was very clear to us that the Italian people still hold the events of WWII on their land in great respect and reverence. They show their appreciation for the Allied airmen and soldiers, and respect their sacrifices.

This experience was far more than I ever could have expected. **WAFB**



Top L-R: Giuseppe Versalato, Douglas Tomas, Col. David Buckingham, and Mayor Paolo Gozzi, after Tomas was presented with a piece of *Ready, Willing, and Able*, the plane his great-uncle flew.

Above: Momentos of his great-uncle's service.

Right: The wreath and plaque placed in Arcugnano, Italy to commemorate the crash site of *Ready, Willing and Able*.