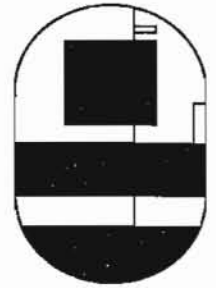




# PANTANELLA NEWS



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## SACAJAWEA

By Robert Shetterly

This is the story as best recalled of the Crew of Sacajawea during the training, deployment to Africa and Italy, and their combat tour.

First, Sacajawea was a B24J number 42-52558, new and trouble-free as it was assigned to us at McCook AAF, Nebraska, in January 1944. But this crew was assembled well before this in June 1943 at Gowan AAF, Boise, Idaho. They were:

Tail gunner  
Sgt. Bennie C. Naticchioni  
From: Framingham, Mass.

Ball Turret Gunner  
John Jurdyga  
From: Compton, Ca.

Asst. Engineer - Waist Gunner  
Sgt. Paul H. Mallette  
From : Houston, Tx.

Engineer - Gunner  
S/Sgt Albert P. LeBlanc  
From: Kenner, La.

Radio Operator  
Top Turret Gunner  
Sgt. George S. Wilson.  
From: Philadelphia, Pa.

Asst. Engineer  
Nose Turret Gunner

Sgt. John N. Forham (replaced  
Sgt. Oscar Schmitt at Wendover).  
From: Boston, Mass.

Bombardier  
2nd Lt. Rowland Craig Taylor  
From: Boise, Idaho.

Navigator  
2nd Lt. William J. Magowan  
From: Gordon, Neb.

Co-Pilot  
2nd Lt. Griscom Bettle  
From: Philadelphia, Pa.

Pilot  
2nd Lt. Robert L. Shetterly  
From: Des Moines, Iowa.



*Robert L. Shetterly Crew, L to R - Rear - Rowland Craig Taylor, Robert L. Shetterly, Griscom Bettle, Jr., Albert P. LeBlanc, - Front - Paul H. Mallette, George S. Wilson, John Jurdyga, Benny C. Naticchioni, John H. Forhan. Not shown, William J. Magowan.*

This crew was designated #6 and started a forced training program in the B-24. As you history buffs will recall, Idaho, a beautiful country, was the land of Lewis and Clark. As famous explorers, they established the fledgling United States' right to most of the western lands. A Shoshone Indian girl named Sacajawea was hired by Lewis and Clark to interpret the language of the Indians encountered. She became known as the "Birdwoman" because she always knew the way. Although only 15 years old, she contributed much to the successful Lewis and Clark mission.

While at Boise, it was decided unanimously that the B-24 we took to combat would be named after the Birdwoman, Sacajawea. And so it was, with a little nose art work of Tom Arthur.

Young men all, most single but a few married, from both coasts,

north and south. Hardly a homogeneous collection, but as time proved, they were very much so. At Gowan AAF, Boise, we were Combat Crew #6 in the 29th Bomb Group, flying training missions together so each qualified fully in the B-24.

In August, 1943, our crew was transferred to the 399th Bomb Group at Wendover AAF, Utah. From August to November 1943 we conducted intense night navigations and long-range bombing and gunnery missions. At Wendover, the crew became W-14.

In November 1943, another transfer as Crew W-14 was assigned to the 465th Bomb Group at McCook AAF, Nebraska, and later assigned to the 781st Bomb Squadron, where intensive squadron and group training was conducted as well as the final combat readiness inspections.

From McCook, the squadron and all crews deployed to Lincoln AAF for final deployment, equipment and readiness inspections. All aircraft and crews passed and February 1944 saw us depart the United States via Florida; Puerto Rico; Trinidad; Belem, Brazil; Natal, Brazil; and across the south Atlantic to Dakar, French West Africa; then on up the coast to Marakech, French Morocco; then to Oudna Field, Djedeida, North Africa. Signs of war were everywhere; the German troops had only recently been forced out of Africa.

The first of our tent cities at Oudna Air Field became home for several weeks while the base at Pantanella was being prepared for our combat operations. More training in formation, bombing and gunnery continued until deployment to Pantanella took place on 20 April 1944.

During the month of May, the crew of Sacajawea flew 10 missions over Northern Italy, Germany, Austria, Rumania, and Yugoslavia. One noticeable mission was a long one to the oil refineries at Ploesti. We coped with difficult weather, heavy flak and fighter attacks in the target area. Many aircraft were damaged and one lost; a pattern to be followed many times over at Ploesti.

During June 1944, the crew flew

14 missions covering a wide range of targets in Italy, Rumania, Germany, Hungary, Austria, and France. We had to cope with many in-flight emergencies caused by enemy fire and the crew performed without a hitch. We had every right to feel capable and confident.

On June 6th, we were scheduled to fly #6 in the right-hand box of 6 aircraft. It has been called the tail-end Charlie position. The target was the Dacia Romano Oil Refinery at Ploesti, Rumania. The bomb run from the IP to the target paralleled a railroad serving the refinery. About midway to the target the Germans had placed several large batteries of 88 MM anti-aircraft guns. Because of the damage these batteries had caused on previous missions, we were assigned to make a single-plane run over and drop our bomb load on these gun emplacements. This we did with good results, I thought, but it wasn't really that easy.

**Al LeBlanc** remembers as follows:

On June 6th we were up early, around 3 or 4 am, had breakfast and were briefed for the mission. At the briefing the instructions were given. Two things I can plainly remember; we were told that it was D-Day for the invasion of Normandy and also that one plane would drop out of the formation on the way to the target. Its bomb load was to be dropped on the anti-aircraft batteries. It seems like the batteries were so many that it would be best to bomb them for the protection of the planes flying along the route.

When we were checking over the plane, Bob Shetterly told us our crew was selected to make the bomb run on the anti-aircraft battery. I always felt that since we were tail-end Charlie, maybe we were volunteered.

Things went well until it was time for us to leave the formation. Shortly after our bomb run was started, we would see anti-aircraft shells exploding below us. The first rounds were several hundred feet below. The second and third rounds were much closer and we were being hit. A red flare burst above. A few

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**781st BOMB SQUADRON**

as part of the 465th Bomb Group, Fifteenth Air Force, flew B-24 Liberators from Pantanella Airfield located near Canosa, Italy, during WW11 (1944-45). During it's 191 missions over Southern Europe it dropped thousands of tons of bombs, shot down 23 enemy aircraft (German) and received two Distinguished Unit Citations.

minutes later a group of fighters appeared at a distance. The fighters broke formation and lined up to attack us from the tail.

At this time Craig Taylor took my turret and I went to the back as they needed help. The bomb bay doors were open and the bombs already dropped. The catwalk was slick and real slippery. I immediately noticed a bad hydraulic leak. Fluid was draining out of the reservoir. A large line was cut in half. Reaching over to the side of the bomb bay I closed the valve. A little fluid was still draining out of the system. My clothes became saturated and my eyes inflamed by leaking oil and fumes. I proceeded to the back. The waist gunner had just put out a fire in the ammo box and now had leaking oil and fumes. We kept the bomb bay door open as well as the waist windows and camera hatch. We decided it was safe to use the guns. Although our tail gunner, Bennie Naticchioni, was hit in the leg, he was shooting like hell. Of the nine fighters in the attack he got one and damaged others. Paul Mallette, our waist gunner, either got another or badly damaged it. The ball gunner, John Jurdyga's turret was out from flak, so we pumped him up manually. He took the tail turret from Bennie. A parachute was put on Bennie after his leg was taken care of and a blanket was put over his shoulders and he sat near the camera hatch. We had a handful of cables cut to the control surfaces. Also had brakes out, most of the electric system, hydraulic and intercom. While we were taking care of the fighters, Bob Shetterly and Gris Bettie were trying to maneuver the plane under the formation for added protection. We were there for awhile and then lost oxygen. We left the other planes and went to a lower altitude so breathing would be easier.

Our navigator, Bill Magowan, did a good job

mapping our way back, as we now were alone. We were using more gas than usual and getting low. I showed Taylor and Magowan how to throw the nose gear out so I could do other things. Magowan helped me crimp other lines in front of the pilot to stop a leak there. Taylor was all over the plane once he was able to leave the top turret, helping where needed.

Meanwhile, up front, **Gris Bettie** and I had our hands full. Immediately after bombs away we were really clobbered with numerous flak hits all over the aircraft. We lost rudder control, aileron control, radio and intercom and most oxygen positions. Fortunately, the elevators still worked and all four engines were still turning. We were out of formation because of our bomb run on the AA gun batteries. Impossible to fly formation but we S-turned back and forth under the formation using engines and cowl flaps to guide us. Being under fighter attack we needed to stay with the formation. Al LeBlanc and Taylor did yeoman work keeping me informed. We had no intercom or radio but the crew worked well. Bennie Naticchioni



*Shetterly crew in Yellow D, badly damaged and loss of some controls could not avoid heavy equipment extending on the runway.*

was injured and bleeding, but as of now, all other hands were OK. Taylor, Wilson, Mallette, Jurdyga, Forham, and Naticchioni kept the turrets and guns going as we were under heavy fighter attack from all sides. One head-on pass of 3 ME 109s caught my attention. They were line abreast all firing right at my front windows. Quite a relief to hear Forham in the nose turret and Taylor in the top turret blasting away. As they passed over us, 2 of the 3 were trailing smoke, no doubt in trouble. Magowan and LeBlanc cut off valve lines to stop the hydraulic spray in the cockpit.

It soon became apparent that we were suffering from lack of oxygen. We were well above 20,000 feet and all but a couple of walk-around bottles were depleted. The fighters were still attacking but we had to leave protection of the formation and descend. We made it gradual and played back and forth under the formation to try and counter the fighters. After what seemed like ages the fighters gave up, perhaps, they too were low on fuel. At any rate, we gave more than we received and the crew was credited with I kill and several probables.

Upon leaving the formation,

Bettie and I experimented with the autopilot, hoping to regain rudder and aileron control. When first turned on, it was very erratic and put us into a steep nose down bank. This was bad news in our condition. We were able to recover straight and level by use of engines and elevators. Craig Taylor went back to the tail and made some adjustments in the autopilot servo which decreased the sensitivity and made things more manageable.

**Magowan** recalled the following:

The bombardier had just called 'bombs away' over the interphone when three 88 mm shells exploded around the ship.

The hits blew in the plexiglass tail turret, cut our rudder cables, set fire to a box of 50 caliber ammunition in the tail and smashed the hydraulic system.

We were in a bad way with the ship out of control and the spray of hydraulic fluid drenching and blinding us. The pilot managed to get us back under control and under the formation going home.

In the meantime, the tail gunner put out the fire before the bullets started exploding. I crawled out of the nose to help the engineer stop the spray of hydraulic fluid which was blinding everybody in the waist.

The engineer managed to stop the spray of hydraulic fluid. Just as the right waist gunner spotted three more ME 109s boring in, the radio went dead and the oxygen system failed. The ship was cut off from all communications and breathing at an altitude of 20,000 feet became extremely labored.

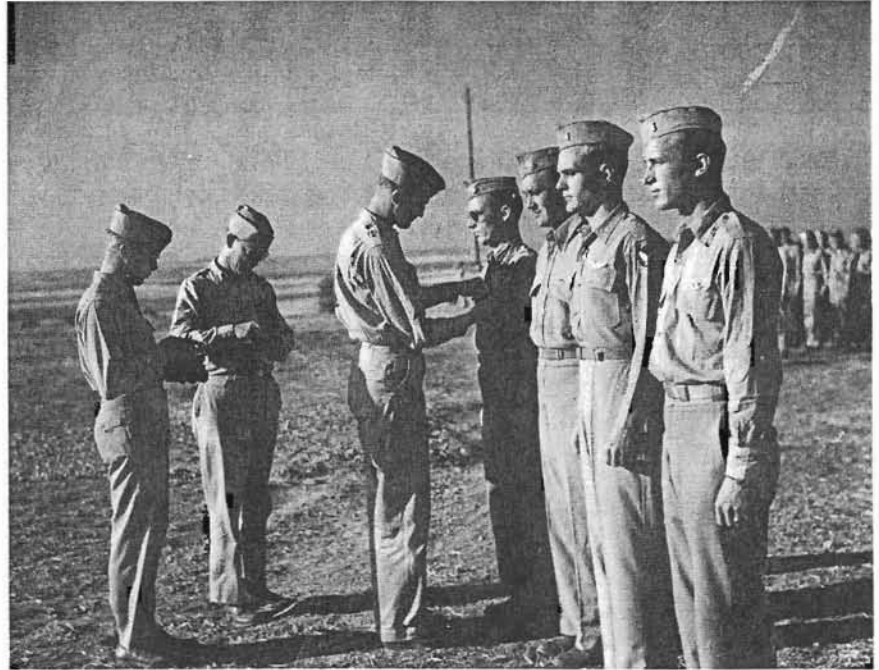
I saw one fighter hit at us from 100 yards, stagger and fall off, then begin a long spiral down. Another fighter caught a burst from one of our gunners, in the Jerry engine nasal, and dove under the nose where once again he was plastered. A third decided events were too hot and dived before he came within range of our guns. We finally got rid of them and the pilot took the ship down to a safer breathing level.

It was one long prayer coming back over the Yugoslavian mountains and the Adriatic Sea, but we made it in one piece. I'll never know how the pilot managed to land without rudder, brakes and flaps, but he did. We counted 139 flak and bullet holes in the ship.

Again, up front. The pilot and co-pilot were still pretty busy. After we outsmarted and out-fought the fighters and the formation was long gone ahead, it was pretty obvious to me that we would have to bail out. So many things were broken in our flying machine. Because of Bennie Naticchioni's leg injuries, bailing out wasn't too attractive, especially over German-held Rumania. At present, things were under control so we postponed bailout hoping to get to Yugoslavia. Some people on the ground were a little more friendly in Yugoslavia. We were sweating out fuel and hoping to get over the mountain ranges in central Yugoslavia before giving up on Old Yellow D. We made it through a pass in the mountains thanks to Magowan's expert navigation. By the time we sighted the Adriatic,

things were chugging along and we continued.

With so much damage it was a little foolish to have too much confidence, but things were working so we pushed on across the Adriatic Sea. Crossing the water, the bailout was put on hold since no one seemed anxious to swim home. Barring any engine trouble or fuel leaks, it began to look possible that we would get this big wounded bird back home. But getting it on the ground posed some problems. No hydraulic to lower the gear and flaps and no hydraulic fluid for brakes. Rudder and aileron inoperative except through the



*Distinguished Flying Crosses being awarded at Pantanella. R to L - Roland Craig Taylor, Robert L. Shetterly, Col Joshua Foster?, Maj. Harold A. Bullock. Awarding the medals Col Foster? Bob Shetterly noted the whole crew earned this recognition for bringing them home.*

autopilot which was still working OK. Elevators and engine controls OK as best we could tell. WHAT THE HELL - LET'S LAND. Gris Bettle strong armed the elevators to override the autopilot, rounded out perfectly and I, steering with the autopilot turn control, lined up with the runway and maintained airspeed and descent with the throttle. Al LeBlanc, with help, cranked the gear down and locked with the emergency system and then called off the approach airspeed for Bettle and me. We touched down close to the end holding the nose way high for aerodynamic braking.

**Al LeBlanc** remembers this part as follows:

Being low on fuel because of the extra drag with everything opened, the guns, ammo and everything loose was thrown out. Two parachutes were ready to be released from the gun mounts for slowing us after landing. The main gear was lowered but had to be cranked the rest of the way to lock it.

We passed the tower and George Wilson, our radio operator, gave light signals that we were in an emergency and prepared for landing. Shetterly and Bettle made a long approach on automatic pilot to the runway and it looked good. At the appropriate time the throttles were pulled back and we dropped to the end of the runway. What a wonderful feeling as Shetterly and Bettle made a perfect landing. They held the nose high and cut the engines for more drag. All free crew members moved to the tail to keep the nose up and tail dragging. The plane slowed down fast. All at once we noticed a sheep foot roller on

## **STALAG LUFT IV**

**by Harold B. Farrar**

the side of the runway. Bettie tried to start the outboard engine to miss the roller, but could not. We hit the roller and broke plexiglass on the lower part of the nose. The nose gear also hit and stopped us. An ambulance arrived quickly as well as a truck and tractor.

Two other crews were lost because of flak so in the end with all our problems we felt lucky.

On June 7th, the next day, we went to the flight line to look at the plane. We counted 159 holes. Old Yellow D looked pretty bad. On the right wing about a foot from the leading edge I noticed 3 or 4 ricochet bullet tracks across this part of the wing. This probably came from the fighters. These hit between No. 1 and 2 engine. Somehow, the propellers were not hit. On the leading edge of the wing was a large hole badly chewed up. Mallory Simmons, our crew chief, gave me a big piece of flak he had removed. This piece of flak is about one inch by 1/2 inch thick and 4 1/2 inches long. I still have it as a souvenir.

Simmons, Becnel and Ferich, our ground crew, placed about a dozen cans of beer they had saved up on our plane to get cool. They were placed forward of the camera hatch. We had a few hits there and they lost all but three cans.

As pilot of the crew of Sacajawea, I felt a great pride in the work these guys did. It brought us home. Luck helped too, but we made it. The June 6th Ploesti mission was a tough one for the Group and the 781st. Two aircraft from the Squadron were lost over Rumania on this mission. Lt. Martin's crew bailed out and survived with some injuries as did Lt. MacFarland's crew.

Bennie Naticchioni, our injured tail gunner, said to me after landing, "Thanks, Lieutenant. I really didn't want to walk home." How in the world can you thank any one person for a performance like that? They - all 10 - did it, and did it damn well!

Through the rest of June, July and August 1944, the crew flew 26 more missions. Three more times over Ploesti. Although damaged many times over, never as seriously as the June 6 mission.

John Forham caught flak in the nose turret over Linz, Austria, while we bombed the Herman Goering Tank Works. A flak wound in his right lower leg resulted in a compound fracture. Both John and Bennie recovered fully and completed their missions and returned stateside in 1944.

All members, except Lt. William Magowan who had a non-flying injury, completed all missions and returned to the states and survived the war and many years after. Today, some 52 years later, four of the ten guys that kept Sacajawea flying are still living the good life.

*On July 16, 1944 on a mission to Vienna the Tipton crew began to have problems with their aircraft. By the time they left the target two engines were out and they were forced to leave the formation. After an encounter with a Me 109 they had to bail out near Zagreb, Yugoslavia. They were captured by the Ustachi troops and turned over to the German soldiers. Two days later they were taken to Budapest, Hungary for interrogation. From here the officers, Lt Dale Tipton, Lt Eugene Weiss, Lt Vernon Burda and Lt Eugene Krzyzynski, were sent by train to Stalag Luft III at Sagan, Germany. The enlisted men, T/Sgt Frank Jasicko, T/Sgt Hulitt Holcombe, S/Sgt Harold Farrar, S/Sgt Albert Ralston, S/Sgt Paul Brady and S/Sgt Michael Deironimi along with 20 other enlisted men, were sent by box car to Stalag Luft IV. Harold Farrar will tell about life as a POW. Editor.*

It was now August 4, 1944 and the Tipton Crew's enlisted men had traveled over 600 miles north since they left the prison in Budapest. They uncoupled our box car at a small train station called Kiefheide near the town of Grosstychow about 25 miles inland from the Baltic Sea in the Province of Pomerania. When we got out of the box car we were hungry, weak, stiff, very tired, and somewhat scared. Our guards were replaced by soldiers dressed in the blue uniform of the Luftwaffe as we were lined up and ordered to start marching down a dirt road. We walked along the road for over a mile and a half through a heavy forest until we broke out into a large clearing and off in the distance we could see a large compound of many wooden buildings completely surrounded by double fences of barbed wire. After they opened a large locked gate we were led into an outer camp that contained the German administration/housing portion of the camp called the Vorlager. We were told we were in Kriegsgefangenenlager der Luftwaffe Nr 1V, a prisoner of war camp for enlisted airmen. We were stripped of all of our clothes and completely searched. After we dressed we were photographed, finger printed, and assigned a prisoner of war number for identification purposes. My POW number was # 649 1.

This was a new prison camp that had just been activated in early May. Learning from their earlier experiences at other camps, this camp was located, designed, and constructed to eliminate as many escape and tunneling routes as possible. First it was located as far North and East as possible to keep it a great distance from the Western front, so you would have a very long and dangerous walk if you did escape. Next it was located on sandy soil in the center of a very large cleared area in the middle of a forest of trees, so you would have to dig a tunnel in sandy soil that would have to be shored up, so that it would not collapse.

About 350 acres had been cleared of trees and the camp was built in the middle 150 acres, so a tunnel would have to extend a long ways just to get to the edge of the camp and a lot farther to reach the safety of the trees. The barracks floors were raised about 30 inches off of the ground, so they could see underneath the barracks and also turn their dogs loose under there to sniff out any possible escapees. We also found out that the floors were made of two layers of wood. The planks were running in one direction on the lower floor and the planks on top were placed in the opposite direction. So you could not just remove the upper planks over a small area and still get through