

A WINGSPAN FROM DISASTER

A B-26 mission goes terribly wrong

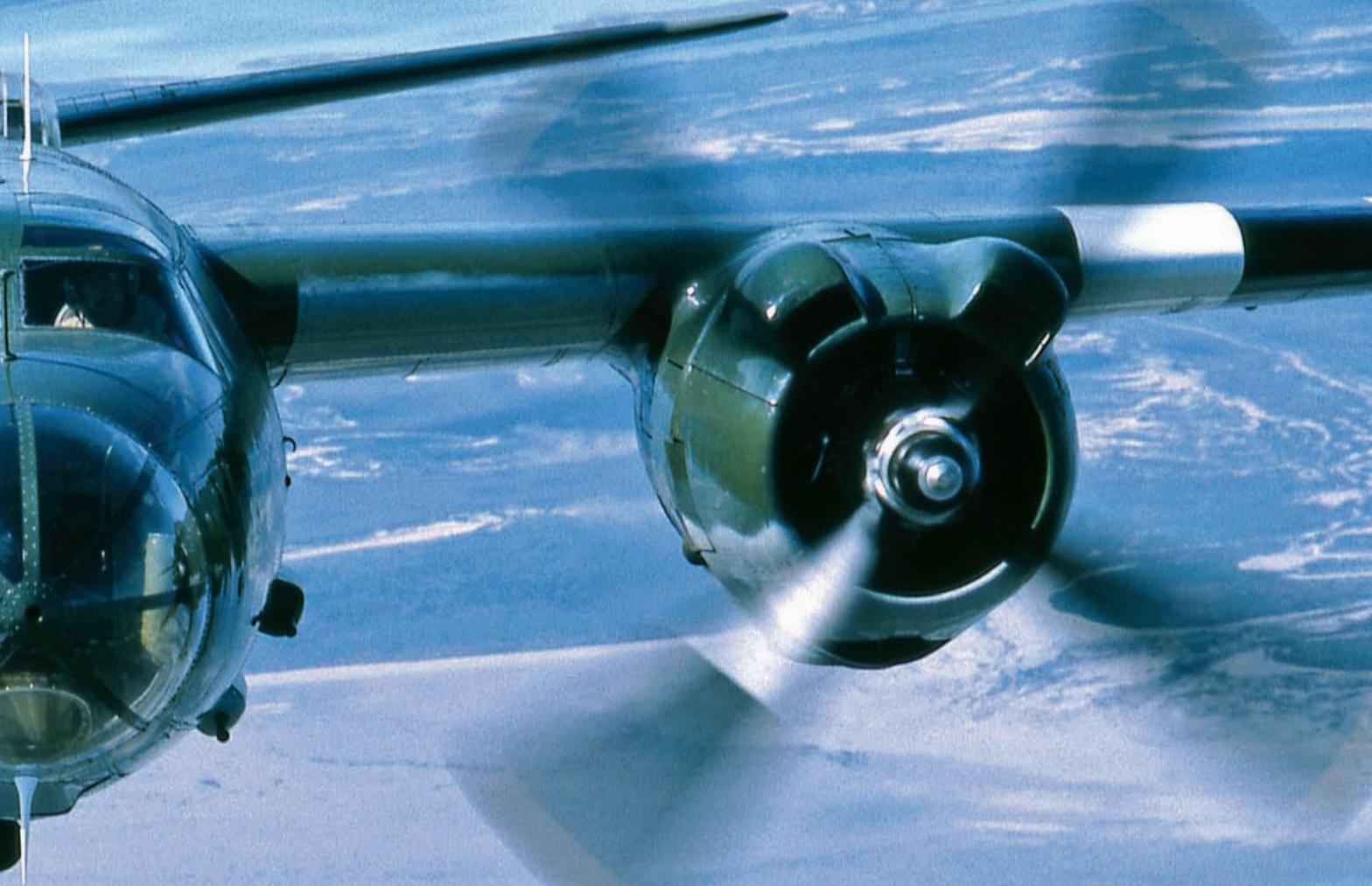
The Martin B-26's sleek lines and powerful Pratt & Whitney engines yielded unusual speed for a medium bomber: officially 317mph in the B model, though later versions were pegged at about 285. (Photo by Bill Crump)

BY CHARLES O'MAHONY

Our Martin B-26 Marauder crew arrived on the island of Sardinia in the Mediterranean Sea to begin our combat tour in July of 1944. We joined the 320th Bomb Group, and we were assigned to one of the four squadrons, the 441st. The Group was operating off Decimomannu airfield, a one-of-a-kind dirt field with six oiled, parallel runways, 8,200 feet long (Editor's note: Picture that—six 8,000 foot runways side by side!). We took off on missions in flights of three, at 30-second intervals. An 18-plane group could be launched in just three minutes, and it reduced join up time and extended our range.

Our missions took us to targets in Italy in close support of the Fifth Army, and in August we bombed the beaches of Southern France for the invasion. Allied forces advanced rapidly on both fronts, and we were soon coming back to Decimo with our gas gauges flirting with "empty," and a move closer to the action was inevitable. There were rumors that we might be going to an airfield near Viterbo, a town north of Rome, or Corsica, to be exiled on another island, smaller than Sardinia. No, Lord, please, not Corsica. We wanted girls, beautiful Italian girls, and fancy restaurants to take them to. We sweated while the coin was in was in the air ...

It landed tails, and the 320th was going to Corsica.



Exiled to Corsica

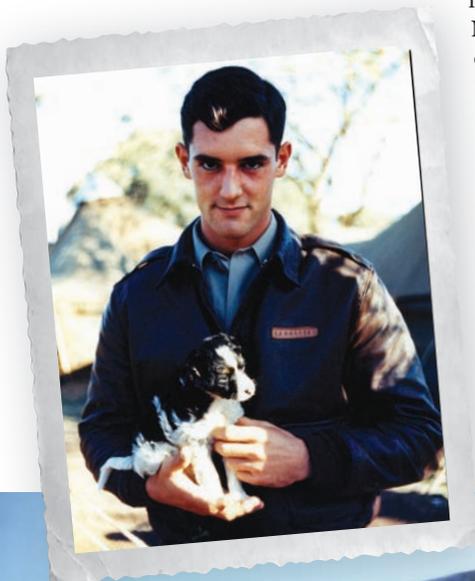
Our new base was at Alto, on the east coast of Corsica, near the middle of the island. Directly across from our field, on the west coast, was the town of Ajaccio, birthplace of Napoleon, and just off the east coast was the island of Elba, to which the little emperor had been exiled. A wide spine of mountain rose to 8,000 feet the length of the island, leaving only a narrow strip of level land before it reached the sea.

Our runway was a single north/south strip, less than 5,000 feet long, made of Marston mat, also known as PSP, or pierced steel planking. PSP was lengths of steel 10 feet long and 15 inches wide, punched with holes. Each piece weighed only 60 pounds. The pieces were locked together by hook and slot edges, and the holes gripped the earth. In rainy weather, though, mud oozed up through the holes, and as one good ole boy put it, "made that iron runway slipper than owl sh*t." The runway length had been adequate for the previous tenants, a group of

P-47 fighters, but for our B-26 Marauders taking off with a 4,000-pound bomb load and grossing out at 38,000 pounds, it was cutting it thin.

There was no housing to be had and we lived in pyramidal tents, four men to a tent. This was a lateral move for us new guys, but a step down for the old timers who had lived in mud brick, tile-roofed *casas* on Sardinia. Our tent had "requisitioned" pierced steel planking for a floor, and we used ammunition cases for chairs, desks, and cupboards. We burned wood and the heavy cardboard bomb wrappings in our pot-bellied stove. When we added a bare electric light bulb, Robinson said, "Next thing we'll be having the magazine folks from *Better Homes* coming by to take pictures." Space was at a premium, and we lived so close to the runway that our tents flapped like birds when the planes checked their engines before a mission. There was a mountain stream nearby, our only opportunity to do laundry. It was really cold, but we waded in and washed our clothes with brown bar soap. By the time we finished, our legs were blue and our fingers looked like white raisins. As for bathing, we became disciples of Ernie Pyle who said, "If you go without a bath long enough, even the fleas will leave you alone."

Jim Murray, a tent mate, and my dog, Short Timer, on Corsica. (Photo courtesy of author)



Conventional wisdom holds that war is 90% boredom and 10% terror. This crew indulges in the majority pastime alongside its veteran aircraft with 55 mission markers.



I had 23 missions when we moved to Corsica, and I was flying as a flight lead plane, and also training to be a lead pilot. Between missions, my bombardier, Jim Ferrandino, and I had been working as a team, practice bombing with the Norden bomb sight and a load of 20 "blue whistlers," 100-pound bombs filled with 98 pounds of sand and two pounds of an explosive spotting charge. We would climb to 10,000 feet and fly to a practice area near the town of Bonifacio on the southern tip of the island. We were learning to make a precision bomb run in the shortest possible time. The less time straight and level on the bomb run, the less flak they could throw at you.

Mission on!

On November 5, our target was a railroad line near Rovereto, Italy, in the Brenner Pass. Eighteen aircraft were assigned to the mission, fifteen from the 441st squadron, plus a flight of three and one spare from the 444th squadron. Each plane would be carrying eight 500- pound demolition bombs. If we got a good bomb strike, we would bring down a landslide on the tracks and sever a main passageway between Austria and Italy. For the first time, Ferrandino and I would be flying as group backup, on the right wing of the lead plane. Our crew would have a navigator and there would be a Norden bombsight in the Plexiglas nose of ZERO FOUR. If anything happened to our group leader, we were ready to take over. At 0955 hours, a green flare arched from the Alto control tower and ONE ONE came off the brakes and thundered down the runway. Every minute

another B-26 followed, and in 17 minutes, the mission was launched. We joined up out over the water, then headed off in loose formation, north towards the coast of Italy. It was an exceptionally clear day, and as our 18 plane group made landfall over the town of La Spezia we could see 100 miles in every direction, Cannes and Nice on the French Riviera, the Swiss Alps to the northwest, and the town of Pisa off to the East. It was hard to believe we were fighting a war on such a beautiful day, but trouble started early.

Just as we reached the coast, Lt. Domke's ship developed engine trouble. He was flying TWO ZERO on the left wing of the group lead aircraft, directly across from me. Domke peeled out of formation, and First Lt. Chuck Kamanski moved in, flying EIGHT FOUR from the 444th squadron. Kamanski and I were both tucked in close on ONE ONE when mission commander Captain Smith's head appeared in the astrodome that stuck up on the top of the fuselage at mid-ship. He was wearing a blue baseball cap that threw a shadow across his eyes as he scanned the sky for flak and fighters.

Here come the bad guys!

"I got four fighters at one o'clock high!" came crackling through my earphones. Definitely bad news. We had no fighter escort, so these had to be bogeys. "Three at eleven o'clock, level ... got two at twelve o'clock ... four at nine o'clock high!" They were circling us like jackals, and with the same fighters being called in from different crew positions it sounded like the whole Luftwaffe was

B-26s often flew in three-plane flights, permitting tight formations that concentrated bomb drops and afforded optimum protection with defensive firepower against interceptors. (Photo courtesy of author)

there. With no urging, every ship in the formation pulled in closer to give us more concentrated fire power. Captain Smith's head dropped down from the astrodome, and reappeared moment later, the blue cap replaced by a flak helmet. Things were getting serious. The air was glassy calm and I had the wing of my plane well overlapped on the group lead. And then I saw dozens of parallel, ribbon-thin vapor trails streaking under our flight. *Hooooee!* It dawned on me. Those trails are from machine gun bullets! The first pass was from 12 o'clock high, and, when it seemed like the fighters were going to come right through our formation, a mix of Me 109s and Focke Wulf 190s, they split-essed, rolling inverted and exposing only their armor-clad bellies. These pilots were the first team.

Two of our crippled bombers drifted out of formation trailing smoke, a 441st plane, ZERO ONE, and EIGHT SIX from the 444th. Only three chutes were spotted before both planes went into the mountains. Our plane shuddered as the gunners fired their 50-caliber guns in short bursts. The cockpit filled with acrid stink of gunpowder. Chatter on the intercom was nonstop and laced with profanity. The fighters streaked by in pairs, closing in and firing, midair-close, before they dove under our formation. It seemed to go on forever, and all I could do was concentrate on staying in position, and try not to grip the yoke

too tight.

Finally, both sides seemed to run out of ammunition at the same, and the fighters herded together out of range and disappeared in the direction of Austria. Once again, the only sound was the drone of our engines.

The bomb run was the safe part

At the Initial Point we rolled out of a gentle bank onto the bomb run heading. Lt. Lester Polakov, bombardier in the lead plane, hit the switch and ONE ONE'S bomb bay doors fanned open. Kamanski's plane, on the other wing, was directly in my line of sight, and had no visible damage. When his bomb-bay doors opened the rear half of EIGHT FOUR's fuselage disappeared in a wild spray of gasoline. How the hell did it get there, and why hadn't he exploded? And if he explodes now, the lead ship and I are going with him.

There was nothing to do now but keep flying ... and praying. We weren't getting much flak, so the bomb run was a smooth one and our bombs brought down a mountain of earth on the torn up tracks. Back at base we would be firing green 'mission successful' flares. We wheeled south towards the coast, and Kamanski was glued as close to the left wing of the lead plane as I was to the right wing. Just after we got back over the Mediterranean, EIGHT FOUR backed out of the formation as abruptly as if he had put on the brakes.

The author's 320th Bomb Group in action, striking Axis targets in southern Europe. The unit's distinctive yellow markings are obvious on these B-26Fs. (Photo courtesy of author)



Early B-26s wearing OD/gray camouflage consort with a new arrival sporting bare metal, but all pack the same loadout, here 12 500-pound bombs. (Photo courtesy of author)



What really happened was he lost power completely on his left engine.

Now what? A bomb bay full of fuel and a dead engine

“Top Notch leader, this is EIGHT FOUR. I’m gonna drop my landing gear to make sure it comes down.”

“Don’t do it yet, you’ll never be able to hold altitude.”

“Hey! I got a bomb bay full of gas and I wanna know right now if I got a landing gear that works. I’m not gonna belly this sumbitch in.” His main gear came down, and gravity appeared to lock the two mains into position. The nosewheel, which comes down forward and into the 180 MPH slipstream, bobbed up and down in the wind, appearing and disappearing behind the nose wheel doors.

Kamanski’s voice again, very calm. “We’re bailing out.”

Only weeks before, a 441st crew had bailed out over water off the southern coast of France, and a U.S. Navy convoy had been nearby. Not one of the crewmen from that plane was ever found. Today the waves were high, and the Mediterranean would be November cold. The two remaining planes from the 444th dropped out of formation to stay with EIGHT FOUR.

Bailing out is never easy

Kamanski recapped what went on inside his doomed aircraft.

“On the first pass, the fighters knocked out a fuel booster pump, and our bomb bay started filling with gas. Sgt. Pete Greco tried to stop it by tying a silk map from his escape kit around the

leak, but there wasn’t much he could do. He almost passed out from the fumes, and when it was time to bail out, he was still groggy, so he sat on the nosewheel first. His weight took it down and dropped him free, then the nosewheel swung back up. Tom Friel, our radio man went next, then Jim Beeby, our bombardier.” All the while, Kamanski was struggling with the plane, with lots of power on one side and a dead engine on the other it was impossible to trim.

“I told Ford, my copilot, to stand behind me and hold the yoke while I got out of the seat. When I was out and my chute was secure, I took over the yoke and he sat on the nosewheel and was gone. Now it was my turn. I let go of the yoke, dropped onto the nosewheel, and the plane rolled over on its back. Not good. But it dove down real steep and spit me out, and there I was, about 50 feet above the plane, looking at the belly. I figured this would be a good time to pop my chute open, and I did. I could see four parachutes below me, and I watched while the plane went screamin’ down and into the Mediterranean. “

Once in the water, Kamanski worked out of his parachute harness and inflated his Mae West. The two remaining 444th planes flew low and dropped six man rafts. “That was the scariest part,” Kamanski said. “Those rafts area are really big, and one damn near hit me.” But he was able

Sometimes the bad guys got lucky. (Photo courtesy of author)



Kodachrome: A Sharp Eye Into the Past

Kodachrome. Just the mention of the venerable Kodak film product brings forth a variety of differing emotions and opinions from experienced photographers and editorial professionals. From its rich, saturated colors, and exceptional resolution qualities, to the painfully narrow exposure latitude and the long, slow decline of its attendant processing quality, you'll evoke a wide gamut of feelings from those who have utilized this medium to record the events so important to them.

Kodak first produced the unique layered emulsion film in 1934 and it came along just in time to document some of the most significant

political and technological events of the twentieth century. We are very fortunate to have had this medium available to photographers, such as Richard Ham, when documenting events in aviation's most prolific development period.

I first met photographer Richard Ham in 1992, while looking for some original black and white images to go with my own Kodachromes of in-flight portraiture of restored fighters and bombers. I visited with Dick at his home in Portola Valley, California, and came away with much more than I expected. He explained to me how he began his career in photography before the war, growing up in Southern California. Educated in graphic arts and photography, he had worked with both cinema and press type still cameras when his call for military service came.

Serving with the Army Signal Corps, Dick had the unenviable job



A first-generation scan of a 4 x 5 Kodachrome transparency is seen so seldom, that we forget how crisp film can be. Or how stable the color can be over time. Eastman-Kodak supplied Kodachrome color film (ASA 8-10, depending on type) to unit photographers and Public Information officers throughout the war. This is how a photograph is supposed to look! (Photo by Richard Ham, via Brian Silcox.

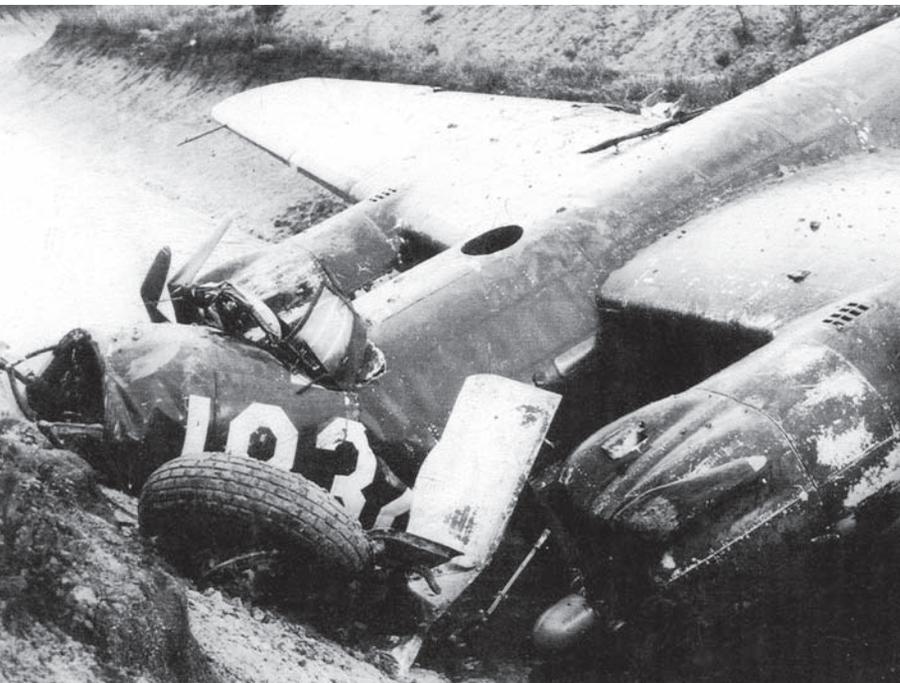
of following the advance of troops across France after the D-Day invasion on June 6, 1944. However, since he was also experienced with a 16mm cinema camera, he was frequently sought out by the Eighth Air Force for their documentary needs as well. One of many lasting tributes to his talents, the William Wyler documentary, *Memphis Belle*, benefitted from his cinematography.

When I contacted Dick again in January of 2010, although 90 years old, he had just returned from a trip to Paris visiting a woman he had met during WW II and was vibrant and quite conversational. I explained to him that I was interested in scanning his 4X5 Kodachrome image of a Martin B-26 Marauder for preservation, and possible publication. We revisited our common ground of shooting in-flight portraiture each having shot from the ball turret of the Boeing B-17. When it was time to leave, Dick insisted that I keep the Marauder image, as he felt I

had an interest in preserving it, and seeing that it would remain in the record of his time in Europe. I was highly flattered and felt the heavy responsibility attached to such a gift.

The B-26B, serial number 41-31918, served a long career with the USAAF over Europe, flying with the 454th Bomb Squadron, 323rd Bomb Group. Having survived nearly the entire war in continuous combat use, it was shot down on April 20, 1945, only about two weeks before V-E day. The pilot, Lt. Dale Sanders and his crew became POWs for the brief remainder of the war. The photograph taken by Dick Ham was made on a training flight from the 454th base at Earl's Colne, England just prior the invasion of Normandy.

In this single, nearly 70-year-old piece of film, we are made to realize what a high-quality contribution Kodachrome, sadly, now gone, made to the visual record of our history. —*Brian Silcox*



This B-26 evidently over-ran the runway and crunched in a ditch during a failed landing attempt. The Marauder's robust airframe usually protected aircrews at such times. (Photo courtesy of author)

to get out of the cold water and onto a raft, and within 15 minutes an Air Sea Rescue RAF amphibian Walrus flying out of Corsica showed up. He climbed on board, and the pilot told him to take off his wet clothes and wrap himself in a blanket. Kamanski gave the pilot the reciprocal of the heading he had been flying when they bailed out and urged him to start searching for the rest of the men, but the pilot of the Walrus wouldn't move. "We stay here till more help comes," he said. The waves were high, and spotting the other men from the water would be difficult.

A PT-type boat and a C-47 arrived within minutes. Kamanski transferred to the boat, and the C-47 took off on the reciprocal route Kamanski had given them, searching from above. The boat followed, and within minutes all five crewmen were together on the boat. The seas were so high

Silver Star for an Old Marauder Pilot

In 1950, Charles Kamanski volunteered for duty in Korea where he flew 55 combat missions in the Douglas A-26. While serving as Operations Officer for the 452nd Group, he earned a second Purple Heart, and the Silver Star. This is a portion of his commendation.

"Captain Kamanski distinguished himself by gallantry in action against the enemy on 10 December, 1950. As a pilot of a B-26 aircraft (the Douglas A-26 had been reclassified) on a low-level attack mission against targets at Sariwon, Korea, Captain Kamanski displayed an extraordinary degree of determination, skill and courage. On his initial rocket pass, Captain Kamanski was painfully wounded and his aircraft severely damaged. Although completely blinded in the left eye by glass particles and streaming blood from face wounds, Captain Kamanski, with the help of his navigator regained control of the aircraft and again attacked his target. He accurately fired his remaining rockets into the target in spite of a large hole in the windshield. Only after totally expending his armament did Captain Kamanski leave the target and fly toward friendly territory. His superior flying ability and bravery enabled him to safely return

by now that the Walrus had to taxi all the back to Corsica.

The remaining aircraft in our group landed back at Alto field just after 1300 hours. At debriefing it was determined that while we had lost three B-26s, our gunners had downed five of the Luftwaffe fighters. A fair exchange? That would depend on which plane you were in. Even though it was only lunchtime, most of the animated crew members passed on the Red Cross coffee and doughnuts at debriefing, opting instead for the whiskey ration. We were living testimony to Winston Churchill's observation, "Nothing in life is so exhilarating as to be shot at without result."

Epilogue

Capt. Charles Kamanski and his bombardier, Lt. James Beeby, were chosen as a team to learn the new Shoran system, bombing with radar in overcast weather. They trained together for over 40 hours in the air at Istres le Tube Airfield in Marseilles, and flew the group lead aircraft on days when cloudy weather ruled out the use of the Norden bombsight. Kamanski finished his European tour with 53 missions.

My luck also held for the duration. I worked up from Assistant Operations Officer, to Operations Officer, and at 21, became the Commanding Officer of the 441st Squadron. By war's end I had flown 71 missions. †



and land his heavily damaged aircraft."

After having flown a total of 108 combat missions in WW II and Korea, Maj. Charles Kamanski returned to civilian life and used the GI Bill to obtain a law degree.

—Charles O'Mahony