

115 Orkney Rd.,
Oak Ridge, TN 37830

To whom, it may concern,

This is an account of the events that occurred on November 1, 1944 while I was on a bombing mission of the Fifteenth United States Army Air Corps against Vienna, Austria. I was a member of the 451st Heavy Bombardment Group, 726th Squadron and was flying as an Aerial Photographer. This account represents my best recollection of the events that occurred that day. Although over 41 years have passed since then, I believe this account is accurate because the events themselves were so unusual and therefore memorable.

On that date I was assigned to fly with the air crew of Lt. Rosser I. Bodycomb as photographer and to take bomb strike photos. These photos were to be used to make rapid damage assessments to determine the effectiveness of the bombing mission. Lt. Bodycomb was flying in the Deputy Lead position of the 726th Squadron formation. (Lt. Bodycomb, a top pilot, and I knew each other well as I had worked in the squadron S-2 before being reclassified to an aerial photographer. He had been a squadron 1st Pilot since June and had already flown 33 combat missions including one for which the 451st Group had received a Distinguished Unit Citation. See the attachments.)

The flight to Vienna was uneventful up to the Initial Point before the bomb run. At this point I readied the camera for taking pictures of the bomb strikes by opening the rear escape hatch, lowering the camera and its frame over the opening and connecting the required umbilical cords to the aircraft supply sources. The rear hatch on the B-24 Heavy Bomber is located just in front of the tail gun turret and aft of the bomb bay. At a preset time I started the camera motors to start taking pictures of the bomb strikes. On this day I was photographing through a long range telephoto lens and it was necessary for me to aim the camera in order to include the bomb strike area as the flashes of the explosions occurred. I had been on four (4) missions previous to this one and there was no enemy opposition on those. This mission was expected to be different since Vienna was one of the targets most heavily defended against high altitude heavy bomber attacks.

When we were in the bomb run, the lead plane was damaged and, as Deputy Lead plane, Lt. Bodycomb maneuvered his plane into the lead position. Just as our bombs were dropped our plane lurched and I could hear the "whump" of anti-aircraft shells exploding near the plane. I lurched also in an attempt to maintain my footing and keep my camera aimed at the target area to photograph the strikes of the previous flight. In a very short time I felt a tap on my shoulder. I looked up to see the tail gunner out of his turret and wearing his parachute. The waist gunner was pointing to the parachute he was now wearing and to my intercom connector which had become unplugged while the plane and I were pitching about. I plugged my intercom in and heard Lt. Bodycomb say that he feathered Nos. three and four engines (to his right) and that he

thought he could continue controlling the plane and to cancel the order to “prepare to bail out.” He made a damage and personnel check. The plane had lost two engines, a third engine, #2, was trailing some black smoke and the right wing had holes in it. The navigator had a facial wound and was bleeding profusely. Fortunately, the gasoline neither burned nor exploded, but gasoline was leaking in the bomb bay.

When Lt. Bodycomb realized I was on board he remembered that when I worked in the Squadron S-2 office I kept the situation map updated. This included posting enemy areas where strong partisan activity existed as well as enemy anti-aircraft batteries and enemy airfields. He asked me to come up to the flight deck and help Capt. Wier, our bombardier, establish a flight path that would take us over “safe” bail out areas while we headed back towards Italy. In order to reach the flight deck I had to walk through the bomb bay.

The bomb bay doors were being kept open to keep the plane vented of gasoline fumes and to allow an escape opening if needed. The bomb bay was about twenty (20) feet long and I had to cross it on a central catwalk about ten (10) inches wide. There were vertical struts about every five (5) feet on either side of the catwalk with just enough room for me to get through sideways without wearing my parachute. I walked through the bomb bay carrying my parachute (not wearing it), balancing myself between struts and knowing that if the plane lurched I would likely fall to the ground. When I got to the forward bulkhead of the bomb bay I saw Sgt. Richardson, the flight engineer and top turret gunner working with some valves, rags and tubes. I found out later that he was plugging some holes in gasoline tubing and transferring gasoline from the damaged tanks to the undamaged gas tanks supplying the #1 and #2 engines. This transfer not only saved fuel but helped the attitude of the aircraft. When I got to the flight deck Lt. Bodycomb had the plane under control and could maintain the plane in a straight flight although there was a steady slow altitude loss. I went over the maps with the bombardier and showed him where the partisan activity and enemy activity were located. He asked me to pick a flight path and give it to the pilot. I realized then that the bombardier had been in the nose of the plane when it was damaged and was in a state of shock, and through no fault of his own was not his normal self.

I looked out the pilot’s side window and could see the kidney shape of Lake Neuseidler. We were slightly south and east of the south end of the lake. The flight engineer, Sgt. Richardson, told me that we had fuel remaining for about one hour or a little more of flight. I determined that the safest and nearest destination was a large area in the hills southeast of Zagreb. This area had partisan activity for the whole time we were in Italy and the area of their influence had been steadily increasing. It would require that we fly about due south from our present location and would not include any areas of high population enroute. The co-pilot, Lt. Cooper, gave me windage information. I applied a windage correction and gave the resulting heading to Lt. Bodycomb as the bombardier had requested.

The pilot flew the heading. It required all of his skill as a pilot and his strength to maintain the plane in a straight flight because of the poor weight distribution and the fact that both working engines were on one side of the aircraft. He was half standing in his seat in order to push hard enough on his foot controls. Through all this time Lt. Bodycomb was in complete control of the plane and crew and maintained his own calm and courage. The crew was all confident of his ability.

During this time period the remainder of the crew was doing what they could to lighten the load of the plane. Sgt. Richardson and I threw overboard the excess ammunition, flak protection suits, helmets and anything else that was loose on the flight deck.

After a while we saw that we were crossing the Drava River, the boundary between Hungary and Yugoslavia and the beginning of the area where the partisans were supposed to have strong influence. A few minutes later one of the remaining two engines sputtered and Lt. Bodycomb hit the bailout alarm. We all parachuted safely out of the plane and were picked up by friendly farmers who took us to the partisans. We found that we had reached our intended area and that we landed several miles south of the city of Virovitica located southeast of Zagreb. One crew member broke his leg when he landed, Lt. Bodycomb sprained his ankle and there were other minor strains and pains. The navigator's face would was superficial and everyone received medical attention from the partisans.

The whole crew spent the next six and a half (6 ½) weeks in the mountains southeast of Zagreb with the partisans. We met the Russian army about December 17, 1944 after they occupied Hungary adjacent to Virovitica. The Russians took us to Bucharest, Rumania and from there we were returned to the Fifteenth Air Force in mid-January. Everyone returned safely. We were then returned to the United States for reassignment.

It is my firm belief that the manner in which Lt. Bodycomb, Sgt. Richardson and I, Cpl. Levine, conducted ourselves on November 1, 1944 resulted in a safe return of our whole crew without anyone being captured by the enemy and may have saved the lives of the crew. We each demonstrated courage, character, skill and devotion to duty in a manner that gave credit to the armed forces and to ourselves while accomplishing this extraordinary achievement in aerial combat with the enemy.

Lt. Bodycomb piloted the B-24 bomber with the utmost skill when the aircraft had sustained an amount of damage from enemy anti-aircraft fire that would have made it unflyable to the usual pilot. He displayed the greatest amount of courage, leadership and character consistent with the best tradition of the armed forces while performing this extraordinary achievement in aerial combat with the enemy.

Sgt. Richardson kept his courage and his wits by finding and fixing the gas leaks before too much fuel was lost and transferred the fuel to the proper tanks to prevent further loss of fuel from

the damaged tank. He utilized all of his training and skillfully improvised solutions to technical problems generated by enemy anti-aircraft damage to his aircraft. He carried through these solutions in a most skillful manner during a hazardous situation that arose while he was engaged in combat with the enemy. He behaved in a manner consistent with the highest tradition of the armed forces while performing this extraordinary achievement in aerial combat with the enemy.

As for my own, Cpl. Levine's part, I believe I performed in an exemplary manner while utilizing all my knowledge to help in saving our crew and avoiding our capture. I voluntarily exposed myself to unusual risk by walking through an open bomb bay without wearing a parachute so I could establish a safe flight path from enemy territory. I believe my actions were also an extraordinary achievement during aerial combat with the enemy.

All three of us deserve to be commended.

The addresses of the three individuals singled out above are:

Rosser I Bodycomb, ASN 0-683950	Sgt. Delbert Richardson
Route 9, Box 234	Current address unknown
Fort Worth, Texas 76179	ASN 34775493
Telephone (817) 236-7236	

Cyril G. Levine (now known as Cyril G. Lawson) ASN 31328125
115 Orkney Road
Oak Ridge, Tennessee 37830
Telephone (615) 483-9902

The Army Serial Numbers of each individual are also listed.

This is as true and accurate account according to my memory of the events that occurred on November 1, 1944 to Lt. Bodycomb, Sgt. Richardson and myself on this mission.

Enclosed with this letter is a copy of the news release from the Fifteenth Air Force Headquarters to the newspaper, "The Daily Item" of Port Chester, New York on February 14, 1945. The article reports these events along with other information.

Sincerely written,

Cyril G. Lawson, known as
Cyril G. Levine before August 1949