

Raymond Christensen
1914 – 1944

Written and Compiled by Karen Seeman
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“I had a brother who was killed in the war,” my grandmother said. And that’s about all she ever told me about it. Of course, I didn’t ask for more either, but then again, at five years of age I was just stunned to hear that Grandma was ever young enough to have had a brother!

I only learned more about Ray by going through his letters that she had saved for nearly 50 years. It was that pack of letters that stimulated my interest, and what a “Catch 22!” It was only through her death that I had become interested in her brother, and then I could not ask her any questions.

My grandmother, Lillian, was very close to her brother. And both of them were friends with the Knutz family, their neighbors in Clyde township of Beadle county, South Dakota. My grandfather, the story-teller of the family, told how he and his brother Howard would ride a horse to school, and Lillian and Raymond would also share a horse. After they got down the road a distance, they would trade partners and Bill would ride with Lillian; they “claimed each other” in 3rd grade, and he loved to tell that story – a love story that would last another 70 years. However, Bill seemed to spend as much time with Ray as he did with Lillian. Bill loved a good practical joke, and so did Ray, and they grew up concocting plans to get the best of each other. They later put together a band with Bill’s brothers, with Bill playing saxophone and Ray playing the fiddle. As young men, they worked as farmhands, driving south into Nebraska looking for work. In 1935, Bill married Lillian and settled down to farm on his own account, and Ray continued the life of a farmhand.¹

Ray’s life was an interesting one, albeit short. He was born on Feb. 4, 1914², the second child of Peter Christensen, a baker, and his wife Ella Monsen. Pete came to the U.S. from Denmark and Ella from Norway, both as teenagers. They both found their way to Huron, South Dakota, where they met, married, and began a family. By the time Ray was old enough to start school his father had sold his interest in the bakery and purchased a farm southwest of Huron, where Ray grew up. He was involved in the Farmer’s Union Junior group, entered his crops in the Junior Fair competition, hauled fodder for a few bucks, and worked around the farm. Eventually he took to the road, working as a traveling farmhand in Nebraska, Iowa, and Minnesota.

As evident by his letters, there were certain things that Ray was passionate about - agriculture, playing the fiddle, dancing, and women. And he seemed unafraid of a challenge, and after reading his letters from the last six years of his life, he was not afraid to do a little extra work to obtain his goal.

¹ Raymond Christensen, to Lillian Knutz and Mr. and Mrs. P. C. Christensen, 1936-1944, personal letters; privately held by Karen Seeman and Janice Payne.

² South Dakota Department of Health, Birth Record Search of Records Over 100 years old, database, State of South Dakota, (<http://apps.sd.gov/ph14over100birthrec/index.aspx>), accessed December 2014, entry for Raymond Christensen, State file #103443.



The Christensen home in Clyde Township, Beadle County, South Dakota.



Ray , grafting wheat



Raymond Christensen

In the latter part of 1938, against his father's wishes, Ray decided to put his farmhand days behind him and pursue a college education. He set his sights on the University of Minnesota School of Agriculture in St. Paul. He started right out taking courses such as Market Livestock Production and Agricultural Botany, among others. His grades were a mix of A's and B's – not bad for a farm boy with just an 8th grade education! He went on to take more agriculture classes, algebra, mechanics, band and orchestra, and the usual basic college coursework over the next few years.³

Ray's time in St. Paul demonstrated his ability to "make his own luck." To pay for his education, he sold insurance for State Farm.⁴ He eventually worked out a deal to live in a girls' boarding house in exchange for taking care of the grounds. By his own admission, it was a bit like putting a fox in the hen house! Besides free rent and plenty of girls, this boarding house was located on University avenue and had nightclubs, a theatre, restaurant, drug stores, grocery store, bakery, cleaners, ice cream shop, and a candy shop, all in his immediate vicinity. He also had a job on campus taking care of part of the grounds, landscaping however he pleased - a project he completed with passion. Car fare to get back and forth to school and work was \$3.60 a month.

While in St. Paul, Ray joined the WPA orchestra; but, "that dame who leads it is not any good and consequently they're lousy and I don't help matters a heck of a lot because I can't play as good as they can..." Life in St. Paul was looking up; he

³ Raymond Christensen, academic transcript; University of Minnesota School of Agriculture, St. Paul, Minnesota; privately held by Janice Payne.

⁴ Certificate of completion of State Farm Life Insurance Sales course; he also mentioned his State Farm employment several times in letters.

received a raise at State Farm, and bought an old 1932 Model B Ford, which he described as follows:

“When I first heard it it didn’t have a muffler so I couldn’t hear anything but exhaust. Now I got a muffler on it and I can’t hear the motor for other noises. I shift into low and then try to decide whether to shift into second or jump out and run.”

Life was moving along well for Ray at this time, but then on December 7, 1941, life changed for him as it did for most Americans, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Ships were destroyed, and nearly 1200 American lives were lost. The following day, President Franklin D. Roosevelt gave a rousing speech about the unprovoked attack, and how the United States had remained neutral up until that point but that he considered the attack an act of war. His speech got a standing ovation, and hundreds of thousands of young men enlisted in the days following.⁵



President Franklin D. Roosevelt giving his speech on December 8, 1941.

We may never know precisely why Ray dropped everything – school, work, friends and family – and enlisted. But there are clues that point to the Pearl Harbor attack as the driving force. Many of his letters home after enlisting say how much he’s looking forward to battle with the Japanese, and he seems to assume he’s headed for the Pacific theater. At this time, in the European theater of the war, Hitler was a force to be reckoned with as well but Ray doesn’t appear to consider him. Also, within just 12

⁵ http://www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe40s/life_02.html

days of the Pearl Harbor attack, Ray had already quit school, disposed of his belongings, been inducted into the military and was on his way to a base in Texas.⁶

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

TO MEMBERS OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY EXPEDITIONARY
FORCES:

You are a soldier of the United States Army.

You have embarked for distant places where
the war is being fought.

Upon the outcome depends the freedom of your
lives: the freedom of the lives of those you love—
your fellow-citizens—your people.

Never were the enemies of freedom more
tyrannical, more arrogant, more brutal.

Yours is a God-fearing, proud, courageous
people, which, throughout its history, has put its
freedom under God before all other purposes.

We who stay at home have our duties to
perform—duties owed in many parts to you. You will
be supported by the whole force and power of this
Nation. The victory you win will be a victory of all
the people—common to them all.

You bear with you the hope, the confidence,
the gratitude and the prayers of your family, your
fellow-citizens, and your President—



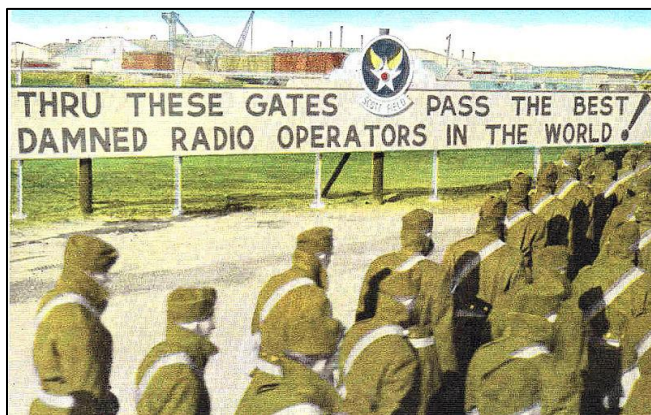
(courtesy of 417th-NightFighters.com)

⁶ Christensen, Raymond (Omaha, Nebraska) to Mrs. P. C. Christensen, postcard, 19 December 1941; privately held by Janice Payne. Mentions that he had spent time at the Servicemen's Club in Omaha. He arrived at Wichita Falls, Texas at Sheppard Field the next day, per letter of Dec. 20, 1941.

Ray's entry into military life occurred at Fort Snelling in St. Paul, which was a major induction center. At its peak in 1942, they processed about 800 men and women each day.⁷ The induction process included swearing in of the recruits, giving medical exams, making sure immunizations were up to date, classifying them, and handing out their basic equipment. The process went relatively quickly.

On December 20, 1941, Ray arrived at Sheppard Field near Wichita Falls, Texas. He said, "Well, I'm here, and I'm happy like a lark. This place is really big. There's barracks every direction about as far as you can see and men all over the place. From the last three samples I see we are not going to eat in the same style as at Fort Snelling. There we were practically stuffed. Here we get enough to eat, I think, but the food is not as good or the variety as large, but I think I'll live." The beds were also less than comfortable, he lamented.

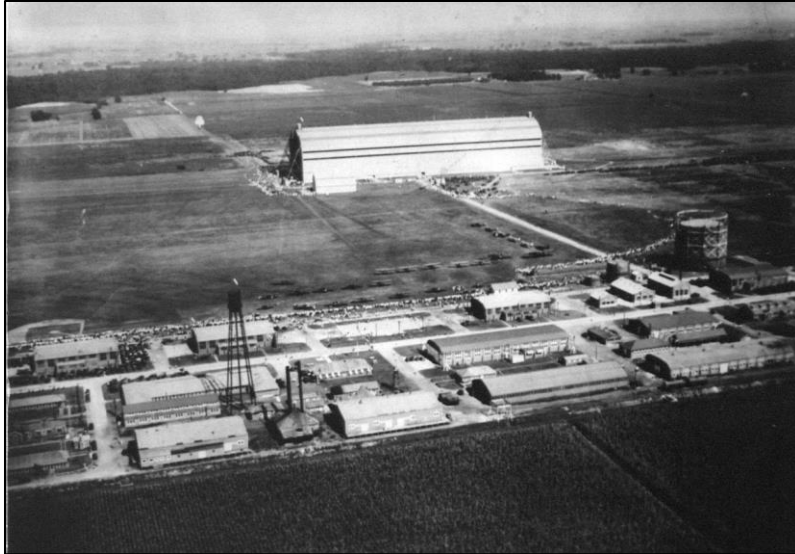
Sheppard Field was not unlike many bases in the country, scrambling to build accommodations for all these new recruits and to accommodate other operations. Ray and his comrades were quarantined for 2 weeks, so he was unable to do much socially, but spent his time taking aptitude tests for placement. He asked for a mechanic position, took the test, and received very good marks; he was feeling so confident, he asked to try the radio aptitude test and passed above average, though not as high as for mechanics. He said, "I talked a while and managed to get them to change me from mechanics to radio." While mechanics came naturally to him, he enjoyed radio work more and there was more potential for advancement, but he knew he'd have to work harder at it to be successful.



Scott Field, Illinois

Shortly thereafter, he shipped out and arrived at Scott Field, Illinois on January 6, 1942, for 22 weeks of radio school. He assumed he'd either end up as an instructor or doing some sort of specialty work, such as inspecting equipment. Some of his classmates had studied radio in college, so he was starting with a distinct disadvantage, but that didn't stop him. He just had to work harder.

⁷ Minnesota Historical Society, website, *Historic Fort Snelling* (www.HistoricFortSnelling.org)



Scott Field, aerial view
(photo originally from Scott Air Force Base History Office)



Radio Operating Class, Scott Field, Illinois



Communication School, and Tactical Procedure Class

Learning code seemed to give him a rough time throughout his training, but it was an important part of the skillset he needed. He said, “Listening to a code machine for 3 ½ hours a night is driving me goofy. You’ve heard it on short wave radio – Imagine having that in your ears for 3 ½ hours every night,” and “A fellow can feel ever so good but after three hours of struggle with code you walk out simply licked.” Still, his hope was to get a job as an instructor at this point, but that quickly changed. He couldn’t say much about it, but he was trying to get into another school when he was done at Scott Field. He told Lillian, “I’ll have to work like heck to make it but if I do I’m on the road and if I don’t I’m still no worse off than before and I will have had that much more schooling. If I pass I may get to be radio man on a bomber and fly all over heck...”

Ray’s thirst for learning earned him shared top honors in the exam results. His knack for mechanics helped as well: “It’s getting pretty rugged as we go along – we’re getting to where we work with some of the radio parts and it’s quite interesting – wish we had more time. That’s about the only reason I’d like to be an instructor. I could study as I taught and maybe learn something.” And sure enough, later on in his military education at Boca Raton, that’s exactly what happened.

He was enjoying a good social life in Illinois, attending dances for soldiers. He told of an interesting way to start the dance, with all the girls going out to a balcony, and the soldiers lined up inside. The next guy in line took the next girl to walk in. After that it was “every man for himself.”

About this time Ray’s interest in becoming an instructor was beginning to wane, although there were opportunities in the Midwest to teach at some of the new military schools popping up, including one in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, just two hours from his family. But, he said, he was beginning to want to “ride a bomber” because it’s “more exciting than trying to teach a bunch of dumb soldiers.”

Radio school was coming to an end, and while he was doing well, he was still struggling with code. “Still knocking the blazes out of there in school but code is driving me nuts. I’ll lick it or bust though before I leave. Here we get our diploma in one hand and our traveling orders in the other.”

On May 8 of 1942, that’s what happened to him – he left for the Army Air Forces Technical Training Command in Boca Raton, Florida, where new, secret technology was being developed for use in the war – radar. These new trainees, Ray among them, were hand-picked from a large group of volunteers to become radar observers (R/O). They were selected on their aptitude tests during school, high physical standards, and a background security check.⁸ The Army Air Corps had just moved this technical school from Scott Field to Boca Raton. In doing so, they needed land to build a new air field, and took over the small airport nearby. It was an ideal location, as the land was dry and well-elevated, but at the same time near to the ocean and good for flying. It was the Air Corp’s only airborne radar training facility during the war.

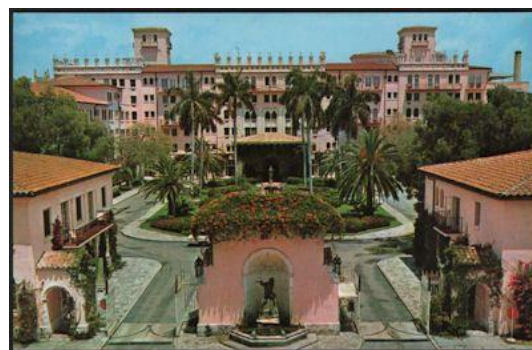
⁸ Eisel, Braxton. 2007. *Beaufighters in the night: the 417th Night Fighter Squadron USAAF*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword Aviation.

Unfortunately creating the new airfield had some challenges. The land contained a cemetery, so all bodies had to be moved to a new location; landowners had to be compensated under the Second War Purposes Act, requiring them to sell to their land to the government for a “fair price,” although not all of them were happy with what they were offered. Buildings were popping up everywhere, runways were being constructed, planes were there from all over to have radar installed, and soldiers were being trained in engineering, aerodynamics, and communications. Ray was there among all the activity; the official opening of the Boca Raton Army Air Field didn’t occur until five months later, in October.



Provost Marshall's office.⁹

Since buildings did not exist to house all these new students, the Boca Raton Hotel and Club, an Oceanside resort, was used with no complaints from the soldiers. While it provided much better accommodations than tents, the army had removed the luxury furnishings and replaced them with standard army fittings. The earlier soldiers had it good, but eventually eight soldiers were housed per room, and when they ran out of space, the golf course was used as a tent camp.¹⁰



Boca Raton Hotel and Club
Early Postcard

⁹ Photo in public domain, produced by U.S. Government
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boca_Raton_Army_Airfield#/media/File:Boca_Raton_Army_Airfield_-_Provost_Office.jpg

¹⁰ Boca Raton Historical Society & Museum, website, *Boca Raton Historical Society & Museum* (<http://www.bocahistory.org>). Accessed 05 December 2015.

This airfield was later destroyed by a tornado in 1947, and Florida Atlantic University and the Boca Raton Airport were built on the site.



Boca Raton base – photo taken by Raymond Christensen.



Ray, in front of one of the buildings at Boca Raton.



Ray, center front. Several of these men went on with Ray to become night fighters with the 417th NFS.

Ray describes the surroundings in his own words: “We live in a Millionaire’s paradise now. It is a large 700 room hotel a skip and a hop from the ocean. The place is so big you can put a whole air force inside, which we have and never seen them outside. We eat in a luxurious hardwood floor ballroom with big arched and decorated ceilings and a large lake right up to the large French windows, and surrounded on the other sides with palm trees and shrubs. Out front it is all fancy with statues – water fountains and decorative palms and hedges – flowers and everything you ever saw in a movie. We of course being new get hooked in what was servants quarters – even then we have our wash basin and water in our rooms and several tile bathrooms and showers a couple doors away. In a few weeks we will get to move out front in the nice guest rooms. They have carpets and inner spring mattresses – private bathrooms and French windows opening on a flowered balcony – large closets. The rooms used to rent for \$16 to \$20 a day just like they are, food and other things extra. There is a golf course right outside. Because it is summer there just aren’t any people around these parts so if we fall in love here it will have to be with a mermaid in the ocean.”

Regarding his actual work at Boca Raton, he couldn’t tell his family or friends what he was doing, but did mention that he would be sending a list of friends’ names to his sister. They were to be notified if anything should happen to him and that “this flying isn’t the healthiest job going.”

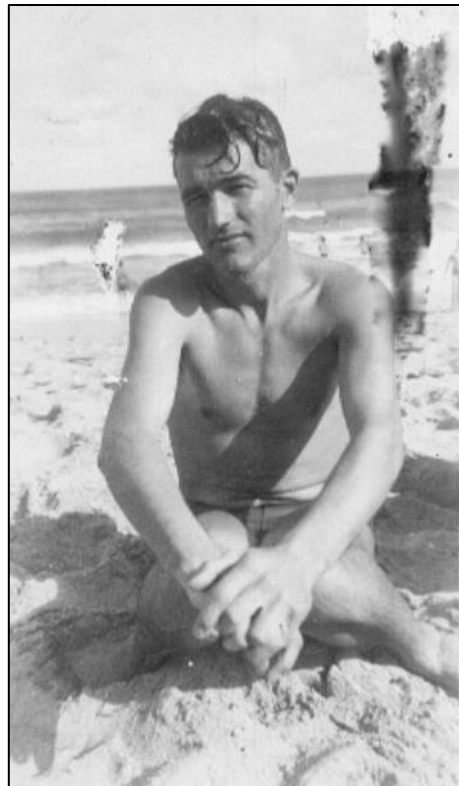
Despite working hard and putting in long hours, Ray found time for an active social life. He described a “shoe dance,” where the girls would throw one of their shoes in a pile, and each soldier would pick out a shoe, and find the girl wearing the other one. It was at such a dance where he met four sisters, and would spend a lot of time with their family over the following months – at the beach, horseback riding, etc.

Ray spent the next eight months expecting to be shipped out “any time now.” In the meantime, he went to gunnery school, learning to handle a machine gun shooting 1200 shots per minute. It “makes a hell of a noise,” Ray commented.

Also during his long stay in Boca Raton, he worked as an instructor. He said it was his job to “try to teach some bums how to kill Japs. I’m getting to be a pretty good instructor too. If the students keep teaching me things I’ll be pretty good after a while.” His enjoyment of the job turned sour when he thought it might be permanent. A few weeks later he wrote: “I am now, I believe, a permanent instructor. The double crossers gave us temporary jobs while we’re waiting to ship with the promise no strings attached. Now we read a bulletin, not asking us but telling us we are assigned. I think maybe I’ll make a fair instructor because I know my business fairly well but it’s too dry and we’re too far from nowhere.” It was clearly too routine to keep him interested.

Boca Raton Air Field was in the expansion stage at that time, buildings flying up everywhere. The new barracks were ready in October, and Ray said “our comfort isn’t what it used to be.” The new barracks was in wilderness – with sand, brush, mosquitoes, spiders, snakes, etc. He was still hopeful of “going across” [the ocean] since they know enough to really be useful, but was resigned to the idea that he might never get to go.

To console himself, he and several of the boys started up their own band and had a few dances. When they weren’t busy playing, Ray spent a lot of time at the beach. Below, left, he’s climbing a tree trying to get coconuts.



Ray applied for aerial gunnery school, certain that he'd get sent across if he had those credentials. "It's more dangerous, of course, as it calls for constant flying and a bit of excitement. But, they refuse to give us a break here so we are all taking off." The biggest complaint from the instructors was no chance of advancement in rank. While that part of the situation was a bone of contention, Ray liked to learn the new equipment, which he needed to do in order to teach it. The instructors would run experiments to learn as much about the equipment as possible, which he seemed to enjoy.

By November, 1942, Ray passed the aerial gunnery board, and was then a candidate for aerial gunnery school. That, and a physical, was all that was standing between him and combat. "It's a hell of a tough life," Ray said, "You live fast if not long."

It didn't take combat to make it a dangerous job. The training itself had its hazards. Ray describes: "We had a crack up here the other day. The damn plane didn't have a piece left any bigger than a chicken crate. The poor guy jumped and fell so hard he pushed a hole in the sand 3 ft. deep. Such is life." He also described the surrounding swamp land, and the dangers of having to bail from your plane for any reason – with alligators and snakes, there was plenty of peril on the ground as well as the air.

In November or December, Ray went off the "permanent list" of instructors, so was not eligible for the furlough he'd wanted to take for some time. On December 3, he shipped from Boca Raton to Tyndall Field at Panama City, Florida for his long anticipated aerial gunnery training. This was the same facility where Clark Gable took his gunnery training. He said, "We got our orders at 10 in the morning, packed, cleared the field and left in one hour. I was really sweating. That included traveling 4 miles round trip from where we got our orders to the squadron and back."

The men were bussed to Panama City, and upon their arrival were fed dinner, then they took a flight in a decompression chamber. "I went and ate too much," Ray explained, "so when I got up to 38,000 ft breathing pure oxygen I got sick. The lack of air makes your stomach fill with gas and it just pushed the food up. Some of the boys got air in their blood causing bends. They are very painful and almost make the fellows holler. Anyhow I'm going again in a day or so and see if I can't take it for 3 or 4 hours. If I get sick again I may get tossed out on my ear. That would be some fun after sneaking out on my last job. I left at 11:00 and was supposed to teach at class at 2:30... there are only two of us who know this new equipment good and the other boy is on a furlough."

Lucky for Ray, his second stint in the decompression chamber went better.

After his training was completed, it was back to Boca Raton to wait for his shipping orders; he went back to his job of learning new equipment and acting as an instructor. On Feb. 12, 1943, Ray was promoted to Staff Sergeant and given his Silver Wings.

Despite completing all the training he needed to head “across,” he was still uncertain. “I don’t know what is in the future. We have a rumor that we are supposed to start a new school and teach gunnery but we hope it is a false alarm. We all want to go over and see if we can hit a real Jap plane.”



Ray gave a good description of his flying clothes, as well as photos of himself all decked out and ready to fly. He said, “I have a complete sheep skin suit with zippers all over it so it can be opened inside. I’ve got a sheepskin helmet too with goggles and sunglasses. We also have sheepskin boots. You know up at 38,000 feet it gets about 50 degrees below zero.”

He also described some of the flying they did: “We flew in formations so close to each other one could have run the whole link of planes by stepping from one wing to the other. Then we would break and drop clear to the water and just skim the waves. Sometimes we played tag and run all over the sky. We gunners doing firing have to stand up with only one strap holding on to our parachutes. We can’t fall out but it gives us plenty [of] room to move around. I can work on the gun and not even pay any attention to which way the plane goes or which way is up.”

While Ray was concerned about being a permanent instructor, he needn’t have worried. On February 20, 1943, the 417th Night Fighter squadron, only the fourth of its kind, was activated at Kissimmee Air Base near Orlando, Florida.¹¹ The 417th, along with the 414th, 415th and 416th, were the first U. S. night fighters, so these men made history. Slowly, the 417th organized and added personnel. Ray Christensen would eventually be among them.

¹¹Daniel Whitney and Richard Ziebart, “417th Night Fighters.” <http://417th-nightfighters.com>: 2015. This website has an excellent collection of photographs, letters, videos, etc. pertaining to the 417th. There is also an extremely informative publication edited by Daniel Whitney, “417th NFS Illustrated History.”

Meanwhile, Ray waited and anticipated at Boca Raton. He was still going to school, but expected to ship out “any day now,” and he was still anticipating going to fight the Japanese. He even went so far as to speculate about a 2 day “rest” on his way to the west coast, stopping at his former home in St. Paul and then his parents’ home in South Dakota before heading to the west coast. However, the army had different plans. And unfortunately, Ray never got to have that last visit.

In the meantime, he put himself into his teaching. “I put on a different experiment for the boys in the class every day,” he wrote. “They are as good or better than I at operating but when it comes to inside [the equipment], the instructor sits down and I take over. I’m sure glad I was a mechanic before I started this last course. I’m darn near a one man aircrew by now. There isn’t anything I can’t do on it [the plane] but fly it and I have to do that before I go over. Somebody has to bring it back if they decide to shoot the pilot. I expect to spend 3 months at that and tactical school. This school business is gettin’ tiresome without any vacations.”

Ray was spending 12 hours a day at school at this time. He and another soldier asked for permission to do a special 10 week course, or at least as much as they had time to complete, before they left; they were anticipating completion in 4 weeks. As he said, “The more I learn the more there seems to be left to learn.” He was not going to complain about the long days, either, since he had asked for the chance to do this.

Ray’s sense of humor often showed when he wrote about their food and the cooks. For example, “There is supposed to be a big inspection of the field in general by some big boys so we had quite a meal today. First decent food in some time. Those damn cooks can cook if they have to. Hell, we even had butter for the first time since I came back, they tell me butter hasn’t been served for a month or so before that. Guess I’ve just got to get back to God’s Country where they raise cows – even if do I hate to milk ‘em. Also we eat so much mutton I’d be ashamed to look a good beef critter in the face. We do get enough and I’m still sporting a big middle.”

Ray didn’t elaborate on specifics regarding his career options, but he did say that he had several possibilities. Communications cadet seemed to be what he’s “set for,” but he didn’t really care to be an officer on the ground.

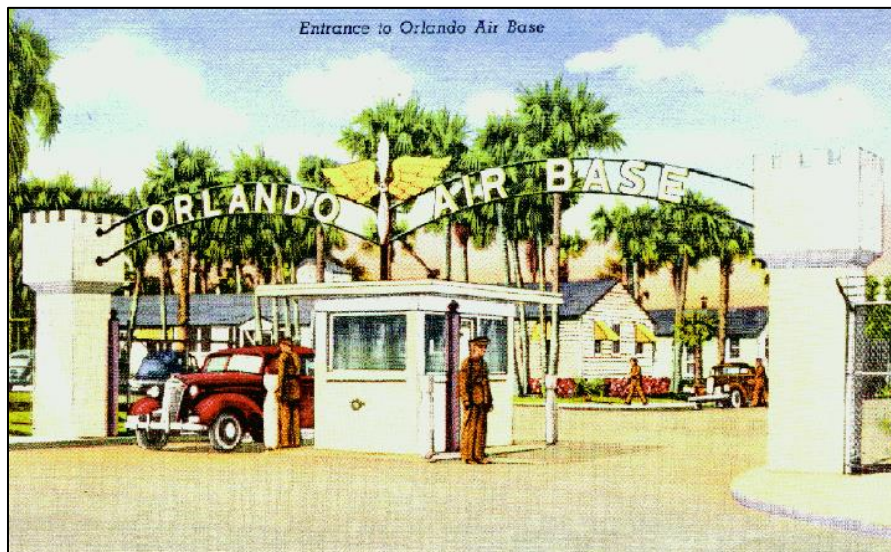
In early March, the first men were assigned to the 417th at Kissimmee, however none of these were radar observers. 38 enlisted men were added to the squadron that day and Capt. Joseph T. Ehlinger was assigned as Commanding Officer. Within the first two weeks, radar observers and others began to be added, including Paul Peyron, who would later write a book about the 417th¹², and Joe Leonard, a pilot from the 348th Fighter Training squadron at Orlando, Florida, who would eventually team up with Ray. Personnel in the early days of the 417th were said to change continually, as some men changed their minds and wanted out, while others decided they wanted in. Once

¹² Peyron, Paul. *C'est La Guerre*. Baker City: Professional Help Press, 1993. Print.

assigned to the squadron, the dangers of the job became very real, and since this was an all-volunteer unit, transfers were granted.

Ray's time finally came in late March, 1943, when he was officially sent to Orlando Air Base. He said, "I've made one more step and here I am at Orlando Air Base. This may mean 'goodbye' for a while. It is almost certain that I don't get that furlough on this side. Don't blame the army too much. I haven't of course told you what kind of work I do and probably won't until the end of the war, however the front lacks men of our training and to such an extent that we can't be given too much personal consideration. A slight indication of this can be seen in our welcome here. We came on secret orders so of course no one knew when or where. Our definite orders always follow us so there will be no "tip offs" in advance. When they found out who we were several outfits started maneuvering to get us in their outfits. The officers walk up and greet us with a smile. I think when it is all settled and the dust blown away we will be in a pretty decent outfit and on our way over."

Most of the crew trained on P-70 planes, described here in Ray's own words: "The type of plane we use is devilishly fast and tricky and so the boys have a lot of work to do before they can feel at home in them. Even so we seldom ever have a crash. At this base they train a lot of the boys before we get them and in their early training some of 'em forget to land on the wheels. They are pretty good fellows to know. Of course we hold their lives in the palm of our hand along with our own so they have a healthy respect for us and really go out of their way to be friends."



Orlando Air Base
(courtesy of 417th-NightFighters.com)

The whole process of shipping out happened swiftly: "We move so fast and on such short notice that we stay packed most of the time. I can be ready to move in 15-20 minutes... I shipped out of there [Boca Raton] with a 3 hours' notice. I was in the

dentist chair at the time and couldn't get back to my barracks for an hour. So I really had to move. And because it was Saturday (darn it) I stood up a very nice date."

By April 1, Ray and other radar observers had been called to join the 417th at Kissimmee Air Field, a sub-base of Orlando; these men were hand-picked from the school at Boca Raton. Joining Ray were his good friends William "Willie" Henderson and Joe Van Laecken. All of these men had graduated from Air Force radio school and then the radar school at Boca Raton. They had learned theory and operation of the SCR540 radar, and some had even learned the experimental SCR520 radar, which was still being developed. Ray, as well as a few others, was an "Aircraft to Surface Vessel" graduate.¹³

The general purposes of the 417th were to protect US convoys as they moved overnight, and to disrupt similar movement of the enemy. They would also need to engage in air-to-air combat.¹⁴

Of the conditions as Kissimmee, Ray said they slept in 6-man tents, they had excellent food, and breakfast on demand, which suited Ray, who loved to sleep late. "The kitchen is in a building and we have nice showers and etc. or concrete and in buildings. The rest of the outfit is all in tents." They engaged in some night flying while there, and as Ray described it: "It is nice in the day time but at night so much prettier. The everglades have fires that burn all the time. I don't know what starts them. From the sky they make brilliant figures in oranges, and the pools of water reflect the light from the moon and stars. All the towns are lighted here so they also show up. Light beacons, for the planes to follow are flashing all over the place, and there you sit just you and the plane. One really appreciates a radio when you make that ground call and get an answer. You really don't know what lonesome is until you have been lost up here and nobody answers your call. You don't know where you are or what's wrong. Then when that good old ground station finally comes through you could just kiss the old radio all over. It's quite a sensation to approach a landing and see only a string of colored lights to guide you. If you ever miss the runway in this sand you are sunk. We don't have many accidents considering the amount of flying that we do. It is usually the new pilots who make the mistakes. Once they have flown our planes awhile they are O.K. All over pilots are good and perfectly at home in the air."

And regarding the planes: "The type of plane we fly cruises at about 220 miles an hour and lands over 100 miles an hour. It takes a pretty good man to handle a plane close to ground at that speed. At that, there are worse planes being used for as tricky handling is concerned."

Describing the terrain, Ray said: "You should see the everglades in the day time. Just clumps of trees surrounded by muck and water. It's the most desolate scene I have ever witnessed. There's not a sign of life or road or trail all the way across. When you fly over and think of jumping out for a forced landing you imagine the place is just full of alligators and snakes. Thank goodness we don't jump often."

¹³ Daniel Whitney and Richard Ziebart, "417th Night Fighters.com"

¹⁴ Daniel Whitney and Richard Ziebart, "417th Night Fighters.com"

“A funny thing happened to a boy – a friend I went to school with last summer. They got wrong directions and went out over the ocean and before they got straightened out they ran out of gas. They were almost back when that happened. Anyhow, he jumped. It was pitch dark and his parachute caught in a tree and he just dangled there. He hung for a whole hour before he got nerve enough to drop to ground. He couldn’t see the ground and had no idea how far down it was. He let loose and dropped 2 feet. He was almost standing on the ground all the time.”

Again in Kissimmee, as in Boca Raton, Ray had no idea how long they would be there, and lived from day to day.

As time went on, Ray decided he’d better do more air time, at least 4 hours a day, so he could feel at home in the plane before he goes over. “I still get a thrill when the plane drops a couple hundred feet. I’d like to get over that so I won’t be distracted while I’m working. I never think about the plane when I’m working with the guns. A lot of times I’ve looked up and saw ground and had to think a minute before I realized I was flying upside down.”

“Flying is funny. Most of our ground crew don’t envy us a bit. In fact they’re half afraid to fly. Flying is all voluntary nobody can make you do it. I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

While Ray was tending to his career and training, his mother and sister Lillian handled most of his business. Every month, Ray would send money home with instructions for his mother to purchase bonds with it in both their names, if she didn’t need that money for herself.



The first patch of the 417th
(courtesy of 417th-NightFighters.com)

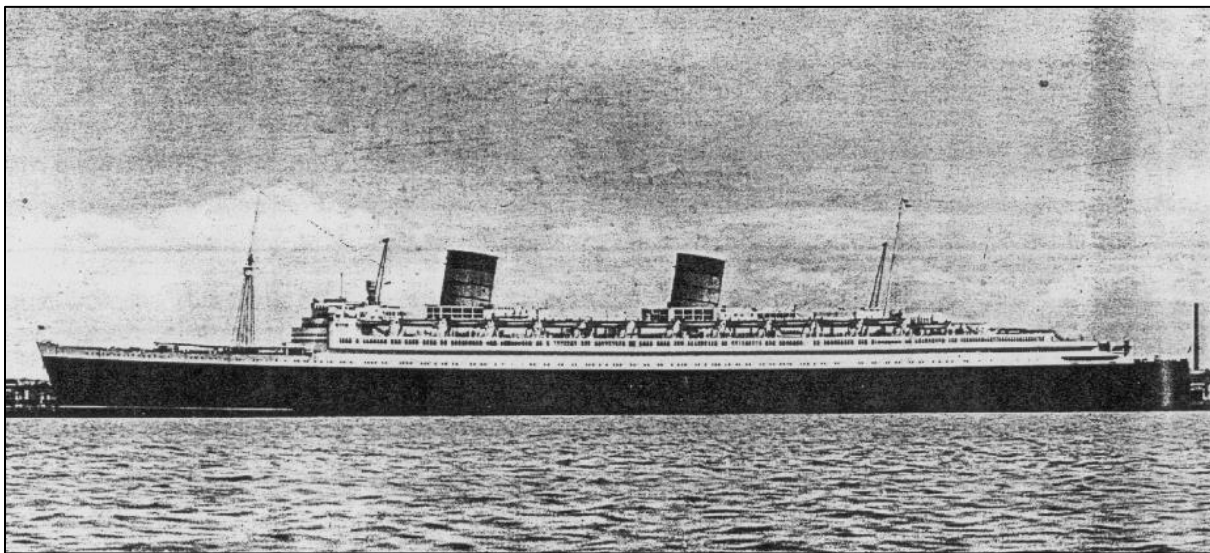
The time spent waiting at Kissimmee wasn’t wasted; paperwork was being completed, they attended lectures on security, physicals were given and immunizations administered; men were “checked out” with the weapons they’d been assigned, equipment was double-checked, gas mask drills were conducted, and insurance and pay allotment paperwork was completed.

On April 26, 1943, the 417th left Kissimmee on secret orders, for an eventual landing in England. GI trucks loaded the men from the air base and transported them to the railroad station, where the coaches were loaded. The train took them into Orlando, where the 416th joined them. The rest of the train ride took overnight, with the squadron cooks having their own equipped cars. Morale was high; meals were good, and cigars

and cigarettes were provided. The train stopped at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, for more organizing. On board were 33 officers and 235 enlisted men.¹⁵

The men stayed at Camp Kilmer for eight days; last-minute dental checkups and procedures were done, inspections were made and weapons checked, and any last-minute immunizations needed were administered. Eventually the men were allowed to make phone calls, but not permitted to mention their location, nor their destination, though most had no idea where they were headed anyway.

The morning of May 4, the troops were told to “get ready.” Later that afternoon, both the 417th and the 416th boarded a train for Brooklyn, New York. They unloaded and then boarded a ferry to get across the Hudson river; by that time, it was dark, and the New York City skyline, though dimmed for security reasons, was still “impressive.” A Red Cross brass band greeted them as they marched into the awaiting ship, the Queen Elizabeth, and workers gave the men hot coffee, doughnuts, cigarettes and candy.



The Queen Elizabeth
(courtesy of 417th-NightFighters.com)

The Queen Elizabeth was a former ocean liner, and the world’s largest ship. The trip aboard this huge vessel was anything but comfortable, however, as it had been mostly stripped of any luxuries and fitted for transporting 20,000 soldiers at any given time. Because of the speed of the ship, no convoy protection was needed despite the large number of submarines in the Atlantic Ocean. It was also equipped with radar, cannons, and numerous other modes of protection. For additional safety, the ship took an indirect, “zig-zag” course to her destination.

¹⁵ The bulk of the information on their travel to England is from www.417th-NightFighters.com

There were 17,000 people aboard the ship - English, Canadian, and American soldiers, nurses, civilians, and even touring movie stars. The 417th went to the top deck, which was as crowded as the others, and the men were taken to their assigned quarters. Each stateroom had 5 triple-decker bunks, and 30 enlisted men were assigned to each stateroom, which meant that half of the men were without beds. Many men slept on the cold, open deck, alternating so that each man got a bed every other night. Entertainment consisted of dice and card games. American cigarettes could be purchased, but were expensive; chocolate bars were also available for purchase.

The ship stayed docked until the following morning, when it embarked on the six-day journey.

As was usual, the officers ate in the dining salon, which was still luxurious, with good food. The enlisted men did not have it so good, eating mediocre food in one of the galleys.

Overall the trip went well, with only one rough day at sea. On May 12, 1943, the ship arrived at Scotland, having traveled around the west and north coasts of Ireland, and then down into the Firth of Clyde, one of the world's largest natural harbors. They dropped anchor just outside of the city of Grennock, and tugboats made their way to the ship to take people ashore, although the 417th were not scheduled to leave the ship until the next morning.

After hitting land, the 417th left immediately by train for a night fighter training unit in Ayr, Scotland. They arrived around 4 pm, and at 6:30 the radar observers got an order to be ready to board a train by 7 pm. Luckily they had not had time to unpack. Shortly thereafter, orders were received for the entire air echelon, not just the R/Os, to be on the train at 7. Due to the extreme short notice, there was no time to load their baggage nor procure tickets, and the train would not wait. The next train was at 5 pm the following day.

The reason for the transfer was that the American air crews would not be flying the P-70s they trained on – the Bristol Beaufighter, an English plane, was considered to be far superior. Also, the Beaus were equipped with Mark IV radar, similar to the SCR540 radar that the R/Os had learned, but still requiring additional training.



Ray in England

It was decided that squadron would proceed to England, but would be split, with the pilots, headquarters personnel, and Commanding Officer sent to Twinwood, a Royal Air Force base, to get experience with the Beaufighters – there was a lot to learn and a lot to un-learn from flying the P-70s. The R/Os went to an RAF AI Observers School at Usworth to learn the Mark IV radar. The RAF flew daily missions, bombing enemy locations, so both Twinwood and Usworth were hotspots for attack by the Luftwaffe, and they were indeed attacked. Bombings were commonplace enough, Ray once wrote, that the Brits didn't get too excited about it.



Bristol Beaufighters
(source unknown)

The Beaufighter was nicknamed “The Ten-Gunned Terror”¹⁶, and the Japanese referred to it as “Whispering Death”¹⁷. It had four 20mm cannons mounted in the forward fuselage, and 6 .303 machine-guns in the wings. It could carry an 18” torpedo outside of the plane under the fuselage, plus 8 high explosive rockets in place of the wing guns. The Beau could also be adapted as a bomber, carrying 250lb and 500lb bombs. The build of the plane could also easily accommodate radar equipment.

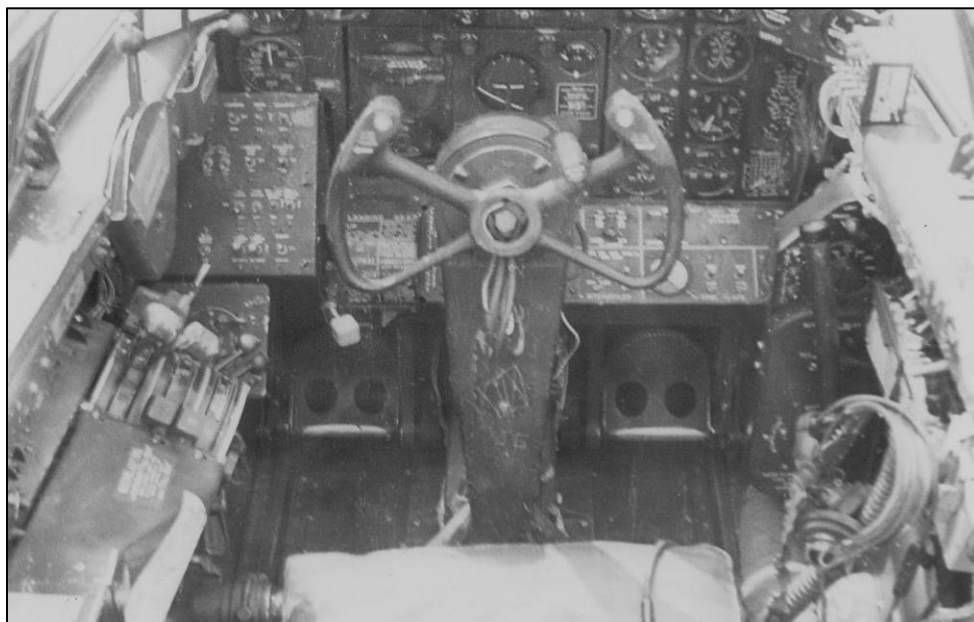
The maximum speed of the Beaufighter was 309 mph, which wasn’t terribly impressive for a daytime fighter, but fine for night work. Overall, it was a successful plane for this job.

However – they were “clunky” and hard to fly. Brakes were frequently faulty. Gas lines could rupture on takeoff and landing due to their placement, so if things weren’t done just right, explosion could result. Parts were hard to come by, and most of the Beaus the 417th had were castoffs, replaced by the Royal Air Force with newer models.

Early radar used 2 scopes, one displaying azimuth (left/right) and the other displaying elevation, both in relation to their own plane. The radar observers had to be able to quickly assimilate the frequently changing data, and tell the pilot what was happening. In short, the R/O had to tell the pilot how high, how fast, and in which direction to fly.

¹⁶ World Record Diving Malta, <http://worldrecorddivingmalta.blogspot.com/2015/07/maltas-divesites-bristol-beaufighter.html>

¹⁷ Entry for “Bristol Beaufighter.” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bristol_Beaufighter



Beaufighter pilot cockpit
(Photo courtesy of 417th-NightFighters.com)

On May 22, 1943, the 417th suffered its first casualty – Pilot McClain and his R/O Joe Hendershott, and a mechanic, Cpl. Dyer, were coming back from air-to-sea firing, and crashed. Hendershott was the only survivor, but he was hospitalized and ultimately he transferred out of the squadron.

In the first part of June, the 417th, which had been split apart in England, were brought together in Scorton, England, sharing a British air base. At this point, pilots and R/Os teamed up, Ray with pilot Joe Leonard. As Ray described the implications: “I’ve got quite a bit of faith in my pilot and we get along as well as anybody could with me. We’ve got to have perfect teamwork to live out this blessed war, so we pay as much attention in our teaming up as we would to getting married – probably more. In this case “until death do us part” doesn’t seem to lend any humor to the situation whatever.”



The above photos are Ray Christensen, possibly taken during his time in England.

The pilot and R/O were not the only vital members of the team – the ground radar controller was also an important component. *Conquering the Night* by Stephen McFarland, had this to say: “Obviously, teamwork was critical. The ground control radar fighter controller could see things the airborne crew could not. The rule in most squadrons was ‘no night fighter unit is any better than its control.’ Pilot and R/O combined two pairs of eyes, each having a separate responsibility. The pilot had to make smooth consistent turns, whether hard or gentle, or the R/O, with his eyes focused on a small scope, would become confused.” Giving a specific example of a well-paired crew, he noted that the pilot could always tell when his R/O made radar contact because “he began to breathe hard.”¹⁸

Ray spent several months in England, and liked what he saw. “The country side is pretty. It’s all green and fenced with no waste land whatever. There are a lot of villages with quite a few public houses “pubs” or “beer joints” to you. We have bicycles most of the time.” The British civilians were stoic about the attacks on their country – they just went about their lives regardless of the bombings, Ray said. He toured the parts of London that were bombed, as well as saw other typical tourist sites. He also noted the irony in that the British helped them celebrate July 4th.

The British were just as intrigued with the Americans: “The places we have been have seen their first Americans when we came along. Some of the people were sure they wouldn’t like us and were prepared to just treat us civil. In a week or so we were being invited out for tea and what not and left good friends and liked us as well as we

¹⁸ McFarland, Stephen Lee. *The U.S. Army Air Forces in World War II: Conquering the Night : Army Air Forces Night Fighters at War*. Washington, DC: Air Force History and Museums Program:1998. Print.

could wish for. The people have the queerest idea of what an American is like. They expect us to be like movie film people and we are all supposed to be jitterbugs. At least we can change that opinion.”

In a letter back home, Ray said, “We have a lot of crazy little incidents that would be interesting but will have to wait until I get that furlough back home. If I last through a couple hundred hours of playing with Hitler’s air crews I’ll probably be dragging along home.” He hoped that this would be his last letter as a Sergeant – and it was. Six days later, Ray was promoted to Flight Officer, traveling to Ajax (near London) to get his ratings as F/O and to buy his new uniform at the London PX. “It’s traditional in the Air Force to christen a new hat so mine got it a couple nights ago. We don’t wear braces in them and so we shape the hat in some beat up form and they won’t shape until wet. Usually it’s beer but mine had a dignified christening with soda water. Bill Henderson – my buddy – done the squirting with one of these affairs and the aforementioned angel [girl he met] held the hat. I thought they were kidding until the hat filled up with soda water. A hell of a way to keep up official dignity.”



Above: The new Flight Officers in their uniforms. Ray is in the back row, second from right.
(courtesy of 417th-NightFighters.com)

The 417th procured 12 Beaufighters from the RAF; these were older, war-weary Beaus that were being replaced. Getting replacement parts for them was a challenge. The mechanics would need to use all their creativity to repair any part they possibly could.

With that, the 417th was off to its first assignment.

North Africa

The 417th was officially be off and running on July 31, 1943. 12 of the 18 air crews took the 12 Beaufighters to Portreath, England, where they'd take off for their new assignment in Africa. The remainder of the squadron, which included Ray and his pilot, would follow by air or boat.

"Home" would be Tafraoui Air Base, just south of Oran, Algeria. The major duties of the squadron would be, besides night fighting, convoy patrols, patrolling coasts, and reconnaissance. They flew their first mission on the day they arrived.

Besides direct combat, one of the things that made this job so dangerous was that German planes flew very low, because the Mediterranean Sea caused clutter to show up on the radar, allowing them to fly undetected. When blips were spotted by the ground radar controller, a 417th air crew would be sent after it to investigate, but would have to fly as low as possible to visually identify the aircraft. The best method was to silhouette the plane against the sky from below, and use size and shape to make identification. This must be done before any firing could take place to prevent shooting down an allied plane. This put the patrol plane in a good position for avoiding radar detection as well. The best shots were taken from below the target, so while flying low was advantageous for several reasons, it also made the situation extremely dangerous. It was the radar observer who would typically have the best vantage point for identification. However, frequently a blip that was seen by the ground radar controller would disappear before the patrol could get there.

The Tafraoui air field was shared with British troops, and the "Free French" flying P-39s, which ended up being a great benefit to the initial 417th squadron members to arrive. The remainder of the squadron had been held up for quite some time, and that included supplies, so they had to borrow supplies and blankets from the RAF, and had to eat in the RAF mess halls, which was not particularly enjoyable for an American palate, but better than nothing.



Map data ©2016 Google, Inst. Geogr. Nacional

Left: map showing the approximate location of Tafraoui Air field, indicated by the purple "X" just south of Oran.

Photos of the 417th at Tafraoui

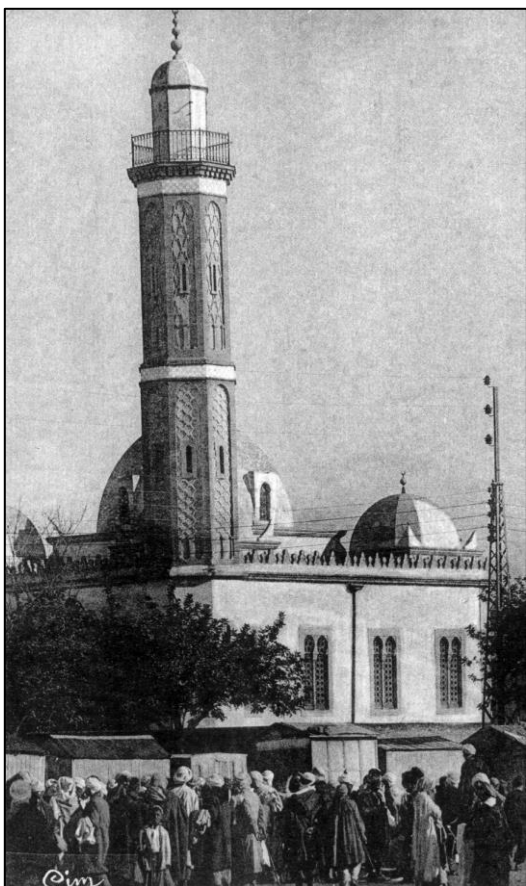


Roll Call at Tafraoui
(courtesy of 417th-NightFighters.com)



Mess hall
(courtesy of 417th-NightFighters.com)

The living conditions in Taфраoui were primitive, to say the least. They lived in tents, and latrines were simply benches placed over large pits. Showers were open-air, consisting of Lister bags hung from a post or tree, however, there was a hot spring nearby as well as a river.



Oran Market
(courtesy of 417th-NightFighters.com)

Ray described Oran, the nearby city, as follows: "The architecture here is quite modern looking and the streets quite wide. The poorer class of natives inhabit the older parts of the city, but they are off limits to Army personnel. One couldn't possibly imagine the sights in one of these areas. There are Arabs lying in the street in the blazing sun with flies all over him. He is unwashed, ragged, no one bothers him, he is left to finish his siesta as he sees fit. No sight disturbs the calm and steady movement of pedestrians. Either a man is just lying around or he has an objective. There seems to be a singleness of purpose like an ant – an utter lack of imagination or interest in events around about. There is every type of uniform and insignia from all the allied countries, jeeps – cars – trucks – donkeys with huge loads or carts ridden by natives – horses – oxen hitched to all types of odd vehicles. The better class Arab in flowing gown and turban, veiled women – quite a number of civilian whites and me. A hell of a mess if I ever saw one."

"This is the most interesting place I have ever been. England was much nicer to live in but this country is so different. I've seen about everything from dirty ragged beggars, sheeted Arabs, veiled women, little donkeys laboring under immense loads, oxen plowing six oxen to a plow, oxen and horses hooked together on a wagon, to every kind of clothes imaginable. I believe North Africa has people and customs from all over the world. These French women and half-caste Arabs and whatever other combinations there may be are the most beautiful women I have ever seen. The boys just stand with their mouths open and watch them walk by - me too. They wear very little clothes and are perfect specimens of health and build. Their skin is a beautiful golden brown and they walk like queens and damn – I can't talk a word of French... They don't flirt like women elsewhere in the world but must be met formally – the better class."



One of the 417th soldiers with natives at Tafraoui.
(courtesy of 417th-NightFighters.com)

Once the entire 417th was together at Tafraoui with their supplies, the men could eat American rations again instead of the British rations, which were prepared according to British tastes. “The boys haven’t been so happy for some time,” Ray said. “I expect to gain a few pounds soon.”

The North African climate was something Ray, and the other men, found distasteful, at least during daylight hours when temperatures could reach 110. “About 30 minutes in this blazing sun will toast anybody to a nice brown crisp. It does get delightfully cool at night so sleeping is a pleasure even for us who get most of ours in the mornings.”

“The flies bother much more than the heat. I never saw such persistent devils. If you swat at them they just move aside and light in the same spot again. They usually try to get in your mouth – eyes – nose and ears. It’s funny to see the boys brush their face with a hand and see the flies just back off and then light again. It’s something like the flies at home just before a rain. However, here it’s all the time. There are only a few mosquitos at night but because of malaria they are considered more dangerous than a larger number anywhere else. We eat quinine every day to be safe.”

One of Ray's comrades wrote a poem about North Africa –

“Somewhere near Oran, Where the sun is like a curse,
And each day is usually followed By another slightly worse;
Where the brick-red dust blows thicker Than the shifting desert sands;
Where a Yank man dreams and wishes For greener, fairer lands.

Somewhere near Oran, Where women are never seen;
Where the sky is never cloudy And the grass is never green;
Where the jackal's nightly howl Robs a man of blessed sleep;
Where there isn't any whisky, and the beer is never cheap.

Somewhere near Oran, Where the mail is always late;
Where a Christmas card in April Is considered up-to-date;
Where we never receive a pay-day, And we never have a cent.
But we never miss the money, Because we never have it spent.

Somewhere near Oran, Where the snakes and lizards play;
Where a thousand more flies Replace the ones you slay.
Please, take me to my hometown, And let me hear a church bell;
For this God-forsaken outpost Is a substitute for hell.¹⁹

Ray continued, “Little do the U.S. people know what rationing is, much less war. I've only had a sample and that wasn't good. Some of the events here that never get back to the U.S. would make your flesh crawl.”

A bright spot in these desolate surroundings was the Red Cross. Ray was grateful for all that they offered to soldiers – “programs from speech classes to dancing – a swell place to kill a few hours and certainly an oasis for me out there. A credit to the organization.”

“Tonight there's a show on at our Amphitheatre. I think it's one of these touring companies who come around to give the old morale a boost. They are darn good shows too. We have a movie every other night. The films aren't the latest but we haven't seen them before so it doesn't make much difference. We saw “Random Harvest” the other night and it was really a swell show.”

And much to Ray's delight, nurses and WACS were on their way to the area.

¹⁹ Daniel Whitney and Richard Ziebart, “417th Night Fighters.”



The movie screen, with the men lining up for mess, and their tent city in the background.
(courtesy of 417th-NightFighters.com)



Home – a tent – in Taфраoui, 1943
(courtesy of 417th-NightFighters.com)



The Tent City
(courtesy of 417th-NightFighters.com)

Within the first month at Tafraoui, the squadron experienced its second fatal crash. As the crew was returning from a dawn patrol, they crashed into a mountaintop several miles from home, and both crewmen were killed.

Initially the 417th was being asked to do convoy and harbor patrols during the day as well as at night, which spread them thin. There was a French squadron available for the daytime work, and eventually it was shifted there, taking some of the pressure off the 417th. However, they had more hours flown than any other night fighter squadron due to that situation.²⁰

The work schedule was a three-day rotation – one day on, one day on-call, and one day off. Ray explains, “At present I’m on the alert. We spend 24 hours all dressed and ready to go play with the boys if they get nosey. Then we have 24 hours off and then 24 hours on call for big action. It’s lovely country to fly in, especially at night. It gets so dark you can’t even see the wing tips, even though the stars do shine. Imagine little “Jerry” up there not being able to see and expecting to get a pantfull of hot lead any minute. No wonder flyers haven’t got any nerves left after a war. It’s good fun though I wouldn’t trade for any other branch of the service.”

But the 3-day rotation made it difficult to keep the days straight. “This seven day war business is funny. It usually takes at least 3 or 4 fellows to argue out just which day it is. They all look alike to us,” Ray wrote.

As for daytime work around the base, “After noon everything settles down to peace and quiet. The boys try to get most of the work done in the morning while it’s still cool. We are mostly a night fighter group but also play with Fritzies in the day time if they come over in our yard. It’s amusing to see that dispersal come to life when the signal comes through. From dead sleep the boys dive for their airplane – start it – get fastened in – check it down the runway and are cutting clouds in 3 to 5 minutes out of

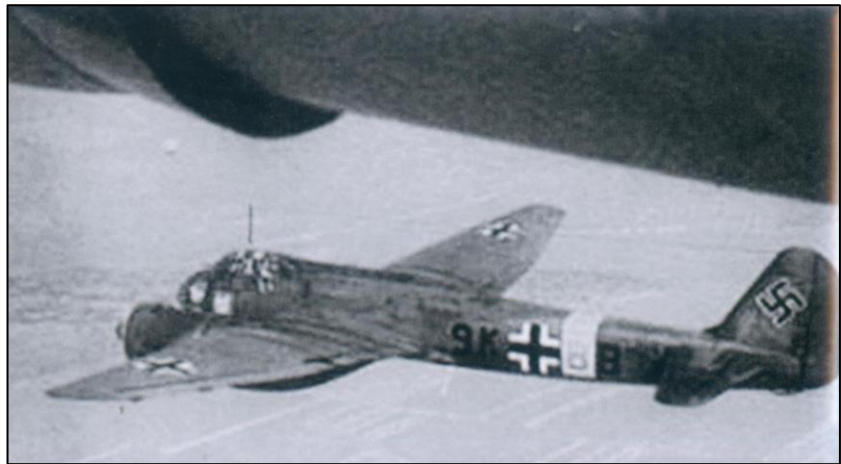
²⁰ Daniel Whitney and Richard Ziebart, “417th Night Fighters.”

sight. We have a sort of game on to see who can get off the quickest. It makes it fun and also gives good results.

Missions could be anything from routine, to “hair-raising,” as Ray described them. Even just landing the plane after an uneventful night’s work could take years off one’s life. “What’s worse than Germans is trying to come back over the mountains and land with clouds and fog clear down to the ground. That’s when I’ve really got work to do. Between the two of us we usually make it. It’s a nice feeling to feel those wheels bump on the ground and hang there. The plane only weighs 10 tons so we don’t always land too easy at that.” To settle the nerves, liquor was “a standard-issue item for crews returning from patrols.”²¹ In addition, the camp doctor also doubled as a psychiatrist.



The view from the R/O's position, toward the cockpit.²²



A Ju88, the most commonly encountered enemy plane. It was used as a bomber, a night-fighter, and a reconnaissance plane.²³

²¹ Eisel, Braxton. *Beaufacturers in the Night: The 417th Night Fighter Squadron USAAF*. Pg. 58. Barnsley: Pen & Sword Aviation, 2007. Print.

²² This photo was taken from Lt. Col. Braxton “Brick” Eisel’s book, *Beaufacturers in the Night*, with permission.

²³ This photo was taken from Lt. Col. Braxton “Brick” Eisel’s book, *Beaufacturers in the Night*, with permission



The 417th Night Fighter Squadron, U. S. 12th Air Force. Original Squadron Aircrews
Tafraoui, Algeria. Fall, 1943
(photo from the collection of Raymond Christensen)

Front Row: John Clemmens*, John S.M. Lee*, Joseph Leonard*, Sam Hooten, Robert Swift*, John Fenimore, George Allen

2nd Row: Rayford Jeffreys, Clarence Fuller*, Walter Groom, Joseph Ehlinger, Ken Nelson, Harold Roth, Tony Speir.

3rd Row: Howard Kohrman*, Roy Hall, William Henderson, Herman Stirnus, Joseph Draper, William Roble, Alexander McQueen*, Dan Cordell, Raymond Christensen*, Thaddeus Kulpinski, Joseph Van Laecken, Theodore Deakyne, John Kirwan, Leonard Potter*, William Larsen, Richard McCray.²⁴

*Killed

Note: Of these 40 original members of the air crew, nine were killed or failed to return from a mission. This is only about an 80% survival rate, and while this data may or may not hold true over the 417th air crew as a whole, it does illustrate just how dangerous this work was.

²⁴ Identification from *C'est La Guerre* (Peyron), and *Beaufacturers in the Night* (Eisel)



The "Strawberry Roan"
(courtesy of 417th-NightFighters.com)

While the squadron was stationed in North Africa, they acquired an old B-25 bomber, nicknamed the "Strawberry Roan." The mechanics got it in good flying condition and used it to travel throughout the Mediterranean in search of Beaufighter parts, which were in short supply. This might have been the closest thing to a leave that the men got. "There's no place to go and get rooms, so you can't take a furlough even if you did get one. The hotel rooms are used by the Army for 'men on the move,'" Ray explained. His other idea for a break: "Guess I'll have to do like some of the locals do – just curl up and go to sleep anywhere."

It was the first week of September, after a month in Tafraoui, that the 417th got its "first taste of Jerry," when Kirwan and Van Laecken damaged a German Ju88 plane.

Relaying news and handling their personal business was challenging for the soldiers; Ray had been in North Africa for six weeks before his parents received the news of his new location. Ray had to begin coordinating with his mother and sister for Christmas shopping early. He complained more than once about the price and quality of the gift items for sale in Oran. "We can't buy a single thing over here anywhere in reason. Even at the best prices there's nothing but junk." So the communication on Christmas gifts to be purchased on his account began in September. Mail was rarely delivered promptly, and sometimes not at all. Just before Christmas, the Germans attacked and sunk the mail boat off the North African coast. Morale sunk with it.

The men always appreciated getting a package from family and friends. Besides candy, gum was a big item, used when flying. Other things Ray requested were gloves for flying, and a good police whistle. "I only have one and if I lose it I'm sunk. They are to attract attention when floating in a dingy – assuming of course you can get into the darn thing. After a few days without water you can't yell but you can still blow a whistle." He also requested a boy scout knife or heavier one along the same lines. "I want to

fasten it to my life saving equipment so I'll have it if I happen to fall in some out of the way joint. You can do a lot of things with those."

And still the distaste for North Africa continued. Ray wrote: "As usual it's hot as blazes. It never varies. I'm beginning to wonder why they bothered to take the blooming country away from the Germans. I think we should play them a dirty trick and give it back." By the time he had been there six weeks, he was ready to leave. "I'm more or less fed up with the country here. There's just nothing to do. I give up on French again – it isn't worth the effort to learn it. It's a hell of a note to have to sit out on a moon light night with nothing but an airplane to make love to but the boss says sit there and so there we sit just awaiting for lil old Jerrys."

The beach was one bright spot in the arid climate. "I took a swim in the Mediterranean Sea the other day. It was a grand beach," Ray said, "The water was very clean and the bottom was pure sand. The officers have a sort of club there where we can buy sandwiches and get some pretty decent lemonade too; we can sit and look at the nurses."

Ray summed up the war this way, "The surrender of Italy only means a few less Italians to content with – of course, every little bit helps. This war business is the craziest thing you ever saw. The Germans bomb their men – our men shoot at us and a hell of a lot of people get hurt and somebody decides who won – beats me."

The locals found ways to get their hands on some American cash. Besides the markup on gift items, local women charged the men for laundry services - \$1.00 for washing and ironing a shirt, which is about \$14 in today's money²⁵. These businesses were run by the French, who hired local Arabs to do the work at about 10 cents an hour.

The food was a mixed bag: "We get cigarettes and candy pretty cheap. The food is getting to be swell, especially the meat. We don't have any fresh potatoes so we don't eat any, just dehydrated stuff that tastes terrible. We have good beans – peas – and canned fruit such as pears – peaches & etc. Spinach too. We also get good bread. The butter tastes like lard – they have to put stuff in it to keep it from melting – anyhow it's butter. Best of all we get catsup to go with the roasts, steaks and what not. Quite a bit of good hamburger too. Occasionally we have to eat up the corned beef and spam. The squadrons who aren't operating from here have to live on C rations and that ain't good," Ray wrote.

For a short time in October, Ray was apparently living with a British squadron in a building, probably a hotel, giving him a reprieve from tent life. He and the pilot he worked with somehow managed to get a room by the swimming pool, although on the nights they're on alert they had to sleep by their plane. Otherwise, Ray made himself at home by doing a little customization. "So today I fixed the joint up. I made a clothes

²⁵ "Calculate the Value of \$100 by Year - Inflation on 100 Dollars - DollarTimes.com." *Calculate the Value of \$100 by Year - Inflation on 100 Dollars - DollarTimes.com*. Web. 27 Dec. 2015.

closet – swiped another one – also a table & etc. I doubt that all the pounding I did helped the boys next door with their sleep. If they had been Americans, I'd probably have been massacred, but these English boys just aren't too sure how far they dare go. Of course, we keep them bluffed as long as we can."

"The room is pretty nice. I've got to swipe a screen door though before it's perfect. We have cold water running in our wash basin – we use our own army cots. Mine's getting a sag in the canvas that lets my hips drop down about a foot. Maybe I can steal another one of those. Brother Hitler should give us a bit more business now so maybe we can stay awhile, I hope."

In October of 1943, the island of Corsica was liberated by Free French forces. This is significant, as Corsica's location made it an excellent place for Allied forces. This liberation may not have taken place without the involvement of Corsica's citizen army.²⁶

The citizens had watched as French North Africa was liberated and the allies moved in, and they waited and hoped for something similar to happen in their country. While the Germans threatened them with death, their allegiance to France was stronger than their fear, and they continued to organize. Every evening at 2250 hours, they listened to the broadcast over Radio France (Algiers) for Corsica. The programming sounded innocent enough, but secretly directed the citizen army's movements, coordinating them with the temporary government set up in Algiers. One of the patriots, 29 year old Jacques Manachem, a newspaper man, was instrumental in the success of the patriots. Manachem had been forced to work in the Fascist headquarters, but he used their official stationery to send out correspondence to every province on the island, using secret code to pass messages to local leaders. The Fascists were totally unaware of what he was doing, and discovery would have meant certain death.

The patriots were organized in units of five; this was for security reasons – if any man was caught he was only able to give up four others. Each member those five others, and they, in turn, picked out five others, until 15,000 men had joined. They met in abandoned farmhouses and barns, and in caves that were only known to Corsican natives, and sometimes even in taverns, engaging in innocent appearing conversation. These men followed orders, never questioning. They had seven vows:

- 1) You are not only fugitives, you are soldiers.
- 2) Hold no communications with family or friends.
- 3) Do not complain if your family cannot help you.
- 4) Expect no pay.
- 5) There is no distinction in ranks between race, faith or party.
- 6) Never abandon a wounded comrade.
- 7) Care for and protect your weapons.

²⁶ "A Shadow Army Leaps to Arms," The Stars and Stripes (European Theater), 09 March 1944.

The weapons had been provided by British RAF. The Radio France broadcasts covertly gave times and locations of where weapons and ammunition would be parachuted down, or brought in by submarine. For instance, “We like good apples” might mean “Tonight at Ajaccio, usual spot, usual signal.”

On September 9, 1943, American, French and British forces moved into Ajaccio, Corsica, and the patriots were prepared – they had learned that the Germans planned to escape northward. The patriots were able to delay them for six critical days with machine guns, but in the end, the Germans broke through. 500 patriots were killed before it was over, and Germans left mines behind them. However, Allied troops were able to overtake them, thanks to the 6 days the patriots had held them back.



Corsican patriots
(Photo courtesy of *Stars and Stripes*²⁷)

Having the islands of Corsica and Sardinia (to the south) under Allied control allowed for patrol of the Tyrrhenian sea, and it didn’t take long before the islands were filled with Allied airfields, just waiting to be filled with aerial fighter squadrons like the 417th.

Back in North Africa, the 417th continued their missions. Ray wrote a description to his parents back in South Dakota: “Riding an air plane tires you more than anything I’ve

²⁷ “A Shadow Army Leaps to Arms,” *The Stars and Stripes* (European Theater), 09 March 1944. Photo and information on the Corsican patriots are from this article.

ever done even if you don't get any exercise. Most of the fellows including me sleep at least 10 hours a day and sometimes more and are still tired. That dingy or rubber boat I sit on is about as hard as concrete. I accused the parachute packer of deliberately putting the air bottle – paddles - and steel sail mast on top just to make it sit hard. They don't sit so good but beats the hell out of a cushion if you happen to fall in the drink."

While on alert one night, Ray wrote a bit more about his work. "Got to stand the alert so here goes another nights' sleep. Hope business is good, I need some excitement. Can't afford to go stale on the job. There's no moon now and I do mean that the sky is black. It fairly makes the hair stand up on the back of your neck when one of those things [German plane] goes whoosh over the top and you can't see him. This war business isn't so dangerous, it just scares you a might. In the afternoon on test hops getting ready for the nights' activity, we buzz back country quite regular. You can sure see a lot of country. If a mountain looks nice we go up there and then down again. Beats climbing the darn things, more fun scaring camels too."

One of the best ways to get a feel for Ray's experience is through his own words: "After about eight hours in the air in one night you can sleep for a week. It's the damndest life to make you tired I ever saw. We have our lighter moments in the afternoon testing ships and equipment. We go out in the desert and visit the nomads. Most of the kids dive into the tents like rats. Don't blame them much, these monsters don't look good coming head on. We've missed each other at night by a couple hundred feet and that ain't good. Your hair doesn't lay down again for several hours."

"One of the boys was breezing along a few feet off the ground at a mere 220 miles per [hour], minding everybody's business but his own when he happened over a race track. He really didn't know there was a race going on and the horses forgot about it too. From what I could fathom it looked like a rat race with all the horses looking for a hole. Ah well, we get hell for some of those things too."

With winter rolling in, the "delightfully cool nights" have turned cold. Ray often has to wear his flying jacket in his room to stay warm. He bought a straw mattress to replace the stretched out canvas cot, and so he can use his blankets on top of him now rather than under him. If it gets any colder, he says, he'll have to wear his flying furs to bed. As unpleasant as that may be, he mentioned that the nurses live in tents with no heat, and work all day in the tent hospitals which are not heated either.

Thanksgiving in North Africa, while not at all comparable to being at home with family, was still something special. "Today it was sure enough Thanksgiving and we done it up proper. We had our lil old turkey baked with dressing like any respectable turkey had ought to be. We had sweet potatoes to go along with the Irish potatoes and brown gravy to make it all American. There were green peas and diced carrots – cranberries – marmalade – pickles – bread and butter. And we do have swell bread. I don't know just where it is baked but they do a good job of it. I forgot about the pineapple and cheese salad. I knew something made me full or could it have been those two pieces of pumpkin pie. I remember gazing at a piece of apple but I just couldn't make it. I hope they save it until supper. There was a bowl of hard candy, too,

but I doubt that anyone touched it. I heard the coffee was excellent. I still don't drink the stuff. To start it all off right I had a hot shower. First time the water's been warm for ages. Somebody must have fixed the stove. I had to shave in cold water, though, so that evened it up." Despite the good meal, he said, "I wish I could have been home today – I'd even settle for Xmas. Maybe soon anyhow." In all of Ray's letters, this was only one of two times he expressed any sentiment about being home – the other in a Christmas card, saying he wished he could say "Merry Christmas" in person.

Later that month, Ray saw a movie about parachuting and "scared myself silly wondering if I would have nerve enough to jump. I came back with my parachute in my lap the other morning for the first time. It seems one of our motors had a cold and was coughing a bit. I had my pilot over in a pretty bad turn when it started and we dropped about 500 feet before he caught it again – more thrills and more grey hairs. I've got myself a whee of a good pilot so if we still have the stick left will come in on that."

Despite complaining about the prices of everything in Oran, he should have known better than to hail a horse taxi. "Just to be doing something different I went for a ride in a horse taxi and forgot to ask what it would cost and so I got hooked for six dollars for an hours' ride. I think I'll buy me one of those and get rich quick. I'll learn some day."



One of Ray's comrades riding on the horse taxi.
(courtesy of 417th-NightFighters.com)

Ray's days in North Africa were coming to an end, though he didn't know it yet. On Dec. 14, Lt. Williams went to Corsica to make arrangements for the 417th's move. A week or so later, Lt. Frazee left for Bizerte, also in North Africa, to arrange for embarkation. The next day, the entire ground echelon took off for Bizerte, and eventually Corsica. The air crews continued to work, with Ray and his pilot bringing in the New Year by "chasing clouds & etc. again. A good start, don't you think?"

The same day, Lt. Swift, one of the 417th pilots, and his R/O Kohrman failed to return from their mission. The reason was unknown.



Corsica
(map from Google Maps)

Just after the first of the year, the ground echelon at Bizerte boarded a ship, and left at night. They arrived at Ajaccio, on the west side of Corsica, on January 6th. The following morning, they boarded trucks and the convoy crossed the entire island to Ghisonaccia, where they began clearing the land and setting up tents.

The air crews continued on at Tafraoui. While his comrades on the ground were preparing a camp, Ray was on duty. "It is my night to hang around again and just wait. Just in case Jerry wants to watch the sunrise we're going up and watch it with him. Might even oblige by adding a bit of color. There was supposed to be one up the line a hundred and fifty miles but we couldn't find him so we came all the way back zooming around clouds – over 'em and through 'em. Frankly I was darn near sea sick. I've got the craziest pilot for things like that – but good. It's good practice for him so I just hang on and chew gum like a good boy trying to keep my stomach

down. It's surprising what a workout your

body gets trying to hold itself together. One minute you float and are held down by the life belt and the next you almost double up on your way down through the seat. When you just skip on the tops of these clouds doing a little over 300 miles an hour it puts a roller coaster to shame for fun and thrills. We took a mechanic along the other day and one of the motors stopped and up only 2000 ft. over the water. We forgot about the boy and my pilot being crazy anyhow looked out and casually said, "Well bless my soul she stopped." I knew we could get back on one motor so I just says, "Shall I bail out now?" We always talk back and forth like that. I happened to look at the passenger and he was white as a ghost and putting his chute on fast. It was only his third ride in a plane. I will admit my stomach sank the first time I looked out and saw the propeller standing still. What a pair he picked to go riding with."

Back at Ghisonaccia, the ground crew was assisting the 414th and the 310th Bomb group to get settled. The air crews would move to La Senia in a few days and attach to

the RAF 337th wing. During the move, they continued to do night patrols in the Mediterranean, and it was on one of these patrols that Ray got the scare of his life: “And so we are out stooging around in the clouds over this convoy when the Jerries sneak in under our noses. I don’t know what they threw at the convoy, but somebody got mad and the convoy escort threw up everything including the galley stove and the sink. So we head for France and bless my soul if we aren’t on some poor devil’s tail. So I’m a’ telling my pilot to go down and he politely – like hell – tells me we are minus 200 feet already. I remember the field is not very high so I look over the side and there’s the damned Mediterranean sea a’ shining past about fifteen feet away and the night black as hell. That shook me. Well – after due time of messing around and etc. we are right up there looking at him and he doesn’t know it. Beats the hell out of me how he was doing it, but he was flying lower than we were yet. So we threw a bit of lead at him and got all kinds of stuff back – prettiest stuff you ever saw at night too. That’s what you get for missing – so we have to do it all over again. We hit his slip stream and almost went into the drink ourselves. I had one hand on the hatch just ready to try getting out. Usually have damn poor luck but no harm in trying. Anyhow methinks he won’t be saying “Heil Hitler” no more... a hell of a dull life.”

Ray’s temporary lodging at La Senia was on the third floor of a dormitory. “Good old marble floor – wash basin and a radiator but no hot water in it. Still I can always look at it and imagine it is hot. This is much nicer than what we had. In fact it’s luxurious. We have Italian war prisoners for cooks and waiters and the food is even better. The kitchen here is complete and good and Italians always could cook. A lovely club and bar above the mess hall. A regular peace time set up. I’ve never lived so good in my life. Even got an Italian chap to clean the room. There’s a balcony running the full length of the building and for each floor. At the moment I’m sitting on the ledge of the balcony toasting in the sun and also getting my blankets aired. In fact the weather is even lovely. From the descriptions I have had of last winter, this one is really nice. Haven’t even had any good raids since the last one I was in. It’s almost too peaceful.”

“I had a good day the other afternoon. I found out about a steam bath joint and thought it would be fun. I got parboiled in a steam box – cooled off in a shower – and massaged in an electric jiggle machine. It was some fun. There’s this Arab girl with arms as muscular as a man’s rubbed me down with some smelly stuff which she rubbed with rough gloves on her hands – it felt like steel wool PS I had bathing trunks on – and so I was late for the date with a nurse for which I got hell all night. It was worth it anyhow.”

“We dropped in on a couple of bars. The Doc said I should force liquids for my cold and he didn’t specify water so I figured I was doing all right. There’s a little black market joint that stays open after hours and serves delicious omelets – and then we danced a bit at the club. We squeezed all that in before the good night kiss at 10:30. Not bad, huh? Don’t ask me what it cost. After chasing that darned Jerry clear across the Mediterranean about 30 feet off the water the whole way, I figure I might as well spend it myself now. There ain’t no future in this.”

And for some, there wasn't. On January 20, one of the other air crews was killed on takeoff from La Senia on an operational flight. They crashed into the Salt Lake at the end of the runway. These two men were not supposed to be flying that night, but had taken the place of another crew.

A couple of weeks later, another air crew comprised of Jeffrey and Henderson had a very difficult night of combat with a German Ju88. They made several passes at the enemy plane and saw their ammo hit the plane, but it refused to go down. Another nearby crew assisted, and the Ju88 ended up plunging into the sea.

Still another air crew was practicing one-engine landing and had propeller problems. The plane crashed on the runway, but miraculously both crew members survived, uninjured.

Ray wrote, "We just got back from a bit of a flight and what they won't ask a night fighter to fly in – wind – rain and sleet – hail – lightening. The ordinary pilot would crawl in a hole first. This nut I fly with [Joe Leonard] loves it and so we bounce around all over hell and here I am as safe and sound as ever. The landing was even pretty good."

Despite these experiences, Ray is ready to move on to Corsica. "It's so dead over here I think somebody signed an armistice and just didn't let the news get in the papers. Everybody else still wants it peaceful and we keep wanting the Germans to come over. Guess we can't please everybody."

Sometime during the month of February, 1944, the ground echelon moved from Ghisonaccia to Borgo, on the northern part of Corsica to help out other units, since they did not have air crews to take care of. The men loved the area around Borgo, where there were natural hot Sulphur springs for bathing. From time to time, the air echelon of the 417th would fly mail to Corsica, and in return, the ground crew would send fresh meat and other items back with them, a welcome sight for men living on C rations.

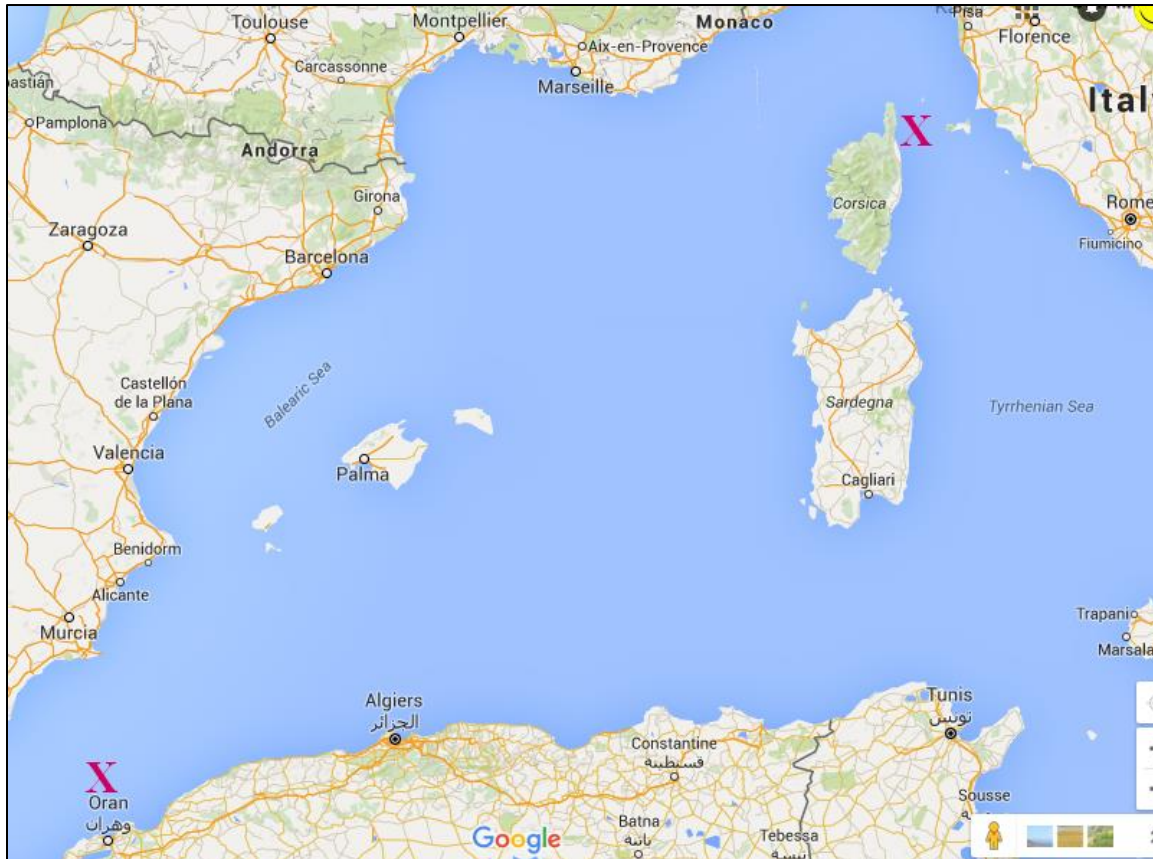
To this date, Ray had still not had a furlough since he enlisted in the military. In the beginning of March, he spent some time in a rest camp in Italy, saw some of the country, and enjoyed himself for ten days. The "vacation" came just in time, as Ray's tour of duty was nearly over.

Several of Ray's letters talked about the future – after the military - when he might need the money he was sending back, what benefit his military schooling might be, or what he's going to do when his tour of duty is up – if going back to the University of Minnesota is the right move for him. And of course, during the holidays, he seemed to be a little homesick for his family. He also repeatedly mentions the dangers of what he's doing with remarks like "only we stupid people who fly don't have a future. It's still fun and I'd do it again." And surprisingly, that's exactly what he did – another tour. The reason? "I wouldn't care to come back to the States and have to work with some of the soldier playboys they have there. At least we know what we are doing over here and

that's some comfort." A few weeks after, he commented, "I've finished my tour too, but won't apply for a trip home until things look more favorable. There is a lot of fun to be had over here yet, and I might as well be here when all hell breaks loose. When we change to the Pacific area, we'll probably stop off. It would be my luck to go across by way of India." Still, he wants to fight Japs.

It was in March, 1944, when the team of Christensen and Leonard got a “kill” which made it into the Stars and Stripes military newspaper. The Huron Daily Plainsman, Ray’s hometown newspaper, also carried the news. On the topic, Ray said this: “A couple of Jerries came nosing around the other day and got themselves killed but one just can’t elaborate on that. And so the war goes – they’ll all run out of men pretty soon.”





Map showing Oran in relation to Corsica, the next stop for the 417th.
(Map data ©2106 Google)

On April 24, 1944, four days after bringing the air crews to Borgo, the whole squadron was given the day off. The major ordered 2 kegs of beer, and they had a well-deserved party.

The squadron generally seemed much happier with their living conditions on Corsica than they were in North Africa, despite being so much closer to the fighting. They could see the fireworks of battle occurring on the mainland of Italy at night.

With the move to Corsica also came “Bed Check Charlie.” Like a gnat on a hot summer night, “Charlie,” a German reconnaissance plane, would make almost nightly trips down the coast, checking out the Allied aircraft buildup, making all kinds of noise and generally causing mayhem. Sometimes he’d drop a bomb or two, sometimes just let loose with a little machine gun fire, or whatever he could to get the men out of bed and to a trench, disrupting their much-needed sleep.

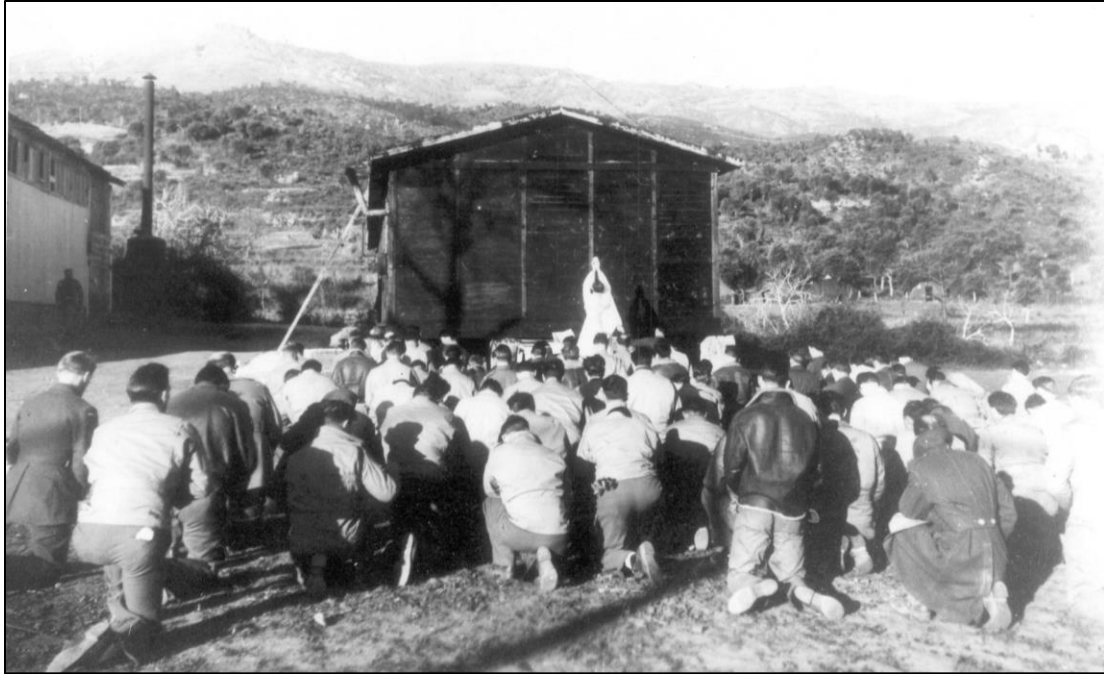
On May 9, an air crew chased and damaged “Charlie,” but he got away nonetheless. Everyone was so anxious to bag him, that they made a contest out of it. Any crew that chased and failed to shoot him down had to put \$5 in the kitty, with the money going to the crew who finally tucks in “Bed Check Charlie” for good.



Ray, on a photo he labeled, "They hit sometimes."



Above: Ray, on a beach on Corsica



Worship Service. Corsica
(courtesy of 417th-NightFighters.com)

Ray's description of his new surroundings is much better than North Africa: "It is very nice over here. There is snow in the mountains and damn cold water in the creeks. I went swimming anyhow the other day. Methinks I shall wait a few weeks after that. That was the first fresh water I have swam in in three years."



The swimming hole at Corsica
(courtesy of 417th-NightFighters.com)



Bastia, the closest city to Borgo Airdrome
(courtesy of 417th-NightFighters.com)



Aerial view of Borgo Air Field
(Courtesy of the Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office)



The 417th Beaufighters on a flight to Italy, 1944.
(courtesy of 417th-NightFighters.com)

Ray went on to say, "Really, though, it's so nice over here that I'm not at all worried about it. I like this little island. When we go airborne we can look right into Herr Hitler's back yard and make faces at him. One of his little boys done foxed me the other night so here I sit on the end of the runway just a'waitin' to get revenge, this time I don't make so many mistakes and the German population is going down a couple notches and more fun than [hunting] pheasants."

It was May 12 before the entire 417th was reunited at Borgo, with the arrival of the rear echelon from La Senia.



One of Ray's comrades on the squadron motorcycle
(courtesy of 417th-NightFighters.com)

Ray spent his off-time building furniture and getting settled, and once that was done, he turned his attention to something else: a motorcycle. "So just to pass the time away I'm learning to ride a motorcycle. I think I'm doing alright, even if I do need a new pair of pants and have a few scratches on my knee. I was going up a mountain trail at the time and they tell me that isn't good. It is good fun and I've always wanted to be able to ride one. Between that and air planes, I don't know..."

Having had only one "rest" in over two years of service, Ray would now qualify for a 30 days' leave to go back to the US under a new policy. But he would not get to use it. Ray mentions in a letter to his parents dated May 12, "If I get a letter from you tomorrow, I'll be working anyhow and probably won't get time to answer it." There would be no more time for letter writing - the action was about to get grim.



Slit trenches in Corsica
(courtesy of 417th-NightFighters.com)

It was the night of May 12, 1944 that all hell broke loose over Corsica, when the Luftwaffe launched a major attack. The alert sounded, and everyone dove into trenches. The squadron history tells of a tough break for the commander: "Major Ehlinger dove into a trench already filled with men, and they threw him out, yelling, 'Get the hell out of here' not recognizing him as their commanding officer."²⁸ The Borgo airfield was not one of the Luftwaffe targets, but it was close enough to scare the hell out of them nonetheless. The Germans dropped numerous bombs, one of which hit the end of the runway, but didn't do any major damage to it. The carnage continued into the early morning hours of May 13.

²⁸ Daniel Whitney and Richard Ziebart, "417th Night Fighters."



Map of Corsica, showing 10 of the 17 airfields²⁹

Corsica was a major vantage point for the Allies, hence the 17 air fields on the island. The island was dubbed the “USS Corsica” because of it. And this made it a very attractive target for the Luftwaffe.

Alesani Airfield, located near the middle of the eastern coast, was home to the 340th Bomb Group – and one of the Luftwaffe’s targets on the night of May 12, 1944. Over one hundred B-25s on the ground were either damaged or destroyed, and 91 soldiers lost their lives or were seriously wounded in the attack.

The events of this night were carefully planned out by the Germans, and almost flawlessly executed. The first plane spotted at Alesani was, ironically, a Beaufighter, presumably one that had been captured by the Germans and subsequently used as a “pathfinder.” Shortly after this sighting, the enemy Beau dropped flares on the airfield, and almost immediately afterward other enemy planes attacked, and dropped more flares to further illuminate the field. Bombs, including “delayed action” bombs, were dropped. Twenty to thirty enemy aircraft were involved, and they attacked the airfield, gasoline dump, ground radio station, and intelligence buildings. Bombs intended for the headquarters were inadvertently dumped off shore into the Tyrrhenian Sea, or the devastation would have been even worse. It was one hour and fifteen minutes of hell.

Personnel casualties were high; some men did not make it to cover in time, others thought the alert sirens were another instance of “Bed Check Charlie,” and others were killed when their planes on the field, most of which were filled with bombs, were attacked. The bombs were so thick through the area that even those in the slit trenches were not necessarily safe.

This was not the first time that the German air force used the tactics displayed by “Bed Check Charlie” before a major attack. Besides depriving their enemies of sleep, and making them hesitant to take the alerts seriously, reconnaissance photos were

²⁹ <http://www.warwingsart.com/12thAirForce/57thoncorsica.html>

being taken overhead as the men stumbled in the darkness for their helmets and gas masks, and left their tents for the slit trenches.

Just before Alesani Airfield was attacked, Poretto Airfield, just 15 miles to the north, was attacked. Twenty-five Spitfire planes were damaged or destroyed, and a number of personnel were killed. Poretto Airfield is just to the south of Borgo, It isn't known why Borgo Airfield was spared a direct attack.

Part of the success of the attacks may have been due to enemy agents that aided the Germans. A great number of German paratroopers had apparently landed on the island earlier in the year. And in addition, the military unit that performed this attack were "The Helbig Flyers," one of the famous Lehrgeschwader squadron, under the command of Joachim Helbig. Helbig was an incredible pilot and commander. He flew 350+ combat missions over the course of the war, and was considered to be among the best.³⁰

While the squadrons at Alesani were overcome, their anti-aircraft artillery personnel shot down two of the attacking planes, while aerial Beaufighters destroyed two others.



Devastation at Alesani Air Field³¹

This attack was said to be the last significant show of military force of the Germans. Three weeks later was the Normandy invasion – the beginning of the end for Hitler.

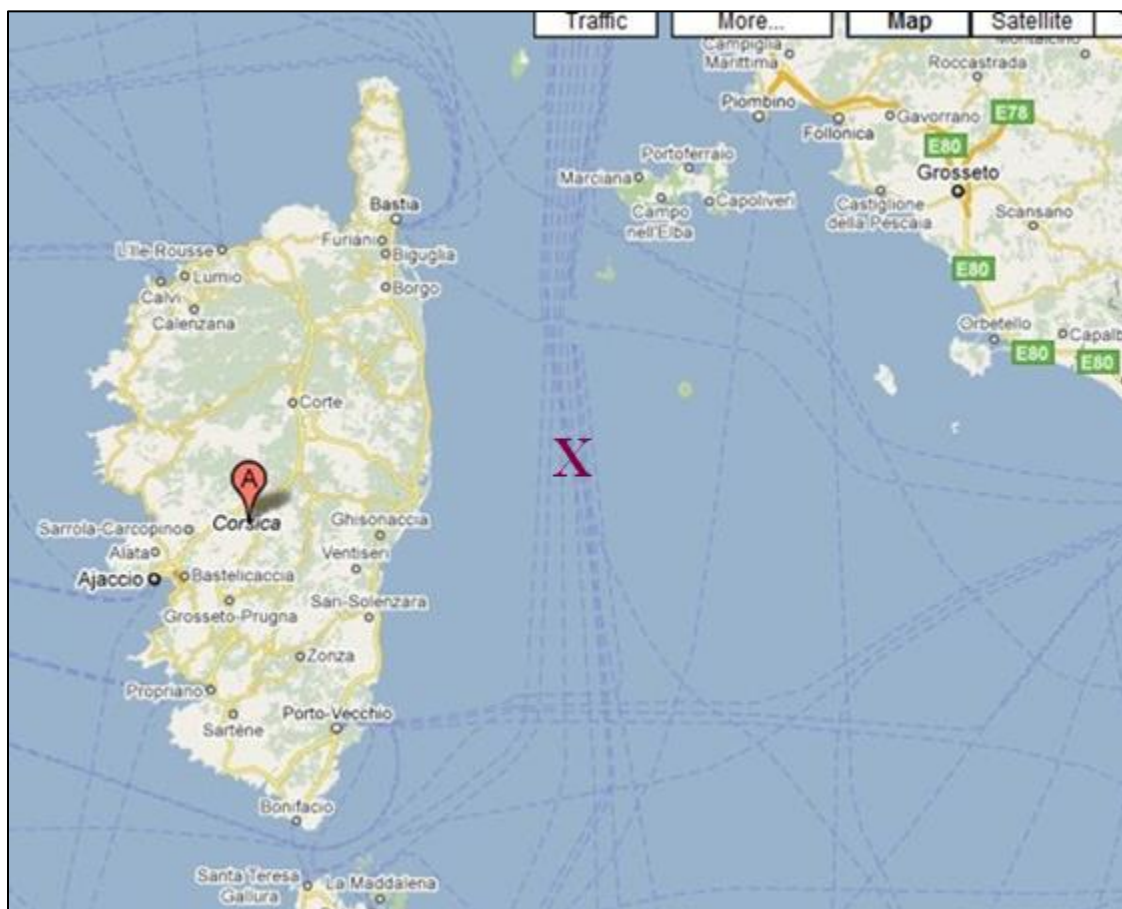
Meanwhile, back at Borgo Air Field, the day was devoted to improving the trenches.

³⁰ <http://home.comcast.net/~dhsetzer> Site is no longer online, but was created by the son of a German headquarters staff, and gave excellent information from the German perspective.

³¹ Photo from <http://home.comcast.net/~dhsetzer> website, which is no longer available. Unable to ascertain original source of photo.

On the following evening, May 13, Ray and Joe Leonard were scheduled for duty. They loaded into Beaufighter KW161 and departed from Borgo Airdrome for patrol. Shortly before midnight, a “bogey” was spotted by radar, and identified as an enemy aircraft. Ray and Joe gave chase near the island of Montecristo. Ground radar personnel saw two “blips” on their radar screen, and at 11:56 pm, one of those blips disappeared, and the other left the area. Flight Officer Raymond Christensen and his pilot, 1st Lieutenant Joseph Leonard failed to return from their mission.

Immediately, 18 P-39s were dispatched to the waters around the islands of Elba, Pianosa, Montecristo and Grosseto. A Catalina “flying boat” also joined the search, which lasted more than 6 hours. No clear sign of the plane, nor the crew, were found; only debris, an oil slick, and two empty life rafts were discovered.³²



The island of Corsica. The “X” shows the approximate location of KW161 and its crew before radar contact was lost. The Borgo Air Field was located to the left of the X.

(Map data ©2106 Google. Inst. Geogr. Nacional)

³² Missing Air Crew Report for 1st Lt. Joseph E. Leonard and Flight Officer Raymond Christensen.

Lt. Leonard's body washed ashore 12 days later, at a place the Americans called "Sir Rogers Field," perhaps on the island of Corsica. He was buried at the United States Military Cemetery in Bastia, Corsica, but was later relocated to the United States Military Cemetery in Nettuno, Italy.



The grave of Joe Leonard in Nettuno, Italy

An unknown author from the 417th wrote about the loss of Joe and Ray: "They had been vectored onto a "Bogey" and whether they flew into the water or were shot down was never determined at the time. Having flown "baggage" many times with Lt. Leonard, I suspect the later. They were both gallant airmen."³³

After Joe's body washed ashore, the military began a new search of the pertinent coastlines, and conducted interviews with people living there regarding any known burials of Americans. No new information was gained.

On June 2, on a farm in Beadle County, South Dakota, a telegram from the War Department was delivered to Mr. Peter Christensen and his wife, Ella, saying, "The Secretary of War desires me to express his deep regret that your son Flight Officer Raymond Christensen has been reported Missing in Action since Thirteen May over Corsica. If further details or other information are received you will be promptly notified."³⁴

³³ Daniel Whitney and Richard Ziebart, "417th Night Fighters."

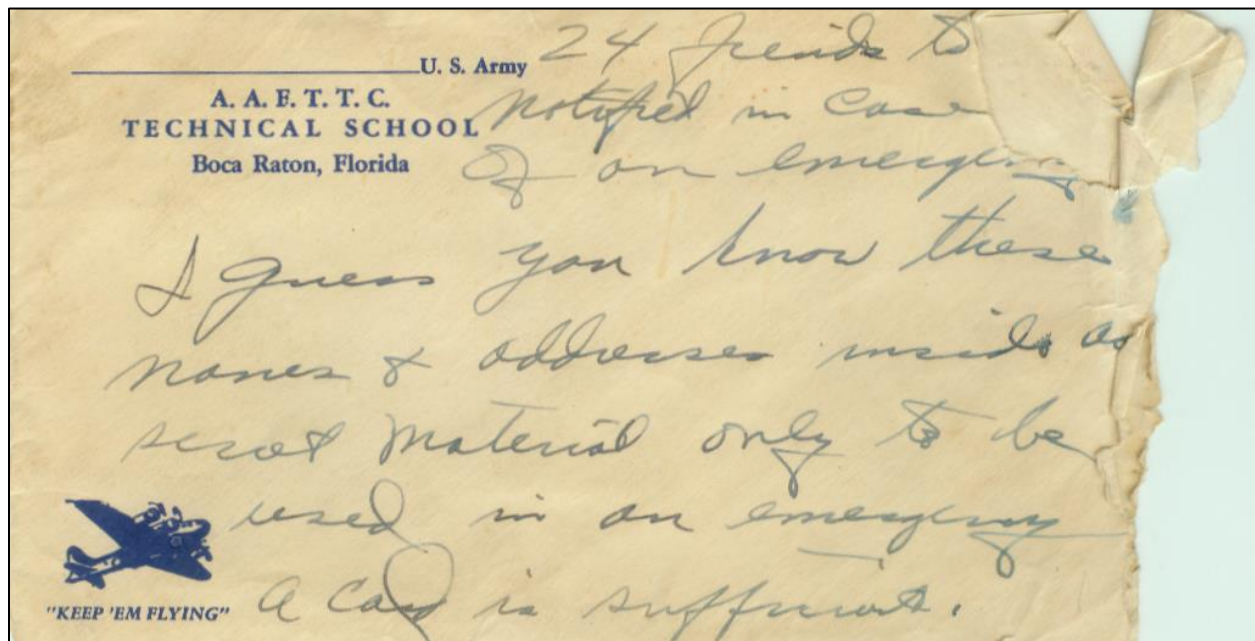
³⁴ A copy of the telegram sent to the Christensens was included in the records released by the Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office to Karen Seeman in May, 2014.

Sadly, on June 1, Ray would have been promoted to 2nd Lieutenant. The orders came down for the promotion, but were revoked upon learning that Ray had been killed in action.³⁵

Ray's mother and sister Lillian began writing letters asking for more information regarding the circumstances around Ray's disappearance, both to military "higher-ups" and to Ray's friends and comrades. Lillian left scribbled notes with names and addresses of those she'd written to in hopes of learning something more. Her pleas were futile. She so desperately wanted to know the details of her brother's disappearance, and as far as I know, she never did get them.

Instead, she got the dreadful duty of taking care of one last bit of business for Ray – notifying the people he was closest to of his disappearance.

While in Boca Raton, Ray had made a list of 24 of his closest friends, and sent it to Lillian in a sealed envelope, only to be opened in case of emergency.



And so began the painful task of sending the notifications. How it must have broken her heart to open that envelope.

Over the course of the next year, Ray's money, medals, and other belongings would be sent to his parents, and they, along with their daughter Lillian, would continue to write letters trying to get more information. Ray's status was changed from "Missing in Action" to "Killed in Action" in September of that year.³⁶ Letters of condolences poured

³⁵ Daniel Whitney and Richard Ziebart, "417th Night Fighters."

³⁶ Documents provided by the Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office to Karen Seeman in May, 2014.

in from all over the country; actually, all over the world, as Ray had left many friends to grieve.

In August of 1948, the Board of Officers met to review Ray's case, and to decide if Ray's remains should be deemed "Non-Recoverable." Non-Recoverable cases were removed from the agenda for any further searching unless or until new information came to light. All of the facts concerning the night of May 13 were examined; another search of the coastlines was also made both on Corsica and Sardinia. Ray's dental records were compared to all available records of unidentified American deceased, with no luck. His remains were declared Non-Recoverable.³⁷

In January, 1951, something happened to spark the opening of Ray's case again, and investigators poured over the data. The "Geographical Clue Index File" of unknowns recovered from the appropriate vicinity was compared against information on Ray, and his dental file was re-examined, but with negative results.

And the story ends here... or does it?

Fast-forward to 1992. I had taken a trip back home to Huron, South Dakota to visit with my parents, and my grandfather, Bill Knutz. My grandmother had passed away the year before, and my grandfather and my mother had been going through her things. They sent a manila envelope full of letters home with me, and said I might find them interesting reading. I did. They were letters from Ray – from 1936 till the time of his death in 1944. I read through all of them, and thought back to when Grandma had tried to tell me about Ray, and how I wished to have a second chance at that opportunity, but of course, I couldn't. I gleaned all I could from the letters, and resigned myself to never knowing anything more.

Several years later, I had obtained access to a subscription database of military records, and decided I'd try to search for any documents about Ray. To my surprise, the MACR ("Missing Air Crew Report") for him had been digitized and was available. I learned a little more about that awful night they disappeared, but it only fueled my desire to know more yet.

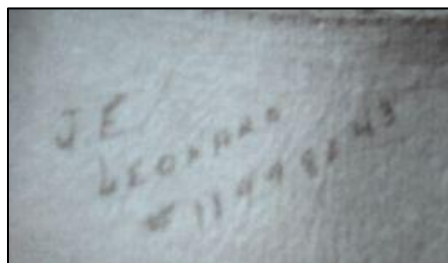
And so began my mission. I contacted the Army to get Ray's military records, which I discovered had been burned in an archives fire. I contacted the American Battle Monuments Commission, from whom I learned that Ray was included in a memorial in an American military cemetery in Florence, Italy. I searched for any scrap of information on the internet, and read articles and books. And then one day, I wrote a blog post about it, which turned out to be the most productive thing I could have done.

³⁷ Documents provided by the Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office to Karen Seeman in May, 2014.



Tablets of the Missing memorial to Ray Christensen in Florence, Italy.³⁸

The post was just a simple tribute to Ray, and also mentioned his pilot, Joe Leonard. Quite some time after that blog post, two incredible things happened. First, I was contacted by Lt. Col. Braxton “Brick” Eisel, who had recently written a book on the 417th NFS. He generously sent me a copy of his book, which gave me more information than I ever thought I’d have. And shortly thereafter, I was contacted by man named David Donohue, a retired military officer and collector of military memorabilia. He had been to a sale and purchased an officer’s cap in very good condition. As he was inspecting it, he found an inscription under the sweatband that read:



Inscription under the sweatband of Joe Leonard’s cap
(Photo courtesy of David Donohue)

³⁸ <https://www.abmc.gov> After contacting them, then sent large color photos of Ray’s name inscribed on the memorial.



Joe's Cap, sent to me by David Donohue.

Rarely, he said, will you find an item such as this with identifying information, and he wanted very much to return it to the Leonard family. He had been unable to locate any of them, but did stumble across my blog post as it included Lt. Leonard as well. He said the next best family to gift it to would be Ray's family, and I gratefully accepted it with the promise that I would continue to look for Lt. Leonard's family. It took several years to accomplish, but in January of 2016 the cap made its way home to Lt. Leonard's nephew.

My association with David Donohue would be an important one. He guided my search, educated me in important topics, and put me in contact with others who might be able to help. That Ray's remains had not been recovered, and Joe's had, troubled him. He gave me information on DNA and suggested we give samples that might be useful in identification.³⁹ He contacted civilian search groups in Italy, who made it their mission to recover remains of U. S. soldiers. They, in turn, contacted anyone they knew who might be of assistance, including Mr. Fred Smith, who was a P-39 Aircobra pilot with the 350th Fighter Group, and who participated in the rescue mission on that terrible early morning of May 14, 1944. Unfortunately, he did not remember any details specific to that search, as he had taken part in many, many searches during those years.

One of the comrades of the Italian group was a newspaper man in a pertinent region of Italy. He wrote an article for area newspapers on the search for Ray, and asked for anyone remembering anything from that night to contact him. Nothing has come of it yet, but as the original blog post demonstrated, sometimes it takes a while.

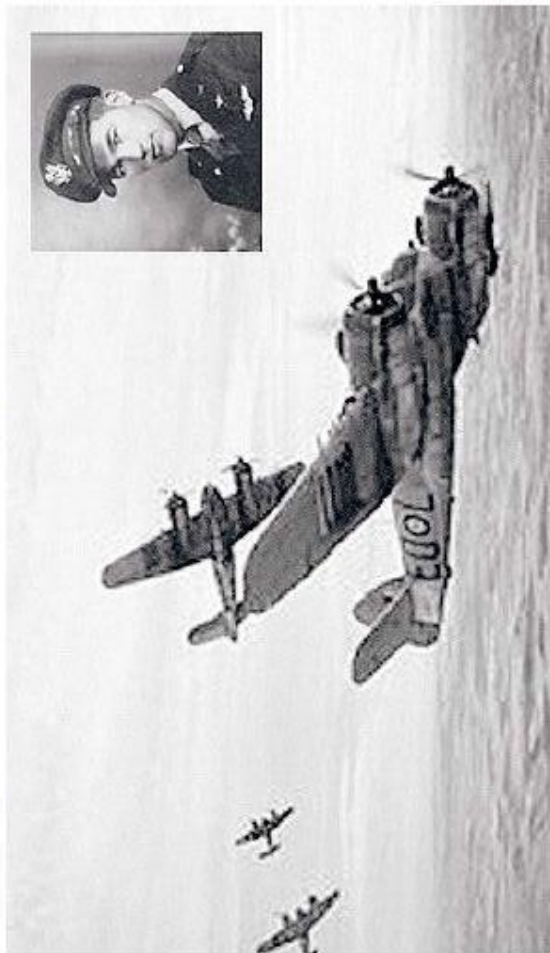
³⁹ DNA from a cheek swab was submitted by Betty Hammer, niece of Ray Christensen, and Karen Seeman, great-niece in 2011 for mitochondrial DNA sequencing. An envelope from one of Ray's letters, which was probably sealed with Ray's saliva, was also submitted for sequencing of Ray's mitochondrial DNA. Mitochondrial DNA gives only a general genetic profile, and is passed down through families maternally.

Appello dal Minnesota: chi ha visto Raymond?

Il giallo del caccia scomparso nell'Arcipelago toscano con il radarista di bordo

di FIORENZO BUCCI

UN MISTERO: quel caccia americano cadde nel mare di Montecristo o riuscì, pur mallesso, a raggiungere la costa, probabilmente nella zona della Costa d'Argento? E perché solo uno dei due aviatori che erano a bordo è stato ritrovato e oggi è sepolto nel cimitero americano di Nettuno, mentre l'altro risulta ancora «missing in action», cioè scomparso in un'azione. Giusto 69 anni fa, nella limpida sera di sabato 13 maggio 1944, il Bristol Beaufighter, del 417esimo squadrone caccia notturna decolla dall'aeroporto di Borgo, in Corsica, per quella che sarà l'ultima missione del suo equipaggio. Il pilota Joseph Leonard di Miami County e l'operatore radar Raymond Christensen, nativo del South Dakota, volano insieme dal novembre del 1943. Il 417esimo era uno dei tre reparti da caccia notturna della «Twelfth Air Force» che svolgevano missioni di protezione degli aeroporti della Corsica e della Sardegna. Dopo il decollo, il Beaufighter dirige a bassa quota verso le coste italiane e l'ultimo contatto radar con la base avvenne alle 23 e 56, in prossimità dell'isola di Montecristo. Da quel momento, si persero le tracce di aereo ed equipaggio. Il mattino seguente, decollarono dalla Corsica 18 caccia P-39 e un idrovolante Catalina per ricercare eventuali resti ed essi avvistarono una macchia di olio sul mare, notarono frammenti che galleggiavano e videro due giubbotti di salvataggio. Nessuno riuscì però a stabilire se quelle tracce avessero



NEL CIELO Caccia americani in volo durante la seconda guerra mondiale. Nel riquadro Raymond Christensen

ro un nesso con la scomparsa del Beaufighter.

OGGI IL CORPO di Leonard riposa a Nettuno, nulla invece si sa di Christensen che non ha tomba e, come ha potuto verificare il ricercatore Marco Ballini di Montecristo, è commemorato nel cimitero militare americano di Firenze. Per quale ragione i due aviatori non sono entrambi sepolti a

Nettuno? L'aeroplano cadde davvero in mare o raggiunse la costa e fu abbattuto o precipitò sulla terraferma? Continuano a chiederselo dal Minnesota i parenti di Raymond Christensen. Da dove hanno voluto lanciare un appello perché qualcuno deve aver visto: persone ormai anziane che all'epoca vivevano nelle isole meridionali dell'Arcipelago toscano o sulla costa. David, un studioso di storia

del secondo conflitto mondiale, si è anche rivolto per conto dei Christensen all'Air Crash Po di Cremona, specializzato in ricerche sugli aerei precipitati nell'ultima guerra e dall'associazione lombarda giunge la preghiera per rilanciare l'appello alle popolazioni delle isole dell'arcipelago e della Maremma. Chi sapesse qualcosa di quel vecchio episodio può contattare il numero 333 9870205.

IN LAGUNA

«Nuovo assetto nella giunta»
La ricerca dei Moderati

SITUAZIONE politica in laguna analizzata dalla direzione provinciale del Centro democratico, che ha dato mandato al consigliere Mario Chiavetta e al comitato comunale del movimento di esaminare la situazione che si è creata in ambito politico (i Moderati che hanno votato contro il consuntivo di bilancio presenato dalla maggioranza), al fine di trovare una soluzione. Quale? «Un possibile nuovo assetto della giunta comunale», come affermano dal Centro democratico, dove si dicono anche impegnati a «risolvere le problematiche dei cittadini, a riavvicinare i cittadini alla macchina amministrativa e a rilanciare l'attività della giunta stessa e del centro sinistra lagunare nel suo insieme».

A rough translation of the article:

“A Mystery: The American fighter plane fell into the sea of Monte Cristo or managed somehow to reach the coast, probably in the area of Costa d'Argento. And only one of the two airmen on board was found and is buried in the American cemetery at Nettuno, while the other is still missing in action. Just 69 years ago, in the clear evening of Saturday, May 13, 1944, the Bristol Beaufighter of the 417th Night Fighter Squadron takes off from Borgo, Corsica, for what would be the last mission of the crew - the pilot, Joseph Leonard of Miami County and the radar operator Raymond Christensen, a native of South Dakota, who had been flying together since November of 1943. The 417th was one of three fighter squadrons of the night Twelfth Air Force which held unprotected missions of the airports in Corsica and Sardinia. After takeoff, the Beaufighter went at low altitude towards the Italian coast and the last radar contact with the base occurred at 11:56 p.m., near the island of Monte Cristo. From that moment, there was no trace of the aircraft and crew. The next morning, 18 P-39 fighters and a Catalina seaplane took off from Corsica to search for any remnants. They spotted a patch of oil on the sea, and fragments floating in it, with two life jackets. No one could determine, however, whether those items were connected with the disappearance of the Beaufighter.

“Today the body of Leonard rests in Nettuno, however nothing is known about Christensen being buried there, and researcher Marco Ballini of Montelanica has verified that Christensen is commemorated in the American military cemetery in Florence. Why aren't the two airmen both buried in Nettuno? The plane fell into the sea or may have reached the coast and possibly shot down or crashing on the mainland. Minnesota relatives of Raymond Christensen continue to search. Someone must have seen something - perhaps elderly people who were living on the southern Tuscan islands or on the coast. David, a student of history of the second World War, has also called on behalf of Raymond Christensen, the Air Crash Po di Cremona, which specializes in research on crashed World War II aircraft, and prays an appeal to the peoples of the islands of the Maremma. Anyone knowing anything of this can contact us at 9870205.”

I continued to scour the internet looking for any detail of the 417th NFS. I found a document distantly related to my topic, but the bibliography was the most interesting part – it listed a history of the 417th credited to Rich Ziebart. I contacted the author for more information, and to my incredible frustration, did not receive a reply. Out of desperation, I looked up the address of every Richard Ziebart in the country, picked the one that seemed to be the best fit, and sent a letter. As it turned out, I'd found the one I was looking for.

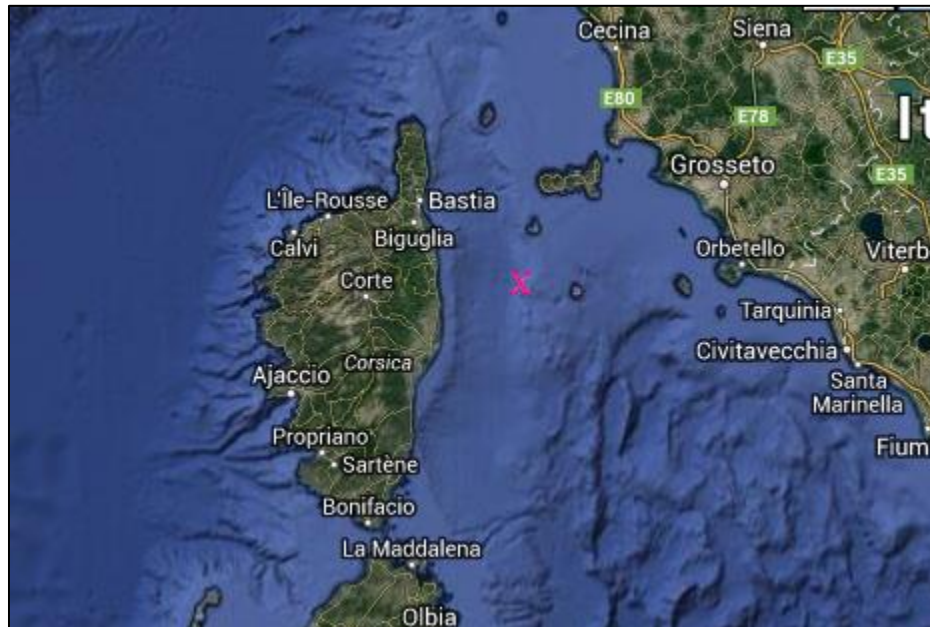
Rich Ziebart and his associate, Dan Whitney, were keeping the history of the 417th alive and in one place. Rich served in the 417th after Ray's death. Dan's father-in-law was Joe Van Laecken, a fellow R/O and a close friend of Ray's. They were quick to share an incredible wealth of information and a huge collection of photographs, many of which helped to tell Ray's story.⁴⁰

One day while searching on eBay, Dan's son found an auction offering V-mail from World War II. The author was Ray Christensen of the 417th NFS. Dan was able to convince the seller to let him purchase the letters as a lot. Six years later, in 2013, I made contact with Dan and Rich. Dan so graciously sent Ray's letters to me. It had taken awhile, but finally Ray's letters were back with his family. These letters, with an additional cache of letters held by a cousin, filled in the considerable holes in my writing of Ray's life story.

In May of 2014, I was invited to a POW/MIA accounting meeting in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where an agent assigned to Ray's case went over what they knew so far, and what information they were hoping to learn. They gave me copies of his existing military records, which were mostly posthumous, and I was able to provide the investigator with information he did not have. I was assured that the Army wants every serviceman brought home. I was also informed that they are working with limited resources, and cases have to be triaged. Newer cases take priority over older cases, and scenarios involving multiple soldiers take precedence over that of one lone soldier - and also that more easily solved cases come first, and that losses over water are the most difficult.

⁴⁰ Whitney and Ziebart have since created a website, <http://417th-nightfighters.com>, where photographs and documents pertaining to the history of the 417th can be found. Without their assistance and materials, it would have been impossible to tell Ray's story in any depth.

I continue to be hopeful, however. I recently ran across an article written by a diving team that tells of an old Beaufighter from World War II that had crashed into the sea and was discovered 62 years later, inverted on the dark sand. The crew of this aircraft was able to “ditch” and were rescued. Their plane, however, lies in about 125 feet of water. The deepest part of the Tyrrhenian Sea, where Ray’s Beaufighter crashed, is about 12,400 feet deep⁴¹, far too deep for diving. The relief map below shows roughly where the plane went down, and what the underwater terrain is like in that area. Where, exactly, Ray’s plane rests and how deep the water is there is anyone’s guess.

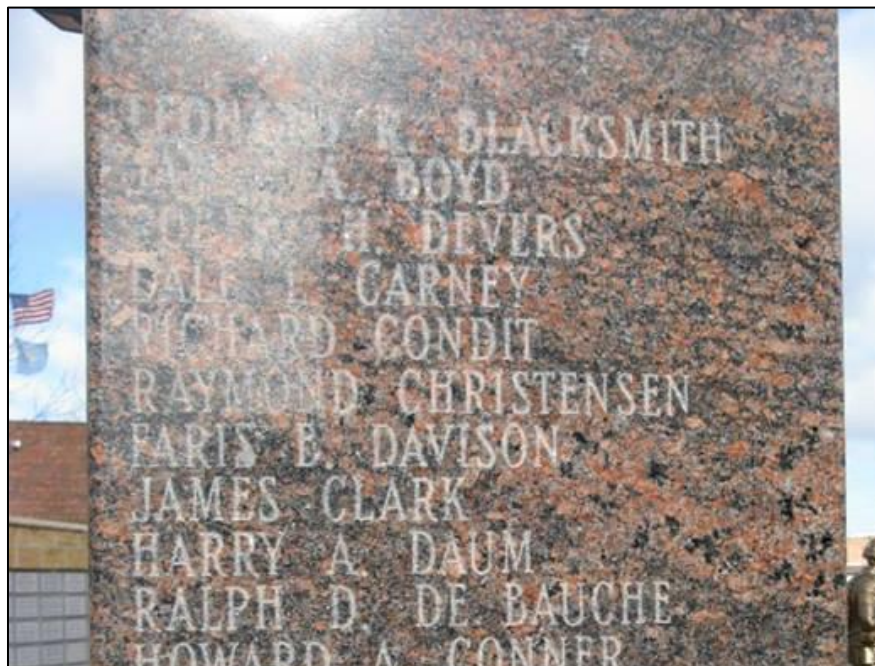


(Map data ©2016 Google Imagery ©2016 TerraMetrics)

I read a description of a Beaufighter hitting the surface of the sea, and how it lasted only 15 seconds before sinking like a rock. Ray himself said there was one instance where he had one hand on the hatch, ready to ditch. If Ray was unable to open his hatch in that short amount of time, he might still be in the aircraft.

Perhaps it’s a matter of time before the wreckage of Beaufighter KW161 is discovered. It took 70+ years for Joe Leonard’s cap and Ray’s missing V-mails to find their way home. Perhaps it’s also just a matter of time before the remains of Flight Officer Raymond Christensen are brought home to rest. My hope would be for him to be brought back to St. Paul, his home before enlisting, and buried at Fort Snelling where he began the military career he loved so much, in spite of the dangers.

⁴¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tyrrhenian_Sea



Huron (South Dakota) Veteran's memorial located at the corner
Of 3rd Street and Wisconsin Ave., SW.
(Photos courtesy of Stan Phillippi)



Plaque from the U.S. Air Force Museum
(Photo courtesy of 417th-NightFighters.com)

This project would never have been possible without the help of so many people. My only regret is that my grandmother, Lillian Christensen Knutz, is not here to share in this. She would have wanted to know these details.

Special thanks to Rich Ziebart, Dan Whitney, David Donohue, Braxton "Brick" Eisel, Paul Peyron, Janice Payne, Jenny Sasaki, Don Knutz, Lillian Knutz, Bill Knutz, Martin Crane, Don Kaiser, Stan Phillippi, the people at the American Battle Monuments Commission, and the Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office as well as many others who have answered questions, given advice, etc. Everything you did was greatly appreciated.

-Karen Seeman
January, 2016
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