

Missouri State Society Daughters of the American Revolution



Patriot of the Month

October 2015



Robert W. Hartel

Sponsored by:

Armstrong Chapter



Robert started his senior year of high school at Paris, Missouri, and at the end of the first semester enlisted at Moberly in the Army Air Corp on November 16, 1942 at the age of 17 and turned 18 on January 11, 1943. He attended basic training at Miami Beach, Florida, and was housed at the Somerset Hotel. Following basic training, he attended Radio Operator Mechanic School at Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and Aerial Gunnery School at Tyndall Field, Florida. He joined up with a bomber crew consisting of four officers and six enlisted men and after a few training missions, they were sent to Pocatello, Idaho, for practices making bombing runs by dropping 100 pound sacks of flour.

The crew had a five day layover in Topeka, Kansas, waiting for the new B-24J Bomber Liberator to come in from the factory to fly overseas. Robert called his fiancée, Kathryn Barbarick, of Fulton and told her to bring a girlfriend and come to Topeka and they could get married before he left to go overseas. Robert and Kathryn were married on November 10, 1943. The crew flew overseas in the bomber "Melodie" in which they flew twelve missions. Another crew took it up on the thirteenth mission and was shot down.

When the crew left to go overseas, they landed at Puerto Rico for a gas refill, then on across South America and to Natal, Brazil where the engine went out of the plane and they had to wait for two months to get a new engine. After receiving a new engine, they continued on and landed at Casablanca, Africa to refuel, then on to Lecce, Italy in the heel of the boot of Southern Italy where they were stationed while they flew fifty-one missions. When the crew arrived in Italy, their first job immediately after getting off the plane was to unload the wounded off the bombers which was a good introduction to air combat. The crew flew over 8 countries on bombing missions which included Northern Italy, France, Germany, Austria, Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary. Robert flew as a radio operator as well as a top turret gunner. All missions were met with anti-aircraft fire and enemy fighter planes. Some of the escorts for their missions were the Tuskegee fighter group. The most harrowing mission and one where 90% of the planes did not return was the Ploesti Oil Field Mission in Romania where Robert and his crewmates flew on three missions. On April 24, 1944, the first high altitude mission over Ploesti was on the plane Chugalug and was the 104th mission for this plane.

It was on this mission, the tail gunner and Robert were wounded. All the guns on Chugalug were knocked out of commission by enemy fighter planes and anti-aircraft fire (flak). Three of the four engines were also shot out. The covering fire of other liberators finally drove the attackers off and it was over the home field, when the pilot discovered the hydraulic system was out. This meant bringing the big bomber in for a landing without brakes. The pilot ran the plane to the end of the runway and steered it in a circle until it stopped.

After completing 51 missions and before being sent back to the USA, Robert and his crew were given a 7 day R & R at the Isle of Capri, West of Naples, Italy. They had been overseas 8 months and 21 days before returning to the USA on a liberty ship which took 18 days. Before boarding the liberty ship, an officer made a speech and told them any pictures or any information that an enemy would like to have were to be laid in a huge painted circle in front of where he was speaking and after you board the ship you will be searched and if anything you should not have is found you will be taken off the ship and I don't know when you will get to go back to the United States. There was a large pile collected in the circle as all the airmen were anxious to go home. After boarding the ship, no-one was searched. The ship left Naples, Italy and was in the Mediterranean Sea enroute to the Straits of Gibraltar (doorway to the Atlantic Ocean) making numerous figure 8 maneuvers to avoid torpedoes from German submarines. After the ship landed on the Atlantic Coast of Virginia, Robert had a 30 day leave, then was sent to Galveston, Texas, to help train co-pilots to become first pilots. He was then sent to Sioux Falls, South Dakota Radio School as an instructor. Robert received an honorable discharge on September 1, 1945, at Truax Field, Wisconsin, then was officially discharged at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, as a technical sergeant. Medals he received were 6 Bronze Stars, Purple Heart, Silver Star, Presidential Unit Citation, World War II Victory Medal, Good Conduct Medal, American Campaign Medal, and European-African-Middle Eastern Theatre Campaign Medal.

He returned to Paris, Missouri, and bought a restaurant called the "Jefferson Café." A year later, he sold the restaurant and worked for Marvin Taylor as a used farm machinery salesman. Later, he moved to Butler, Missouri, where he sold cars for Kahn Chevrolet, then to Nevada, Missouri to work as an agent for Prudential Insurance then to Chanute, Kansas, as a staff manager. He retired from Prudential Insurance in 1980.

Robert is a member of the First Christian Church, life member of the VFW and life member of the American Legion. Through the years, Robert attended the annual reunions of the 98th Bomb Group. After this year, the 98th Bomb Group/Wing Veterans Association newsletter is being discontinued because the majority of the veterans are deceased and there are not enough left to attend the annual reunions. Robert has two daughters, four grandchildren, and one great-grand-daughter. His wife, Kathryn, passed in November 2010.

The members of the Armstrong Chapter Daughters of the American Revolution wish to extend our sincere gratitude to Robert W. Hartel for his service to our great nation.



