

HEADQUARTERS
451ST BOMBARDMENT GROUP (H)
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15TH AAF IN ITALY - The story of Walt and Rocky could be fantasy. But it's true.

They never knew each other in civilian life. Both serial gunners, both in B-24 Liberators for a combined total of 131 missions, they've never been on the same combat crew. Seldom in the same organization. But for two years Walt and Rocky have been following each other around like Pat and Mike.

S/Sgt. Ross L. Koch (Rocky), 940 Michigan Ave N., Fond Du Lac, Wisc., and S/Sgt. Walter E. O'Laughlin (Walt), 623 N. Greely St., Monticello, Ill., enlisted on practically the same day in July 1941. They first met at basic training at Scott Field, Ill.

Walt soon found himself working in the mess hall, and Rocky was there - a cook.

They were separated when Rocky went to Harlingen, Tex., serial gunnery school and Walt to Las Vegas, Nev. They met again two months later, both awaiting crew assignment at Tucson, Ariz.

Walt and Rocky got different crews and different outfits. They went across at different times. They didn't know it, but they both went to England. They never wrote each other.

Down in Bengazi, Libya, one afternoon, Rocky was carting a big bunch of grapes in one arm and a watermelon in the other. He'd been sent down for some special bombing out of North Africa after already seeing a few places like Bremen, Kiel, Schweinfurt, and Cologne out of England.

Rocky plunked his goods on a restaurant table, looked up, and let out a familiar cry, "Walt, you old so-and-so." "Rocky, what the --- 're you doin' here?"

It was Walt and Rocky bombing Foggia, Naples, Bari, and cities of Sicily, both of them on different crews, both in different outfits, but seeing each other frequently - until the low level attack on Ploesti, Rumania.

Walt thought Rocky had gone down. Rocky thought Walt had gone down. Each, unknown to the other, had received the Distinguished Flying Cross for that mission.

Time passed, and they went back to England. Up in Norwich, England, Rocky was enjoying refreshments at a Red Cross. Walt walked in. They had some good days together, in between bombing more targets on the order of Munich, Leipzig, Vienna, and Regensburg.

Came Bremen again, and Walt was wounded. Rocky thought Walt had gone down. Walt thought Rocky had gone down. Walt was sent back to the States to recuperate. Rocky stuck around, hoping to be in England for the invasion. He was there through 101 missions, then he was classified "war weary" and shipped home for a rest.

Rocky was just back from furlough, walking down the company street of his re-distribution center at Miami Beach, Fla. "The first guy I saw was Walt."

Walt had married, and they brought each other up to date on their own two-man war. Both were ready to go overseas again. The two men left Miami Beach at different times. Walt and Rocky came together in the same overseas replacement squadron at Chatham Field, Ga. When they parted there, Rocky said, "Well, Walt, I doubt if I'll be seeing you for a long time." "Just take it easy," Walt replied, "I'll be seeing you."

Walt stood in the Red Cross in Foggia the other day, thinking of nothing in particular, when their seventh meeting took place.

"Walt, you old so-and-so" - the traditional greeting. "What'd I tell you," Walt reminded him.

The two are waist gunners in different squadrons of the same Liberator group. Rocky had picked up a Purple Heart since their last meeting for wounds received on a milk run to northern Italy.

Walt and Rocky want to finish 50 missions from Italy, then go to the Pacific for 100 against the Japs - on the same crew for a change. They figure to have 500 missions between them before they quit.

"If Walt goes down, I'll quit flying," said Rocky. "We've met every place else, and we'd be sure to meet in Germany."

Sgt. Ray J. Schrick
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/s/ ROBERT B. N. PECK
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