Chapter 2
THE WAR

Tom Brokaw had men like Oliver in mind when he wrote *The Greatest Generation*:

> These men and women came of age in the Great Depression, when economic despair hovered over the land like a plague. They had watched their parents lose their businesses, their farms, their jobs, their hopes. They had learned to accept a future that played out one day at a time. Then, just as there was a glimmer of economic recovery, war exploded across Europe and Asia.¹

Oliver had barely finished high school when the Nazis invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, and had just turned 20 when the Japanese bombed the U.S. Pacific Fleet on December 7, 1941. As Brokaw wrote, “When Pearl Harbor made it irrefutably clear that America was not a fortress, this generation was summoned to the parade ground and told to train for war” ²

As a man who was young, single and fit, Oliver was a perfect candidate to be called to serve his country in the military. He heard the news on the radio, and knew that he would soon be drafted. It was just a matter of fact, so it was no surprise when he got his notice in 1942.

He reported to Fort Lewis, near Tacoma, Washington for his physical exam. Since he’d had some previous radio experience and was interested in the field, he was sent to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, for training to become a radio operator on a B-24 [heavy bomber].

Richard Osborne, in *World War II Sites in the United States*, describes the location:

> Sioux Falls Army Air Field was located three miles north of town. It was built in 1942 for the 2nd Air Force as one of eight technical training air fields built during that period. The base had limited air facilities and maintained an average of only 40 aircraft at the field for training purposes. Sioux Falls Army Air Field specialized in the training of radio operator and radio maintenance personnel. Army Air Force radiomen had a secondary mission aboard combat aircraft as gunners, so when the trainees finished their courses here they went to a gunnery school elsewhere in the country.³

The sturdy B-24 had a range of 2,000 miles, flew 300 miles per hour, and carried 9,000 pounds of bombs. Its 10 crewmembers wore electrically heated gloves, suits and boots.

Stephen Ambrose, in *Citizen Soldiers*, described the uncomfortable conditions under which these young men flew. The stress began with wake-up, breakfast and briefing, and then increased on the airfield:
The men pulled themselves into the planes through an opening in the side. The officers moved from the midsection through the bomb bay, walking on a narrow steel beam with the 500- or 1,000-pound bombs hanging down on either side....To get to the nose area, the bombardier bent down and went under the pilot and past the radioman's position. All this had to be done while wearing heavy coats, gloves, boots....Every man on the plane was cramped.4

The men were young, most in the same age range as Oliver—late teens or early twenties. The life expectancy of these crews and their planes was short—about 35 bombing missions

![Image of B-24s over Ploesti oil fields, Romania. US Air Force photo.](image)

Oliver described the route he took to becoming a B-24 crewmember:

Just before graduation, I was selected to go on to radar school, but I got double pneumonia and missed the deadline. After I got out of the hospital, they gave me ten days to go home and recuperate. I was a flight radio instructor for awhile. Then they were forming another bomber group. They took all of those that I was with and put them on crews. We went to Arizona, Davis-Monthan Army Air Field near Tucson, for gunnery training.

We had some simulated training thing there that you sat in just like you was sitting in an airplane. There was a screen and planes would be coming at you. You had guns there to shoot those planes down. They had some small training planes that had a gun in them. We would ride in the back of that, shooting. A bigger plane would fly dragging a target that we would practice shooting at. From there I was a flight radio instructor for a little while, then they found crews for us. They were accumulating crews for the 449th bomb group.

At the time, mid-1943, Italian dictator Benito Mussolini was in league with Adolph Hitler. That same summer President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and U.S. General George Marshall, meeting in Casablanca, decided to invade Italy. By mid-August Mussolini had fallen, generals Patton and Montgomery had taken Sicily, and the Italians had surrendered. The Allies were ready to move on to the mainland.
However, the Germans still had control of most of the country. The conflict was long, difficult and bloody as the Allied soldiers fought their way up toward Rome from the southern toe of Italy. Mark Arnold-Forester, in *The World at War*, describes the big picture:

The Italian campaign helped the Allies towards final victory in three ways. It occupied up to twenty-six German divisions, which might otherwise have fought on the Russian front or have been sent to France to resist the invasion from Britain. It provided the Allies with aerodromes from which to bomb the Balkans, central Europe and southern France—areas which would otherwise have been out of reach of Allied aircraft.\(^6\)

Oliver was originally assigned to the 449th Heavy Bombardment Group, which had been formed in November 1943 in southern Italy. He wrote:

We flew to Florida and from there to Brazil where we waited for weather out in the Atlantic, then over to the bulge of Africa. We had an auxiliary fuel tank in the bomb bay besides the ones on the wings. If we had a headwind or extra flight patterns, it was just barely enough gas to get us over there. In Dakar it was a dirt runway. The control tower was trying to determine who needed to land first. All the planes made it! Some skidded off the runway and had to be pulled around. One place we ran into a cloudy area. We ran into a vacuum pocket. We were flying at 3,000 or 4,000 feet. The air is denser down lower and more efficient flying there. We dropped about 1,000 feet almost straight down before the props started pulling. We had lost about a third of our altitude. Lightning was running all over the outside of the place. I couldn't keep my headset on—too much racket.

We waited in Brazil for a week for good weather, but we had head winds part of the way. We waited a couple of days and a couple of guys appropriated a turkey that we cooked for Christmas dinner. They were pretty good at that snitching business. Once the weather improved and we had enough planes together, we flew across the western edge of the Sahara desert—nothing but sand and sand dunes as far as you can see. We landed at Algiers. We waited until the whole group was there, then flew across the Mediterranean to southern Italy.

During the first part of World War II, the town of Grottaglie and the nearby airport remained under the control of the Italians. Later in the War, the German Luftwaffe took it over; as a result, the British Royal Air Force bombed it heavily. After the Allies invaded southern Italy in 1943, they rehabilitated the bombed-out airfield and used it as a base for heavy bombers. The 449th with their B-24 Liberators was one of the groups that made use of the airfield beginning in January of 1944.
Oliver was among the first to land and set up camp on the bombed-out airfield outside Grottaglie, which lies in the heel of the Italian “boot”:

The air strip was patched up, but the hangar was bombed up, lots of tin hanging on it. We got there ahead of our supply ship – no tents, short on grub. We were sleeping in the hangar. Some of the fellows got a bushel of tangerines. Everybody ate too many of them, except me. I knew what would happen. All night long you would hear the tin rattling, somebody going out to relieve himself. Finally we had tents. We set up the tent for each crew. It was chilly weather, not really comfortable. Chappy and Swede, the engineer and assistant flight engineer, made a stove to burn flight fuel. Other guys copied, but didn't really know what they were doing. Some of them burned down their tents.

Oliver and his fellow airmen made trips into town for food, drink and recreation. There he befriended a shoemaker, his wife, their daughter (whose husband was in the Italian army), and her small child.

Each squadron in the 449th consisted of six planes. Oliver had originally been assigned to the 717th squadron, but he and some other men were transferred to the 719th, which had suffered heavy losses. There he remained until he finished his time.

Oliver's plane was called the Dragon Lady #2. The original Dragon Lady was salvaged as scrap after hitting a brick wall while landing. Fortunately, nobody on the crew had been injured.

From the 449th Bomb Group. In 475 days of combat the 449th lost 103 bombers, 383 airmen were killed, 363 were taken prisoner, and 159 were shot down behind enemy lines and evaded capture.

On April 4, 1944 the 719th was ordered on a bombing mission to Bucharest, Romania. The unit consisted of Dragon Lady, Consolidated Mess, Dixie Bell, Paper Doll, Born to Lose, and one unnamed plane. Only the Dragon Lady returned from the mission. The other five were shot down, their crews killed in action or taken prisoner.

Oliver describes the event:

…we had a mission to Bucharest we were going to bomb. It was a whole wing project. Several other groups were supposed to rendezvous with us. Somehow there was a leak of info, and they called all the other groups back, but somehow they goofed up and didn't give us a recall.

We were met by a bunch of German fighters with belly tanks. When they saw us, they dropped their belly tanks and attacked us. We were the last squadron on the back of the flight....When first coming in range, I started firing. Jack [Pilot John Olson] was up above me and he could
see that my tracers were falling short. He called me on the radio system and told me to raise my sights a little. I did, and then that plane went down....out of our squadron, we were the only plane that came back. Our plane had quite a few holes in it, and I used up all my ammunition. I held the trigger down a little too long and burned out one of my barrels.

![Olson’s Crew, 719th Squadron. Standing (L to R): Chapman (Flight Engineer), Cellilli (Tail gunner), Lauve (Gunner); Seebeck (Gunner); Cameron (Radioman). Kneeling (L to R): Greenhalgh (Copilot); Olson (Pilot); Siewert (Navigator); Deren (Bombardier). Photo from the 449th Bomb Group.](image)

Dragon Lady flew a couple more bombing missions once new crews and aircraft had replaced those lost over Bucharest. On April 12, 1944 the 449th, part of the Heavy Bombardment Group’s 47th Wing, was ordered on a mission over Austria.

In his book, *Of Men and Wings*, D. William Shepherd describes the mission:

April 12: Wiener Neustadt, Austria

The deep-penetration, strategic-bombing offensive continued unabated on April 12 as the 449th mounted the maximum effort that had been anticipated for the past several days—the attack on the aircraft factory at Wiener Neustadt. By the end of the day, three of the crews that were at the 0530 morning briefing would be listed on the Group records as MIAs.

The principle target of the day for the 47th Wing was the “WIENER-NEUSTADT AIRCRAFT ASSEMBLY PLANT WERK ONE.” The 5th Wing and the 304th Wing would strike similar aircraft-plant targets at Fishamend and Bad Voslau. While these three wings were concentrating on the aircraft production facilities in Austria, the 49th and 55th Wings would strike the enemy airdrome at Zagreb, Yugoslavia.

For its part in the day’s operations, the 47th Wing would send all four groups to Wiener-Neustadt in two waves. The lead wave of the 376th and 98th Groups was loaded with 500-pound, GP bombs. The second wave of the 450th and 449th was loaded with 100-pound, clustered, fragmentation bombs.
The Luftwaffe was estimated to be capable of sending as many as 300 fighters to oppose the attack on Wiener Neustadt. To help deal with this enemy fighter force, escort on the route to the target would be provided by one group of Lightnings. At the IP (Initial Point), the 449th formation would be met by a group of Thunderbolts which would provide cover over the target and along the route back.

Photographic reconnaissance conducted on February 28 and March 8 showed that some eighty-three heavy guns were located around the target area. The lead aircraft in each attack unit loaded three cartons of “window”, a radar countermeasure also known as “chaff”, that was to be dispensed from the IP to the target in an effort to confuse any radar-directed anti-aircraft batteries.

Swan’s crew, in ship #55, led the 449th combat formation into the air at 0747 hours. By 0830, the Group had thirty-six B-24s airborne and headed for rendezvous with the other three groups. Shortly after making the rendezvous, ship #42 turned back because of “a very sick gunner.” The formation headed northward across the Adriatic. A malfunctioning supercharger forced ship #27 to drop out of the formation and make an early return before reaching the Yugoslavian coast.

From the coast of Yugoslavia, the planned route would have taken the 449th just west of Mostar. For some unexplained reason the 449th formation drifted well to the right of the briefed course. This variation in course almost resulted in disaster for Brown’s crew aboard ship #33 when the formation came within range of the flak defenses of Mostar. The “moderate to intense, accurate, and heavy” flak ruptured one of the gas cells in the left wing of ship #33, and severed the gas lines between the booster pumps. It took a good ten minutes for Lt. Brown and his crew to realize they had no choice but to drop out of formation and head back to Grottaglie.

The P-38 escorts joined the formation at 1105 hours to take the bombers to the IP. As the formation approached the IP, the P-38s handed the escort job over to the arriving P-47s. Flak bursts began to appear in the sky ahead. As bomb-bay doors opened, the waist gunners in the lead aircraft of each unit began to dispense window, the radar countermeasure. With “moderate to intense” flak bursting around them, the thirty-three aircraft flew over the target, and dropped 52.05 tons of 100-pound, GP bombs at 1207 hours from 22,000 to 24,600 feet.

The landing ground and the airdrome were observed to be well covered by bomb bursts. Dense smoke covered the whole target area with “columns of it rising to 10,000 feet.” Flames and at least one large secondary explosion were observed as the hangars just to the right of the aiming point were squarely hit by the bomb pattern. Coming off the target, the formation rallied to the left. While one group of enemy fighters decoyed the escorts away from the bombers, another group succeeded in closing with the 449th formation.10

The following is from the official Narrative Report for Mission #43 of April 12, 1944:

The average estimate of enemy fighter planes seen was 25 to 30 ME-109s and FW-190s, the number of the latter varying from 2 to 6 planes. Most of our aircraft reported attacks by 6 to 10 fighters. Six of our aircraft, however, reported attacks by 15 to as many as 30 fighters.

All but one of the ships reporting the larger number of attackers stated the attacks were en mass towards the nose, one reporting two waves of 12 to 15 each. Several reported that decoys drew off the P-38 escorts and then mass attacks abreast were made out of the sun from 12 to 2 o’clock. Those reporting the smaller number of planes likewise reported many of the attacks.
towards the nose from 10 to 1 o’clock with the attackers coming in abreast. Most of the other of these smaller attacks were at the tail from 6 o’clock level. Practically all of the attacks were very aggressive and were pressed right thru the formation. The formation was under attack for about 15 to 30 minutes from the time our aircraft started their rally.

Shepherd continues the account:

Three 449th B-24s fell victim to the aggressive enemy fighter attacks. Ship #10 [the Dragon Lady], manned by Olson’s crew flying in position ‘A-1-5’, “started losing altitude”—probably due to flak damage—as the formation made the rally. The enemy fighters immediately pounced upon the stricken aircraft which had the #4 engine feathered and one wing covered with oil. Ship #10 was “last seen making for clouds just beyond target, time 1207 hours.”

The ploy of releasing window to confuse enemy radar had only worked for a short time, as Oliver recalled:

We had shredded tin foil that we would throw out when we started our bomb run...It worked several times, but this time one of the guys down there had smartened up. We took a burst of flack just under the bomb bay doors that were open. That messed up the hydraulic system so we couldn't close the doors, couldn't lower the flaps and couldn't lower the landing gears. We fell out of formation.

As soon as we got out of the flack area two ME-109 planes came at us. One of the waist gunners shot one of them down. They had longer range than our 50 caliber machine. They got the other engine. We were up 16,000 feet. Jack put us into a steep bank and headed over toward some hills. We were trailing smoke from two engines.

As soon as we got to the cloud cover, Jack pulled the plane out. When he pulled out, we all sat pretty darn heavy in our seats. He had to get it pulled out because he didn't know how high the hills were in the clouds.

There's a river on the north side of Croatia. Our goal was to get across that river because then we had a chance of getting help from Partisans there in Yugoslavia.
The Dragon Lady did make it to Yugoslavian territory, but just barely. Oliver described details of the crash landing:

We had one inboard engine wind-milling, which sets up a lot of drag. With the bomb bay door open creating more drag, we were going down. We clipped the trees on the north side of the river, crossed the river and set it down in a pasture. That open bomb bay plowed up a lot of sod and rolled it up into the bomb bay. That probably saved us. We hit a little something or other and the plane nosed up.

At the moment of impact, Oliver was busily destroying codes and other sensitive material. A large black box came down on him, knocking him out. Deren and another crewman had taken his place at the radioman’s table, and were trapped as it got crushed in the crash.

Oliver had fallen over onto one of the men at the table as he lost consciousness. When he came to, Deren was struggling to get him off his lap. Oliver used his unauthorized pocket knife to free Deren’s foot from the splintered remains of the table, but the other crewman remained trapped.

Meanwhile the pilot and copilot simply unbuckled their seatbelts and climbed out through a nearby crack that had opened up as the plane rolled up onto the nose turret. They and the uninjured crewmen rushed to get their injured comrades out of the plane, assess their injuries, and administer what first aid they could. They worked as quickly as possible because one of the engines was on fire and the remaining fuel in the wing tanks could have exploded at any moment.

The greatest fear of downed airmen was that they would fall into the hands of the Germans, who would either take them as prisoners of war or execute them on the spot. Instead, three local men appeared. After speaking with the crewmen, they went to a nearby house and returned with two jacks to help free the second man at the radio table.

At that time, two groups of resistance fighters were rescuing downed American fliers—at grave risk. The Germans had instituted a policy of killing 100 Yugoslavs for every German soldier killed, and had been known to wipe out entire villages for hiding Allied airmen, or even on suspicion of doing so.
The anti-communist, anti-fascist Serbian Chetniks hid and aided several hundred fliers, but the pro-
Communist Partisans, mostly Croats, rescued the majority of them. They moved the men by way of an
“underground railway” to various pick-up points in Yugoslavia, to be transported back to their bases in
Italy.

Either way, the experiences of fliers rescued in Yugoslavia were much the same: They were welcomed
and aided by strong, sturdy rural village people who hid them in their own homes, haylofts and forests,
and fed them from their own meager food supplies. It was fortunate that the Dragon Lady had made it
across the border and that the crew had fallen into friendly hands. Had they crash-landed in Austria,
there would have been little hope that they would have evaded capture.

That night, at the farmhouse where the crew had taken refuge, someone with medical experience
examined them. Oliver, with a head injury and with one leg bruised from hip to knee, was in the worst
shape.

In the morning, two Yugoslavian political leaders appeared, along with nearly 30 Partisans. The ten
crew men joined the group and began a long journey deep into enemy-held Yugoslavia, all the while
avoiding encounters with the Germans. Moving from hiding place to hiding place, the Partisans ferried
the crew 380 miles south toward safety at a British mission in the central part of the country.

“Before we got there we had a few interesting experiences,” Oliver recalled. About one o'clock the
next morning, after a few hours of sleep, the crewmen began walking with the group of Partisans down
a little valley toward the railroad and a major river:

The Germans had a little pill box. Those were arranged so that they could fire toward each
other, but not hit each other. There was a wire strung along through the brush, which was a
trigger to alert the guys in the pill box. The Partisans had that all figured out. They told us to
squat in the brush and wait. When it was my turn, a Partisan came and touched my shoulder.
There was a man on each side of that wire. They picked up one of my feet, set it over, then
shifted my weight and set the other foot across.

There was a wire on each side of the railroad. There were about 50 of us all together. There
was a rowboat at the river that would haul 10 people. They shuttled us across. The river was
fairly wide. We were eager to get out of that valley and into some timber before it got too
daylight.

After we got up in the timber, some of the people were pretty exhausted. Everybody found
what shelter they could from the wind. When you are too tired, you sleep for a bit, then you get
too cold, get up move around a little and settle in for another nap. After daylight we took off
again, into the mountains on the far side.

On the second day they took one of their men to a clandestine hospital for treatment. Meanwhile,
another flier joined their crew, keeping the number at 10. The new man had been a tail gunner on a B-
17. He told Oliver that the plane had come down “windmilling like a maple leaf,” and had landed
softly enough that he simply walked away from it. A few days later, the crew separated from the larger
group, guided by an English-speaking Partisan who had spent time logging in Oregon.
Oliver's skill and hardiness as a “country boy” served him well as they trekked across rugged terrain. Along the way he witnessed the suffering of the local populace, and also the enduring hostility between the Croatian Partisans and the Serbian Chetniks:

We were headed up into those mountains. There was a river coming down from those mountains...the river was in a pretty deep chasm there. There was another trail following along up the river, but there was another group of Yugoslavs. They had always been fighting each other....The other group was on the other side of the river.

These fellows were really hard up. There weren't enough shoes, coats, guns to go around. These fellows would run up to the front lines barefoot. There was snow on the ground. There was a partner up there about the same size, and they would take his shoes and gun and then he would run back, leaving blood in the snow.

Oliver continued his account:

The trail went down a steep hill, across a cable bridge, and then to flatter land. Just as we got to where the trail met the bridge, we caught up to a pack train. One of the horse's front legs wouldn't hold. It couldn't go downhill with a pack on. They were carrying two 40 pound packs, but those horses were not in good shape. I picked up one of those sacks that they were unloading from the horse, carried it down to the cable bridge, then went back for the other sack. Meanwhile they got the horses down.

When I got back with the second bag, they were trying to get the horses across the swaying cable bridge. The horse would go a few steps and stop, and they would swat him across the hips. Then, part way across, he reared up and the fellow with the halter couldn't hold him. The horse fell across the cable and 40 or 50 feet down onto a rock. The fellow that had been leading it leaned on the cable and looked down, waiting for the cable to settle down, then shook his head and shot the horse.

By that time, Oliver had become separated from his group. A man motioned for him to wait, then pointed up the trail toward a sturdy Yugoslavian woman. Oliver followed her off the main trail, barely keeping up with her, until she stopped and pointed toward a familiar group of men. Oliver rejoined his crew, and they continued on.

One night they stayed in a barn, and on another they crowded into a house with several other men. Oliver noted the industry and strength of the local people, as well as certain cultural differences:

Along toward evening but before dark, we came to a two story farmhouse with a huge masonry chimney. A stairway went up to a bedroom up above. Two middle-aged women and a man were staying there. When I went in, I saw the wood box almost empty, and I started to cut firewood. Then the old man went to the barn. I followed him.

There was a horse in the stall. The manger was in front of the stall. He motioned for me to give hay to that horse. That horse was crowding the side of the stall so I couldn't get in there. About that time the old man whomped the rump of the horse and I went ahead and filled his manger. That old man had asthma and didn't want to have to move that hay.

The next morning, I was up before the group. I heard somebody in the kitchen. One of the women was fixing some food, and the old man was getting ready to wash his face. Taking a mouthful of water from a dipper, he squirted water into his hands and smeared it on his face, on
his head, once around his ears, once more and he was ready to go. That's what you call a spit bath.

I went out to bring in some wood, but then I saw that other woman going into the barn. She took the horse and hooked it up to a stonebolt, a little low sled. I got a fork to help her load that stonebolt....I was no match for her in loading that manure. After she took off, I went back in and we had something to eat.

Another incident where Oliver's farm-boy stamina proved useful occurred as his group was following a trail that came out of a patch of timber into a meadow. They spotted a man walking in the timber on the far side. Apparently the guide needed to connect with him and receive instructions before they could continue. He called out to the other man, who was about 50 yards away, but he didn’t hear. Oliver sprinted across the meadow, running wide so as not to startle the man, and got his attention for their guide.

The fliers wore flight boots which included inserts that had electric wires for heat. These boots were designed for sitting for hours in cold airplanes at high altitude, not for hiking across rugged mountain terrain. Oliver was the only member of the crew who brought his ordinary GI shoes on the flight.

With the best of intentions, the Partisans checked the men’s feet and brought them shoes made of half-tanned leather. Unfortunately, most of them were too small. Deren in particular had big feet, so Oliver gave him his shoes and put on a pair of the rough, ill-fitting shoes provided by the Partisans. He modified them to be wearable, but that still meant blisters.

The group continued on for 28 days. By the time they reached the British mission, they were half starved, but the men there were also short on supplies, except for hot tea. After a few days, the crewmen were taken to an airfield after dark. They waited for a plane, but the one that came was not allowed to land. Apparently it was not safe.

The next night they boarded a cargo plane, possibly a C-47, for a flight to Bari, Italy. Bari was the headquarters of the British Secret Intelligence Service and the American Office of Strategic Services. Both groups were orchestrating espionage and information gathering from that corner of Europe.

Before they took off, the men were asked to leave their outer clothes. They left wrapped in blankets. Oliver gives no explanation for this, and probably was not given one himself.

In Bari, back in uniform, they attended a ceremony in which medals were handed out. Oliver was not much impressed:

Deren, when they gave the medals out, said I was the only one who deserved the Distinguished Flying Cross. They said it was just because I had let Deren have my shoes. They didn't know I had stayed in a burning airplane to get a couple of other fellows loose.

We didn't take those medals very seriously. When you are saving your own hide, you don't need a medal for that!

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2) Ibid., xi


9) *Grottaglie and Home, A History of the 449th Bomb Group (Book III)* (449th Bomb Group Association, 1989), 115


11) *Narrative Report No. 43 Date: 12 April 1944. 449th Bomb Group Mission Report.*

12) Shepherd, *op. cit.*