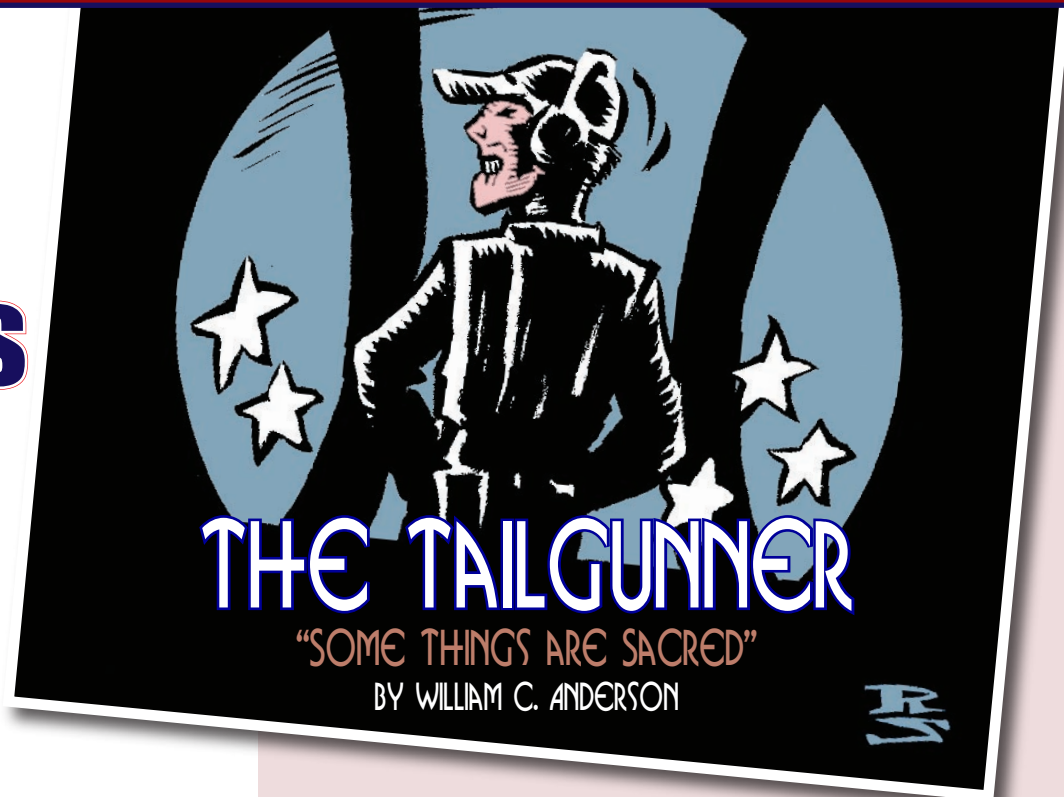


Bomber Tales



As any bomber crew that flew in World War Two knows, the tailgunner was one of the most important members of the crew. Ours was no exception.

Nick being a slender, scarcely dry-behind-the-ears little firebrand of Italian extraction, who was well liked by the crew members.

We were assigned to the 15th Air Force in Italy, and our 451st Bomb Group had just rallied off the bomb run after bombing a ball-bearing plant in Austria. As aircraft commander, I had just asked for a battle damage report over the intercom. Happily, the damaged assessment was minimal, considering the heavy concentration of flak guns in the area.

After the crew members had checked in from all positions, our tailgunner suddenly broke in. "Skipper, I got a problem."

"What is it, Nick?"

"It's a little embarrassing. I was using the relief tube when we hit that turbulence back there. Now an important part of my anatomy is stuck to the barrel of my gun."

It took a bit of doing to sort this all out. The B-24 Liberator, being unpressurized, was colder'n a witch's heart at 26,000 feet. Anything damp would stick to the frozen metal in a death grip. "You have to warm up that gun barrel, Nick. You know what to do."

There was a moment of silence as Nick noodled this. Then, "Lieutenant, you gotta be kidding!"

"I'm not kidding. You have to fire your guns."

There was a loud exclamation, then, "Lieutenant, you know the recoil on these twin 50's -"

"I know, but you're going to be stuck for the duration until you get that gun barrel heated. Now fire off a few rounds. The rest of our formation would be beholden if you didn't shoot any of them down."

There were further muffled exclamations over the intercom, followed by the vibration of the tail guns being fired. There was a long period of silence, then a loud oath, followed by a long sigh of relief. "Mission accomplished, Skipper. My manhood and I are once again as one. Bloody but unbowed."

"There's some sulfa in the medicine kit. You want the waist gunner to come back and put a bandage -"

"Not on you life, Lieutenant. Some things are sacred!"

Not long after that the war ended in Europe. I had been blessed with a top-drawer bomber crew, and it was my good fortune to bring them home mostly in one piece. All were covered with medals and distinction.

Combat seems to be a crucible in which lifetime relationships are formed. Our crew was no different. Following their military discharge, we kept in close touch during the ensuing years. At our reunions, no subject or war story was taboo. Except for one. No one, but no one, ever discussed how Nick, our tail-gunner was wounded.

To this day, not even Nick's offspring know where their father had been injured to be awarded the Purple Heart. And it is highly doubtful if they will ever know. For as Nick so poetically put it:

"Some things are sacred."