

Printed in *The Searcher*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Winter 2014): 14-15; 18.

GENEii Category 1Third Place

The Ripple Effect

By Linda Gartz

On Christmas Day, 1944, my uncle, Frank Ebner Gartz, and fellow airmen, began their flight overseas for World War II bombing missions, but bad weather prevented them from reaching their final destination. Ebner, as the family called him, wrote to my dad about a two-week layover in Africa: “All we did was eat, sleep, haul wood and coal for our fire, play cards, raise hell, get drunk, and have a hell of a good time.”ⁱ

Ebner had completed navigator training stateside during the previous two years with the Army Air Corps. About to face combat, a little hell-raising seemed in order, but Ebner wrote his parents a far more subdued letter about his stay in Morocco.

January 2, 1945

Hello Folks,

We celebrated New Years here but it’s not like the way we used to do it. I thought back to the times we used to pour lead into water to see what our fortune would be for the New Year.ⁱⁱ

“Pouring lead,” was a favorite New Year’s Eve tradition my grandparents brought with them to America from Romania and passed on to their family. We melted a chunk of lead in an old pot on the stove and then, with a flick of the wrist, dumped about a tablespoon of the molten metal into a bowl of water. Bubbling furiously, the cold liquid instantly solidified the lead into fantastical shapes. It was like analyzing a three-dimensional Rorschach as we tried to tease meaning out of each unique form to discern what the upcoming year held in store.

Ebner had spent his wartime New Year’s Eve with eight fellow-crew members, drinking brandy, sweet wine, and a gallon of tomato juice while playing a “nice quiet game of black jack” instead of pouring lead. Even if he had, no one’s wildest imagination could have predicted his fate.

Ebner was assigned to the 2nd Bomb Group to navigate B-17 bombers from the Amendola Airbase, near Foggia, Italy, just inside the spur of the boot on the Adriatic.ⁱⁱⁱ He was part of the 15th Air Force, which operated a complex of airbases in southern Italy. From its inception on November 1, 1943, to the end of the war in Europe on May 8, 1945, the 15th made 148,955 heavy bomber sorties against the enemy, dropping 303,842 tons of bombs on enemy targets in nine countries of Europe.^{iv}

The enemy returned fire measure for measure. Germany’s FW190 fighter planes pounded the American bombers as they flew toward and away from their targets. Allied crews also faced the deadly accurate 88mm and 105mm anti-aircraft guns, which the Germans called Flugzeugabwehr-Kanone, (literally: airplane repulsing cannons)—Flak.^v Flak became the acronym for the hail of metal shards that tore through the planes and ripped airmen apart. By the end of the war, 20,430 bomber crewmen of the 15th Air Force were killed, wounded, missing, or taken prisoner.^{vi} Every mission flown was one more plunge into death’s snapping maw.

Ebner flew the first of his twenty-five missions on January 20, 1945.^{vii} The target was the German’s strategically critical oil storage at Regensburg. Flak was intense.^{viii} On February 13th, he flew with forty-

one other aircraft to bomb an ordnance depot in Vienna.^{ix} Five days later, he wrote home about it. "It was super Hell. We had 42 Flak holes in the ship but no one was hurt."^x

For his fifth mission, he flew in one of forty-two B-17s that bombed the Verona/Perona Railroad Bridge in Italy. The co-pilot of another plane on that mission wrote later that his navigator continued to call headings after his leg had been "severed by flak eight inches below the crotch....The bombardier effectively applied a tourniquet that kept him [the navigator] from bleeding to death."^{xi}

A March 16th bombing run on Vienna^{xii} prompted this description from Ebner to his father: "It was the hottest think I have seen so far...more and bigger flak. My bombardier sits up in that Plexiglas nose [Ebner also sat in the nose] where he can see all that stuff exploding around him. It sort of gets on his nerves. I was trying to explain to him that when your time comes it doesn't matter where you are...your number is up, and that's all there is to it."^{xiii}

With fellow crewmen losing limbs, shot down, and killed, my twenty-year old uncle's philosophy of survival allowed him to focus on function rather than fear. To my parents, he explained it this way:

"When my turn comes I'll get it no matter how much protection I wear, and if the good Lord has some other way [for me] to die, I'm not going to get it on a battle field. Some people call it fatalism, and perhaps it is, but it's a good way to feel about it."^{xiv}

His fatalism had served him well, helping him keep his cool and encourage other crew members to do the same...and it seemed fate had given him a pass.

The war ended on May 8th, just a week before Ebner's twenty-first birthday. He had survived uninjured. What a blessing it would be to have him home again! His mother was eager to see her youngest finish college and marry his high school sweetheart, Cookie, whom his mom adored.^{xv} But Ebner wasn't so sure he wanted to follow this plan, and a mounting ambivalence crept into his letters.

"Right now I'm very confused as to what I'm going to do in the post war era. I want and don't want to go to school. I want and don't want to get married. So I really don't know what I want to do."^{xvi}

In June, 1945, he found a way out of his dilemma when he scored a coveted job with the 15th Air Force Headquarters: flying around the high ranking-generals and other VIPs, who were arriving in droves, developing plans to rebuild Europe after the war.

"Take in your welcoming mat, as your little brother is remaining in the Mediterranean Theater as long as he can....^{xvii} There's congressmen, senators and special envoy men that all have appointments somewhere in the theater, and our job is getting them there. The thing that might do me some good is getting to know some of these wheels for future reference. The army is finally paying off for the times I flew over Vienna on a carpet of Flak."^{xviii}

It was a fabulous opportunity—good salary, extra flight pay, the chance to rub shoulders with the military and political elite—and the perfect excuse to put off those nagging maternal expectations. Of course, the family back in Chicago was disappointed he wouldn't be returning home right away, but the war was over. They could finally stop worrying.

The job turned out to be everything Ebner had hoped for. He wrote to his friend, Ted Symon, "I've been having a swell time since I've been with this outfit and have seen quite a bit in my young age. My first trip...I virtually had a tour of the Mediterranean."^{xix} He flew to Athens, then to Jerusalem and

Bethlehem, on to Cairo, Casablanca, and back to Italy. His adventures continued during the summer of 1945. He flew to London twice, Egypt, Bucharest, Tel Aviv, and the French Riviera where, he wrote, “the girls wear 4 patches and call it a bathing suit!”^{xx} He toured Venice in a gondola, joined a group of war correspondents in Florence, stayed in Salzburg where he “got into some beautiful cars, one of which was Himmler’s,” visited the Eagle’s Nest, where Hitler had planned four of the Nazi’s invasions, and his visit with a swim in Lake Garda.^{xxi} He knew this assignment was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.^{xxii}

Besides relishing the travel, Ebner discovered girls everywhere found him irresistible. “I’ll be putting off my wedding for quite some time,” he wrote to Ted. “At least [until] I’ve had enough time to sow all my wild oats and brother, I’m getting rid of plenty over here.”^{xxiii} By August he’d come to a decision regarding marriage. “I can live without it.”^{xxiv}

As his tour of duty wound down, he stayed on, hoping to get permission from the Soviets to visit his maternal grandfather in Romania. “After I see Granddad,” he wrote his parents, “I’ll be ready to come home. I passed up another chance [to fly home] 3 days ago, but another will come along.”^{xxv}

It never did.

When the family hadn’t hear from Ebner for several weeks, they assumed his busy flying schedule precluded time to write. Then a letter arrived on October 17th, ten days after it was written on October 7th, from the 300th Hospital in Naples. It stopped my grandmother’s heart:

Dear Mrs. Gartz:

The Hospital Command regrets to inform you that your son, 1st Lt. Frank E. Gartz..., who was admitted to this hospital October 5, is now considered to be seriously ill. Frank is in the early stages of Infantile Paralysis [polio infecting the spinal cord], and it is impossible at this time to say what the outcome will be.^{xxvi}

In a panic, my mother, father, uncle, and grandmother, sent out a flurry of letters,

“What did they do to you, Darling,” wrote my mom.^{xxvii}

From Grandma: “The letter from Capt. Uhler came to us like a bomb, that this couldn’t happen to you.”^{xxviii}

Dad sent poems and family photos, and everyone added homey tidbits of news to cheer up the patient, but a gut-wrenching undercurrent of frantic worry crackles beneath each letter’s encouraging tone. From Dad: “I can’t tell you how hard the news has hit us all... We all pray for you, Sonny, every day at every occasion, for you to pull through o.k.”^{xxix}

The Air Force immunization card I found among my uncle’s possessions showed he had received every available inoculation against known diseases, but the polio vaccine was yet to be developed.

A few weeks later, all the letters, with their warm wishes and lighthearted anecdotes, arrived back in the family mailboxes with DECEASED stamped boldly in red across the front of each envelope, a sickening reminder of what the family couldn’t have known: Ebner had been dead five days before anyone at home even knew he was ill. His commanding officer, Major David T. Perkins wrote to my grandparents on October 18, 1945, six days after Ebner’s death at 10:15 p.m., October 12, 1945.^{xxx}

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Gartz:

Your son, Lt. Frank E. Gartz served with us as this base for over four months....I wish to express our deepest sympathy and condolence. He was popular among his fellow officers and enlisted men and was a credit to you, to us, and to his country, which he served so well.^{xxxi}

More than 400,000 Americans died in World War II,^{xxxii} each family wracked with the pain of loss. It was just the utter irony of Ebner's death that still lives with me today. After facing the full defensive power of German fighter planes and anti-aircraft machine guns, he was brought down by the stealth of a deadly virus, well after the fighting was over. Dad lost his best friend. My mother lost her favorite brother-in-law. My grandparents were awash in grief. "Our pride. Our All. Gone," my grandfather sobbed.^{xxxiii}

Shortly after the letter arrived with the news of Ebner's death, my mother discovered she was pregnant with my parents' first child, conceived within days of his passing. My grandmother's response to the news of her first grandchild was, "Don't have children. They'll only be used as cannon fodder." It is impossible to say how our lives might have differed had Ebner lived, but the ripples of his death, like a stone to everyone's hearts, flowed to the edges of our family's future in ways no molten lead could have augured.

ⁱ Frank Ebner Gartz, to Fred & Lillian Gartz, brother & wife, letter, January 5, 1945, Letter from Africa, Box 17: Ebner Correspondence, Gartz Family Papers, privately held by Linda Gartz, Evanston, Illinois

ⁱⁱ Frank Ebner Gartz, to his parents, Josef & Elisabeth Gartz, V-mail letter, January 2, 1945, Letter from Africa, Box 17: Ebner Correspondence, Gartz Family Papers, privately held by Linda Gartz, Evanston, Illinois

ⁱⁱⁱ Second Bombardment Association. David Carlock, designer; Sid Underwood, maintenance.

<http://www.2ndbombgroup.org>

^{iv} 15th Airforce Site, home page, "Fifteenth Air Force Summary," paragraph 3. <http://www.15thaf.org/index.htm>

^v Urban Dictionary, definition #1 <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=flak> (Note: I noticed many sites claim "FL" in "Flak" is for "Flieger," which means "flyer." Flugzeug (airplane) is correct as that is what anti-aircraft missiles were shooting at.

^{vi} 15th Airforce Site, home page, "Fifteenth Air Force Summary," paragraph 4. <http://www.15thaf.org/index.htm>

^{vii} Second Bombardment Association. 2nd Bomb Group Research Data Base. 2nd Personnel. Gartz*

<http://www.2ndbombgroup.org>

^{viii} Defenders of Liberty: 2nd Bombardment Group/Wing, 1918-1993. Multiple authors: 2nd BG Historians. Turner Publishing Company, June 1, 1996 (out of print); PDF at <http://www.2ndbombgroup.org>; pp 251-300, Mission No. 346, 1/20/45

^{ix} Defenders of Liberty: 2nd Bombardment Group/Wing, 1918-1993. Multiple authors: 2nd BG Historians. Turner Publishing Company, June 1, 1996 (out of print); PDF at <http://www.2ndbombgroup.org>; pp 251-300, Mission No. 354, 2/13/45.

^x Frank Ebner Gartz, to Fred & Lillian Gartz, letter, February 18, 1945 Letters from Italy.

^{xi} Defenders of Liberty: 2nd Bombardment Group/Wing, 1918-1993. Multiple authors: 2nd BG Historians. Turner Publishing Company, June 1, 1996 (out of print); PDF at <http://www.2ndbombgroup.org>; pp 251-300, Henry L. Berryhill Jr. Letter to Rudolph Koller 5/23/94. Mission No. 368, 2/28/45.

^{xii} Defenders of Liberty: 2nd Bombardment Group/Wing, 1918-1993. Multiple authors: 2nd BG Historians. Turner Publishing Company, June 1, 1996 (out of print); PDF at <http://www.2ndbombgroup.org>; pp 251-300, Mission No. 379, 3/16/45.

^{xiii} Frank Ebner Gartz, to Josef Gartz, his father. letter, March 16, 1945, Letters from Italy.

^{xiv} Frank Ebner Gartz, to Fred & Lillian Gartz, letter, March 24, 1945 Letters from Italy.

^{xv} Elisabeth Gartz letter to Frank Ebner Gartz, 1945, (exact date unclear), Letters from Chicago, II, "Ebner, you know that I like nothing better as you with Cooky [sic] to share the life together."

July 28, 1943: "Cooky is always so lovely and good....I do like her."

February 24, 1945: "You know how much I like Cooky." Box 17: Ebner Correspondence, Gartz Family Papers, privately held by Linda Gartz, Evanston, Illinois

^{xvi} Frank Ebner Gartz, to Fred & Lillian Gartz. Letter, June 7, 1945. Letters from Italy.

^{xvii} Frank Ebner Gartz, to Fred & Lillian Gartz. Letter, June 7, 1945. Letters from Italy.

^{xviii} Frank Ebner Gartz, to Fred & Lillian Gartz. Letter, June 16, 1945. Letter from Caserta, Italy.

^{xix} Frank Ebner Gartz, to his friend, Ted Symon. Letter, July 16, 1945. Letter from Caserta, Italy.

^{xx} Frank Ebner Gartz, to Lillian Gartz, letter, September 2, 1945. Letter from Caserta, Italy.

^{xxi} Frank Ebner Gartz, to Fred & Lillian Gartz, letter, August 15, 1945. Letter from Caserta, Italy.

^{xxii} "...once I a lifetime opportunity." Frank Ebner Gartz, to Ted Symon, letter, August 19, 1945. Letter from Caserta, Italy. "I'll never be able to come over here on my money again so I might just as well do it on the government."

^{xxiii} Frank Ebner Gartz, to his friend, Ted Symon. Letter, July 16, 1945. Letter from Caserta, Italy.

^{xxiv} Frank Ebner Gartz, to Fred & Lillian Gartz. Letter, August 18, 1945, Letter from Caserta, Italy.

^{xxv} ^{xxv} Frank Ebner Gartz, to Josef & Elisabeth Gartz. Letter, August 18, 1945, Letter from Caserta, Italy.

^{xxvi} Capt. James Uhler, chaplain, to Josef & Elisabeth Gartz. Letter, October 7, 1945, Letter from 300th General Hospital, Naples, Italy.

^{xxvii} Lillian Gartz, letter to Frank Ebner Gartz, October 17, 1945.

^{xxviii} Elisabeth Gartz, letter to Frank Ebner Gartz, October 18, 1945.

^{xxix} Fred Gartz, letter to Frank Ebner Gartz, October 19, 1945.

^{xxx} Major David T. Perkins, letter to Josef & Elisabeth Gartz, letter, October 18, 1945 Letter from Marcianise Air Base, Italy.

^{xxxi} Major David T. Perkins, *ibid*

^{xxxii} Hannah Fischer, Information Research Specialist, "American War and Military Operations Casualties: Lists and Statistics, Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, updated July 13, 2005. Total Deaths, World War II. From the Navy Department Library website:

<http://www.history.navy.mil/library/online/american%20war%20casualty.htm#t1>

^{xxxiii} Fred Gartz, letter to Catherine Hartley, Frank E. Gartz's high school division teacher, November 2, 1945.