

SATOR S. "SANDY" SANCHEZ

by MSgt Barry L. Spink

Splintered wood and jagged metal fragments exploded past Staff Sergeant Sator S. "Sandy" Sanchez's face as he desperately pushed the BT-13's rudder pedals in an effort to stop the runaway aircraft. Two minutes earlier, Sanchez had spotted the crewless aircraft taxiing on its own power down Merced Army Air Field's flightline. The bright California sunshine gleamed off the whirling propeller as the empty aircraft headed for other aircraft neatly lined up on the concrete ramp, leading into a maintenance hangar. Sandy didn't hesitate a moment. Running as fast as he could, Sanchez caught up to the aircraft, but the force of air racing back across the wings and fuselage from the propeller slowed him down. Trying to reach the edge of the open rear cockpit, the sergeant could see his prize slowly crawl away from him. Suddenly, a giant hand slapped Sandy to the rough pavement and the BT-13 rolled on. The horizontal stabilizer had caught him on the upper back and pushed him out of the way. Determined now, more than ever, the diminutive airplane maintenance inspector jumped up and again raced to the errant aircraft. With a Herculean effort, Sandy grabbed the sill of the rear most cockpit and pulled himself in. He immediately turned off the ignition switch, and glanced up to see the imminent collision. Sator's hands flew across the cockpit in desperation; closing the throttle, pulling the mixture control lever, and pushing the tops of the rudder pedals to initiate braking action. Too late.

Although he managed to turn off the engine and shut down fuel flow, the momentum of the trainer carried itself into another aircraft with a sickening mixture of breaking wood and twisting metal. Despite the fear of an explosion at any moment, Sandy didn't leave the cockpit until it stopped, making sure it could do no more harm. It wasn't a total loss; Sergeant Sanchez kept an even bigger disaster from occurring by confining the damage to two airplanes. The speed of the runaway aircraft careening into the hangar with a resultant explosion would have killed a number of men and destroyed many aircraft. On this March 14th, 1943, Sandy became a hero to the men of Merced. Exactly two years and a day later, he wouldn't be so lucky.

Born Satero Sierra on March 22nd 1921, in Joliet, Illinois, Sandy's childhood reflected the rough side of town. His mother lived to see Satero reach the age of two and a half, when she died of tuberculosis. His father remarried five years later, but he died scarcely a year later, 1929, shot outside a tavern, supposedly over a gambling debt. Satero and his older sister, Magdalena, lived with their step-mother, Joquina Sanchez, a kind and beautiful lady, until she also died, in 1934. Both brother and sister went to live with their step-grandparents, Fidencio and Belen Sanchez. Adopted by the Sanchez's, the 13 year old Sator as his name became officially, began to take in interest in the aircraft flown by students of Lewis College. Riding his bicycle or walking the five miles to the airport, Sator would spend hours just watching the frail wood and fabric aerialcraft plod through the skies. The seed planted during those years of

1935 through 1938 germinated in Sator's mind, formulating into a decision to join the military.

In high school, Sator belonged to the junior reserve officer training corps, and in the summer worked for the Forestry Service.

After graduation, he joined the civilian conservation corps, learning mechanics and surveying in the states of Wisconsin and Montana. Finally, on December 20th, 1939, Sanchez enlisted in the Army at Camp McCoy, Wisconsin. Initially assigned to the 7th Infantry at Vancouver Barracks, Washington, Sator participated in the maneuvers at Fort Ord, California. In May, 1941, Sator transferred to the Army Air Corps and moved to his new post at Moffett Field as an airplane mechanic. At Moffett Field, near Sunnyvale, California, Sandy became a member of the 539th School Squadron, a unit devoted to the maintenance of BT-13 airplanes used for the training of new pilots.

On a cool morning, December 11th 1941, just days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the 539th moved its men and equipment away from Moffett Field to Merced Army Air Field (later to be known as Castle Air Force Base), a few miles from San Francisco. Sandy and the other 90 enlisted mechanics formed the core group of trained personnel charged with the responsibility of teaching new recruits, fresh out of basic training, the fine art of aircraft maintenance. The squadron grew, due to the wartime expansion, from 91 to 195 enlisted men by the end of April 1942. By June, the number rose to 237 men, and by the end of the year, there were 289 enlisted mechanics. This expansion meant opportunity for advancement, to those who took the initiative. Sandy Sanchez rose

through the ranks, and by mid-1942, he held the rank of Sergeant.

A week shy of his 22nd birthday, Sandy walked down the flightline towards the maintenance hangar in March 1943, when he saw the runaway BT-13. His success in keeping damage to a minimum netted him the award of the Soldiers Medal, given for bravery above and beyond the call of duty. Colonel Harvey F. Dyer, the base commander, made the presentation in early June, and kept Sandy by his side, as both men reviewed a parade of a graduating class of aviation cadets. Sandy's future seemed just as bright as the gleaming polished brass of the marching cadets. His heroic act provided the means to make his desire to fly come true. His request to attend gunnery training came back approved, along with news of his promotion to Staff Sergeant. With bags packed, Sandy traveled to Las Vegas Army Air Field, California, to learn his trade as a combat crewman.

Scarcely two months after reviewing a graduation parade, Sanchez found himself in one. The build up of American air forces all over the world raised a clamor by theater commanders for more aerial gunners. The need to replace the ever growing combat losses added urgency to their calls. Class 43-26, like other classes of the time, pushed as much training into as short of time as possible. Of the 326 men who entered training, only 13 were eliminated. Sandy held high scores, but, like the other 325 men in class 43-26, didn't receive all of the training needed for his assignment to the United Kingdom and the Eighth Air Force. The need for gunners to fill out combat crews had to be answered, and combat groups in the war theater gave the additional training that

would help them survive the unforgiving skies of Europe. Sandy excelled.

Staff Sergeant Sanchez arrived in England in mid-August, 1943, and reported to the 12th Reinforcement Control Depot, and in turn, assigned to the 95th Bombardment Group, 334th Bombardment Squadron, on 24 August.

The 95th Bomb Group, based at Horham, Suffolk, England, flew their first mission on 13 May 1943. They had flown 31 bombing missions over occupied Europe and Germany, losing 33 aircraft and over 364 men in the process. At the same time, the group claimed 44 enemy aircraft shot down in return. The worst mission the 95th encountered up to that time occurred on June 13th, 1943 on the mission to Kiel, Germany. Of the 26 B-17 "Flying Fortresses" sent against the port near the city, 10 didn't return. One of the ten, shot up badly by an enemy fighter, lost control and crashed into another 95th B-17 in mid-air. Both became statistics of a disastrous mission. Among the missing was Brigadier General Nathan B. Forrest, a descendent of the famous American Civil War Southern General, riding as an observer with the group. A final loss occurred when a 95th Flying Fortress crash landed at another airfield upon its return. The 95th lost 105 men on that day. If Sandy wanted a fighting outfit in the thick of it, he certainly found it.

In-processing into the unit, getting settled into his living quarters, and obtaining his personal flying equipment occupied Sanchez for the first week. By September 1st, the 95th Group issued orders assigning Sandy to flying duty with the 334th

Squadron, and he flew his first mission on September 16th as a replacement tail gunner for Lieutenant Alden Witt's crew. The B-17 carried the name "Situation Normal" on the nose, in recognition of the appearance of Army life, characterized by the phrase, "situation normal, all fouled up." For his first mission, Sandy and the other nine members of his crew flew for 11 hours, to La Pallice, France, bombing the port area. During the raid, one 95th Bomb Group aircraft fell to enemy defenses, but the return to England proved to be the most difficult phase of the flight. Darkness came on, and a weather front closed in the approaches to the airfield with thick blankets of cloud. In this overcast, one 95th B-17 collided with another group's Flying Fortress. Although the 95th aircraft landed safely, all aboard the other B-17 died in the crash. "Situation Normal" weaved its way through the clouds, barrage balloons, and their cables, for a few tense moments, until Lieutenant Witt found a Royal Air Force airfield on which to land. With a sigh of relief, the tired crew waited until the next morning to fly back to their base, and to another mission.

However, before Sator could participate in any more missions, he had to undergo more training. Therefore, on September 20th Staff Sergeant Sanchez led six other 95th gunners to Snettisham, England, for Turret Gunnery School for three days. Although slated to man the tail gunner's position on a B-17, Sandy received training for any of the other five gunner positions as well. He specifically trained for the top and bottom (also known as the ball turret, due to its shape) turret positions. Building upon his state-side training, the instructors at Snettisham provided

Sandy with the technical know-how to clear up any turret problems encountered during combat, using the few tools available to a gunner over 20,000 feet above the earth. Thus prepared, Sator brought his six classmates back to Horham, and re-joined the crew of "Situation Normal."

Sandy's personable attitude and quick smile swiftly made him a full-fledged member of the close knit crew of "Situation Normal." Bombing missions piled up, one after another, in quick succession. Sandy visited Emden, Hanau, Bremen, and Marienburg, all within 17 days. Weather for the mission to the Hanau industrial area on October 4th proved to be messy. One hundred mile-an-hour winds blew the formation 100 miles off course. The oxygen bottles on "Situation Normal" were filled for a five hour mission, and at the fifth hour the formation had only reached Paris on its return trip. To avoid casualties due to oxygen deprivation, Lieutenant Witt broke from the high altitude formation, and dove into the cloudy undercast, successfully avoiding enemy aircraft and returned safely to home base.

The trip to East Prussia to attack a Focke-Wulf assembly plant in Marienburg, on October 9th, impressed Sandy as "...the best bombing I've ever seen. Almost every bomb exploded on the factory buildings." The nine minute bomb run became known as the "bombing of the year" throughout the Eighth Air Force. The formation dropped 83 percent of the bombs within 2,000 feet of the factory. Although impressed with the Marienburg bombing, Sandy would have an exceptional mission the following day.

The 95th Bomb Group met their stiffest German air

opposition, up to that time, during the mission to the railroad yards of Munster, Germany. Twenty B-17s of the 95th started the 5-hour flight, flying 520 miles at an altitude of 24,000 feet, much of it with no friendly fighter support. The 95th counted over 250 enemy fighters trying to defend their homeland. Wave after wave of German fighters attack the formation, shooting down all but one B-17 in the low group and leaving only eight of the aircraft in the high group. Sanchez, in the tail of "Situation Normal," squeezed the trigger of his guns, protecting his Flying Fortress, as he watched one after another B-17 falter, then spiral down to the earth. "...the air was full of German planes, and my tail guns were firing almost all of the time," Sandy recalled. Suddenly, "Situation Normal" rocked violently, and a German fighter streaked by the stricken Fortress. Sandy heard a chilling announcement from Lieutenant Richard Holmes, the bombardier: the navigator, Lieutenant Harry Meintz, had been hit; his arm completely shot off. Fighter attacks ceased, as the anti-aircraft guns of Munster trained their sights on the formation above them. The 95th Group lead the Eighth Air Force towards the target, starting a very long 6-minute bomb run. Flying directly through the anti-aircraft (also known as "flak," an abbreviation for the German *Flieger Abwehr Kanone*--anti-aircraft cannon) barrage, which grew increasingly heavy as the bomb release point neared, the unit took more than the usual amount of time on the turns. The group leader wanted the following groups, which were also undergoing vicious fighter attacks, to rejoin the formation and receive the benefit of defensive firepower. Finally, the call

of "Bombs Away" came, and 102,000 pounds of bombs dropped from the B-17 bellies. Sixty-nine percent fell within 2,000 feet of the aiming point, a pattern considered excellent by Eighth Air Force standards.

As soon as the bombs fell, "Situation Normal" turned for home, and the German fighters contested every inch. A Junkers 88, attacking a formation of B-17s above Sandy's formation, filled the tail gunner's gunsight. "I started firing and caught his left side and his left engine caught fire. I shot off his left wing so the pilot bailed out." Sator didn't have long to savor the aerial victory. A few minutes later, a Messerschmitt 109 attacked Sandy's position, "I gave him several bursts and his tail broke off. Then he exploded," explained the tail gunner. The danger wasn't over yet. Sandy could hear, and feel, the barking of the other .50 caliber machine guns on "Situation Normal." A Focke Wulf 190, with a black and white checkered cowling, came within a few feet of colliding with Sandy's B-17. As the fighter flashed by, so close that he knocked off "Situation Normal's" radio antenna, the co-pilot, Lieutenant William Overstreet, saw the enemy pilot slumped over, dead.

The gunners on "Situation Normal" claimed eight fighters destroyed, two probable, and two damaged. Sandy received credit for two kills, and an Air Medal. The 95th Bombardment Group received the Distinguished Unit Citation for "...extraordinary valor, audacity, and courage under fire." The men were just happy to get home safely.

Sandy flew other missions, but after Munster, they seemed a

bit tame. Even the October 14th mission to Schweinfurt, where 60 B-17s fell to enemy defenses, the 95th squeaked through with only one loss. Due to needed maintenance for their regular aircraft, "Situation Normal," Sanchez and his crew flew "Blondie II" for this mission. During the flight, Sator noticed a Junkers 88 coming up behind his aircraft, stalking another B-17. At a distance of 400 yards, Sandy opened fire and saw bullets strike the engine and fuselage section. The enemy aircraft dropped quickly out of sight, although the ball turret gunner saw him turn over and head straight towards the ground before disappearing into a cloud. Because no one saw the enemy aircrew parachute out, or the aircraft crash, Sanchez didn't receive credit for shooting down another enemy fighter.

Sandy and his crew bombed Duren; Wilhelmshaven; Rjukan, Norway; Solingen; Emden; and Kiel. During the Duren raid, after "bombs away," one of the four engines of Sandy's aircraft developed trouble, became inoperative, and had to be shut down. Unfortunately, the big propeller didn't remain stationary, and continued to turn, driven by the wind. Instead of pulling the aircraft, the propeller acted as a brake. "Situation Normal" broke from the formation and headed for England. The whole crew gave a sigh of relief when an American P-47 fighter pulled up with them, and escorted them back to the French coast; shortly afterwards, a safe landing at an emergency field on the coast of England ended their mission.

Sandy's original crew ended their association with "Situation Normal" on the mission to bomb the railyards at Gelsenkirchen,

Germany. While Sandy and his crew continued to fly missions in other aircraft, they never flew their original plane again.

New bombers arrived for the 95th, and crews flew any combat ready B-17 available.

For the next mission, the crew drew a brand-new B-17 from this "pool." It had no name, and only one mission to its credit.

On the way to Rjukan, Norway, Technical Sergeant Kingsley Spitzer, the top turret gunner and aircraft engineer, gave the crew some bad news. The extra gasoline tanks installed on the B-17 to ensure enough fuel to Norway and back, were blocked. The aircraft carried a lot of unusable gas, and the crew had a long mission ahead of them. Despite the problem, the men elected to continue the mission, and after bombing a heavy water facility, left the formation at the Norwegian coast for the most direct route to England. Happily, the "Flying Fortress" made it back to Bassingbourn, another bomb group's base.

When scheduled to fly again the crew received another new B-17. This time there were no problems encountered. Flying the new bomber twice in a row, December 11th and 13th, they bombed Emden and Hamburg, Germany.

Sanchez continued to fly missions, sometimes as a replacement gunner for other crews. His happy-go-lucky attitude on the ground, and his professionalism in the air, made him an acceptable member to even the most clannish combat crews. As a replacement gunner, Sator could wind up in any of the gunner's positions. On December 16th, Sandy flew as the right waist gunner with the crew of "Peggy Ann." The mission, to bomb the port area of Bremen,

Germany, went smoothly until Sandy spotted an enemy Junkers 88 creeping in under a B-17 flying behind the "Peggy Ann." The Junkers picked up speed, passing under the "Fortress" behind him, and headed right at Sandy's aircraft from below. The position of the enemy fighter, below and under the "Peggy Ann," protected him from Sandy's gun. However, the ball turret, under the aircraft, had him in his sights. Sator recalled, "[The] ball turret started firing at it...until it passed under us, where I saw a large piece fly off the plane as it went into a crazy spin, flipping around, smoking and diving down...until it disappeared in clouds still out of control." Although Sandy vouched for the sharp-shooting ball turret gunner, the 3rd Bombardment Division intelligence staff gave him credit for only damaging the fighter.

Sanchez needed a rest; 15 missions had taken a toll upon his physical and mental abilities. Therefore, according to standard Eighth Air Force procedures, Sandy and his entire original crew spent five days at the Palace Hotel, designated a combat crew rest home, in Southport, England.

At the end of the five days, only Sator and four others of the crew came back to Horam for combat duty. The other four members of the original crew had finished up their required 25 combat missions, and had a flight scheduled to take them back to the United States; but not before they were properly recognized for their achievement. Sandy returned to base and again found himself in a decoration parade. This time a Distinguished Flying Cross and an Air Medal with three oak leaf clusters adorned his uniform, in recognition of his two victory credits and 15 missions

over enemy occupied Europe. Sator's pilot, engineer, radio operator, and ball turret gunner all received appropriate decorations, and gave their farewells.

On December 29th, after a festive Christmas, Sandy watched his pilot (flying the aircraft), flight engineer, radio operator, and ball turret gunner, all board a brand new B-17, recently assigned to the group. The "Fortress" needed only to fly to another field, where the men would catch a transport aircraft back to the United States. He waved, and observed the plane take off, vanishing in some low clouds. A few hours later Sanchez heard the distressing news. Flying thorough the overcast, the B-17 had crashed into a mountain, killing all aboard.

Sator rejoined the air war with a single-mindedness and a determination that surprised all who knew him. He quickly volunteered to fly any and all missions. February 10th dawned with snow flurries, but the mission to Brunswick continued. The bitter cold didn't stop Sandy from sweating. Flying high above Germany at his tail gun position, Sanchez called out on the intercom that a German Junkers 88 trailed high and behind them. As he squeezed the trigger, his heart sank--his guns were jammed.

Sandy quickly notified the crew of his problem. First the top turret gunner, then the ball turret gunner, hanging underneath the bomber, blazed away at the fighter as he dove down on them and away. Sanchez watched in satisfaction as a large piece of the enemy's left wing broke off, forcing the aircraft to spiral down into the clouds below, out of control. Again, however, since no one actually saw the Junkers crash, the stingy intelligence men

awarded the crew with only a "probable" victory credit. The adventure wasn't over yet. The fighter and the cold damaged the B-17, and a forced landing back in England at another unit's airfield finished Sandy's day.

Despite forced landings and battle damage, Sandy escaped unscathed. By early March Sanchez finished his 25 mission combat tour and volunteered for another two months of combat. Sandy had become close friends with his co-pilot, Lieutenant Roy Giles, and they calculated it would be that long before Giles could rotate home. Sanchez and Giles cooked up a scheme in which they would go back to the United States, get some rest, and fly together on the same crew in the Pacific, against the Japanese. The Eighth Air Force needed trained aircrew, and Sator's request for an extension received quick approval.

For his second combat tour, Sandy flew with a new crew in a B-17 named "Able Mable." Again, Sator's characteristic smile and unchallenged ability in the air won him quick respect by his new crew. One of their first missions called on them to participate in the first daylight American strike against Berlin. Another severe winter day created problems for the Eighth Air Force's bombardment groups, as they tried to form up to attack the German capital on March 4th. "Able Mable" had oil pressure instrument failure, which necessitated a return to base. As it turned out, Headquarters Eighth Air Force sent a recall signal for all aircraft to return, but part of the 95th Bombardment Group didn't receive it. Sandy's 238 plane formation heard the recall and obeyed it, and watched in astonishment as a mere 30 B-17s of the

95th and 100th Bombardment Groups went on to bomb Berlin alone. This combined formation hit Berlin and returned with the loss of five bombers. This accomplishment by the 95th won them the Distinguished Unit Citation, which reads in part:

The extraordinary heroism, determination, and esprit de corps displayed by the officers and enlisted men of this organization in overcoming unusually difficult and hazardous conditions brought to a successful conclusion our country's first combat operation over the capital of Germany. The fortitude, bravery, and fighting spirit of the 95th Bombardment Group (H) on this historic occasion constitute a noteworthy contribution to the war effort and add notably to the cherished traditions of the Army Air Forces.

Although Sandy and his crew missed Berlin the first time, two days later they came back; and the Germans were waiting.

Wave after endless wave of attacking German fighters picked "Able Mable" for a target. Lined four abreast, Focke-Wulf 190s bore down on "Mable's" nose. Second Lieutenant John J. Fisher, the Bombardier, picked one out and started firing, hitting the fighter and watching him plummet below, spinning. He subsequently received a "damaged" credit.

Four minutes later, another Focke-Wulf 190 attacked "Able Mable," this time level, and slightly to the right. Technical Sergeant Thomas F. Whitman, the top turret gunner, opened fire,

and the enemy aircraft lost altitude and fell away and behind the B-17. Sandy watched the 190 try to gain level flight, but it started swinging from side to side, losing over 600 feet in seconds, finally disappearing. Sator called Whitman on the interphone and congratulated him. Whitman received a "damaged" credit also. Sandy's turn came next.

A Messerschmitt Bf 109 came around from the B-17's left, and straightened out between "Able Mable" and the bomber behind it. "That was when I started firing at 500 yards," explained Sandy. "It buckled as though climbing and then went down as if banking to the left. Then it started smoking." The ball turret gunner, Staff Sergeant Thomas L. Kinnebrew, saw the enemy's propeller slow down to where it barely turned, as the plane kept going down to earth. Since no one saw it crash, Sandy got a "damaged" credit. No one had time to watch Sandy's victim fall to earth; "Able Mable" came under attack again.

This time, however, the radio operator, Sergeant Charles E. Wentzell, found the mark. "He came in to our left, and high," bubbled the exuberant crewman. "Just as soon as he was in range I started firing. He came in to 100 yards and peeled off to the right and to the back. When he got to the rear of our aircraft, his tail assembly came off and the rest of him went down in a spin." Wentzell got credit for one Focke-Wulf 190 "destroyed."

Sandy glanced over to a B-17 leaving the formation. The reason why became apparent, as flames licked away from the stricken craft. Sanchez, in accordance with procedure, notified the navigator, so a notation could be made in his log. All such

events were noted for documentation purposes back at the group. Sator gave a sudden start of recognition. This floundering B-17 was his old aircraft, "Situation Normal." Then, in a quick flash, "Normal" blinked out of existence in a ball of fire and light, taking half of the crew with her. She had participated in 45 missions, and number 46 proved fatal. Berlin's targets felt the weight of the Eighth Air Force's 1,648 tons of bombs, but 69 bombers and over 700 men were killed or missing.

Good weather allowed the Eighth Air Force to keep up the pressure on Germany. Sandy quickly piled up missions, bombing a V-1 rocket launch site, and a German occupied airfield in France, as well as airfields and industrial targets in Germany.

The first of April brought bad weather. The mission to Ludwigshaven, Germany, became impossible to complete, due to heavy cloud cover several thousand feet in depth. Shortly after crossing the French coast, the bombers were called back to base. After an uneventful landing, Sandy and his crew received good news: since they had completed another 15 missions, the crew qualified for a stay at the combat crew rest home at Southport.

Sator and his crew left the 95th Bomb Group at Horham, and the associated combat stress, on April 4th, and spent a quiet five days at the Palace Hotel catching up on sleep, eating, reading, and writing letters.

Returning to Horham on April 8th, Sandy and his crew didn't appear on the crew roster for any missions until April 12th, to Germany. However, bad weather prevented the bombers from forming up into the vital defensive formation they depended on for mutual

support. Without the proper formation, the mission couldn't continue, and the B-17s turned back to their bases shortly after crossing the French coast.

Weather improved, and Sanchez flew on missions over both France and Germany throughout the month. Sator had been a Staff Sergeant for a year, and on April 15th, he held orders in his hands promoting him to Technical Sergeant.

By late April the days grew longer, and provided the Eighth Air Force an opportunity to fly two missions in one day. Technical Sergeant Sanchez, and the crew of "Able Mable," participated in this expanded effort in the air war. Early in the morning on April 27th, "Able Mable" attacked a German rocket site in France and returned. Shortly after landing, Sandy and the crew unloaded their gear and headed over to the briefing hut, to get details for the next mission of the day--enemy airfields in France. However, for this second mission, the crew flew a newer B-17 without a name. The hazy weather didn't cooperate this time, and an airfield deemed as a "last resort" target felt the weight of 53 tons of bombs raining down on it.

Sandy flew again the next day, April 29th, again against a rocket site, and on May 1st flew another double mission. This time Sator and his crew climbed into a B-17 named "Silver Slipper," and tried to attack a German rocket site in the Pas De Calais, France, area. Unfortunately, weather frustrated the attempt, and everyone in the 95th Bomb Group brought their bombs back.

Later the same day, however, the railroad marshalling yards

of Sarrguemines, France, did not escape the pounding from Eighth Air Force bombers. In the eyes of Sanchez's crew, this second mission was the most memorable; it marked the end of their combat tour for almost everyone on the crew. All except Sandy.

Lieutenant Roy Giles still needed a few missions more before completing his tour, so Sator signed up at the squadron as a replacement gunner. In this way, Sandy hoped both men could go home together. As a spare gunner, Sanchez flew another double mission on May 8th.

The first mission called for the 95th to strike at Berlin, again. An uneventful flight ensued; take-off at a quarter to six in the morning, reaching the target at eleven, and landing at two-thirty in the afternoon. A few hours of respite, then the crew loaded back onto a B-17 at five in the evening, striking LeGlacerie, France, and returned to Horham by nine-thirty that night, all in daylight.

May 12, 1944. Jittery before the mission, as usual, Sandy wanted to get off the ground as quickly as possible; and, as usual, did so as a replacement gunner. Flying over Czechoslovakia the air, so clear that vehicles could be distinguished from 20,000 feet above, rocked and rippled by the German flak and fighters intercepting the 3rd Bombardment Division's 258 heavy bombers. Droning onward, the B-17s neared the oil industries of Brux.

Later, the Air Force official records would dryly note the German fighters offered "intense opposition" to the Fortresses. An estimated 430 fighters opposed the air armada, taking a terrible toll on the American force. The 3rd Bombardment Division

came home 41 B-17s short, with the 96th and 452nd Bombardment Groups losing 26 of the bombers. Happily for the 95th Group, only one aircraft failed to return to Horham. After bombing the target, the battle-damaged B-17 made a forced landing in the English Channel, where rescue boats picked up survivors.

Sandy's bomber touched down at Horham, and pulled into its parking spot surrounded by 334th squadron personnel. Cheers and back-slapping erupted when Sanchez lowered himself from the Fortress. Sator had just set a record up to that time for the most missions flown by a combat crew member in the European theater of operations--44. The squadron commander made a brief speech, calling Sandy "...a great inspiration to other airmen." In addition, a newly arrived B-17 had its nose emblazoned with a caricature of Sandy, and carried the name *Smilin' Sandy Sanchez*, and the number 44. This was the first such tribute to a crew member in the entire Eighth Air Force. Admiring squadron personnel commented, "He's trying to win the war all by himself." Sandy's combat career seemed over, at least for the time being.

With poor weather over the European continent preventing the 95th Bomb Group from flying any missions for a week, the newly christened Flying Fortress *Smilin' Sandy Sanchez* stayed on the ground. This gave an opportunity for the public relations officer to gather Sandy and some Red Cross girls together for photographs around the new B-17. After a number of photographs, Sandy's time in England quickly drew to a close, and he soon found himself back in the United States.

While Sanchez spent time visiting his sister Helen, now

married and living in Detroit, his namesake aircraft went to Berlin on 19 May. Piloted by Captain William S. Waltman, it suffered battle damage after dropping its bombs with the rest of the group, and started to lag behind on the way back to England. The B-17 struggled to stay aloft, but it became apparent to the crew that a landing was imminent. To avoid capture, the crew elected to land in neutral Sweden, where the aircraft and crew were interned. The crew were eventually returned to duty, but the *Smilin' Sandy Sanchez* became scrap metal shortly after the war's end.

After some time in Detroit, Sandy visited his boyhood home of Joliet, and found some old friends who were now in the service and also home on leave. During their short reunion, Sanchez bewildered his friends by declaring his desire to return to combat. Despite their strenuous objections, Sator never wavered from his chosen course.

As can be imagined, Sanchez found the duties as an aerial gunnery instructor less than exciting. During his first week at the new station, he received a Silver Star medal for his "...gallantry in action...participating in a large number of heavy bombardment missions over...Europe...in a manner that was an inspiration to his fellow crewmen." Before long, he started requesting a transfer back to combat. His plans to join Lieutenant Roy Giles, and fight in the Pacific, came to naught, so Sandy volunteered for any combat tour available. He didn't have long to wait.

By late September, 1944, the delighted Sandy Sanchez clutched

orders in his hand, taking him to Lincoln Army Air Field, Nebraska. This reclassification and processing station detailed him to a B-17 crew getting ready to go overseas, and for Sandy, another combat tour.

Sandy earned instant respect with his new crew. The much decorated combat veteran, with his enthusiastic, yet easy going style, and good humor, fit right into pilot George Sommers' new, and therefore green, crew. Although officially listed as the tail gunner, Sandy's experience allowed him to operate almost any gunner's position on the Flying Fortress. Al Rowan, the flight engineer and top turret gunner, often relied upon Sandy as his unofficial assistant. Dallas M. McLaughlin, one of the waist gunners, became the closest man to Sator on this new crew, often seeking advice from the veteran.

Sandy and his crew were ordered to travel by train to Newport News, Virginia, and report aboard a French ship named the **ATHOS II**. Since B-17s primarily operated only in the European theater by this time, no one doubted their destination. The enlisted gunners on Sandy's crew listen attentively to Sator explaining the way the Eighth Air Force operated, how to get along with the British, and what to expect from German fighters protecting their homeland.

On October 13, 1944, the **ATHOS II** slipped her moorings and steamed off to the east, joining a convoy of other troop and supply ships heading for war. As the mainland sank under the horizon behind them, tension mounted within the ship. The danger of German submarines still lurking under the monotonous waters of

the Atlantic kept the men on edge. The large amount of free time weighed heavily upon the aircrew. The only interruptions consisted of air-raid and life-boat drills. Sandy's good humor, however, remained a constant, and so were his promises of better times ahead in England. Time dragged on. After ten days at sea, those with navigational skills, noting the position of the stars at night, concluded the coast of Africa would appear soon. Finally, on October 28, 1944, Gibraltar majestically passed by the ship's left railing. Realization of their true destination struck the crew. Welcome to Italy, and the Fifteenth Air Force.

The ***ATHOS II*** docked at Naples, Italy, and the crew hurried off and started their trip to the Fifteenth Air Force's combat crew replacement center located at Caserta. At Caserta they received, after a number of days wait, orders to report to the 353rd Bombardment Squadron, 301st Bombardment Group, located at Lucera, approximately nine miles east of Foggia, near the "spur" of the Italian "boot" peninsula. For the next few weeks orientation and training programs occupied Sandy and his crewmates.

The 301st had been at war for a long time. Stationed in England in 1942, they had flown under the Eighth Air Force, and began combat operations against submarine pens, airfields, and other targets in France. Transferred to the Twelfth Air Force and operating from Algeria, the 301st bombed docks, shipping facilities, airdromes and railroad yards in Tunisia, Sicily, and Sardinia. On April 6, 1943, the group withstood intense anti-aircraft fire from shore defenses and nearby vessels to attack

a convoy of merchant ships off Bizerte and successfully destroyed supplies essential to the Axis defense of Tunisia. Their actions resulted in a Distinguished Unit Citation. In November, 1943, the 301st again changed locations and found themselves assigned to the Fifteenth Air Force and in Italy. Directing attacks against strategic targets, the Fifteenth Air Force utilized the 301st against oil centers, communications, and industrial area, in almost every country in southern Europe. The group received another Distinguished Unit Citation for a mission to Germany on February 25, 1944, when, in spite of vicious encounters with enemy fighters, the group bombed aircraft production centers at Regensburg. In addition, the unit supported the invasion of Southern France. Throughout the war, the 301st delivered more tons of bombs than any other Army Air Force unit, logged the second most missions and sorties flown, and claimed more enemy aircraft shot down than any other Fifteenth Air Force bomb group. In return, the 301st had the second highest bomber losses, 137 total, in the Fifteenth Air Force's B-17 groups. Five hundred and sixteen 301st members died, and another 208 were captured. Sanchez had picked another fighting outfit.

Conditions on the ground, however, were radically different from Sandy's days with the Eighth Air Force. In England, personnel lived in permanent quarters, or, at least, Quonset huts, with showers in nearby buildings. In Italy, the aircrews of the Fifteenth lived in large green canvas tents with homemade heaters, and washed themselves with what water their steel helmets could carry. Situated in a large olive tree grove, the men of the 353rd

Bombardment Squadron visited the nearest town only occasionally, for baths, haircuts, and close shaves. Lucera and Foggia offered only limited recreation and entertainment opportunities for the 301st airmen. In addition, the language barrier between the flyers and the local nationals made the cultural differences unbridgeable at times.

The 301st historian noted in his October 1944 report the influx of 14 new crews and aircraft. "If aircraft and crews continue to arrive at their present rate, it will not be long before maintenance and housing become very definite problems, walking hand-in-hand with that of morale." The approaching winter months prevented a large number of flying training flights, and only 50 percent of the available aircrews could be scheduled to fly missions. "...class work on the ground, may well occupy a part of their time here, but winter evenings are going to be long and dull until further ways and means of passing the time are found...." forecasted the historian.

The month of October, 1944, consisted of crew and individual training. Not until early to mid-November did Sandy once again fly combat missions. Sometimes Sanchez flew with his crew, oftentimes he flew as a replacement gunner. Bad weather limited the number of missions the 301st could fly, but Sandy noticed how conditions in the European air war had changed during his five month absence. The 301st targeted marshalling yards and oil production plants, deep inside enemy territory--sure-fire ways to get the Germans to respond with strong fighter opposition. However, while some small number of Luftwaffe fighters did fly

nearby the formations, the 301st had no attacks on their formations for the entire month of November. For a fighter like Sandy, eager to add to his score, the missions were dull and uneventful--except for the flak. The anti-aircraft defenses were more numerous, more accurate, and a constant worry to aircrews. At least you could shoot back at an enemy fighter, with flak, you just had to fly through it and hope it missed.

About this time two jet-powered Messerschmitt 262s and one rocket-powered Messerschmitt 163, flew through the friendly fighters escorting the bombers on a mission to Regensburg, Germany. Although they inflicted no damage, these new, fast propellerless aircraft added another bit of uncertainty for aircrews to ponder. Sandy, however, started to mention to his crewmates about how he would like to add a jet to his kill credit, and looked forward to an encounter with one.

Encounters, however, were difficult to obtain. Bombing marshalling yards and oil refineries or depots seemed to be the theme of the Fifteenth Air Force for December 1944. Sometimes the German Air Force appeared, but stayed a discreet distance away from the bombers. On December 8, four Messerschmitt 109s made one diving pass through the 301st's formation, resulting in no damage, and never returned. Throughout the rest of the month, enemy fighters could be seen in the distance, and once, on December 17, attacked another formation. But Sanchez's guns were silent, and this five-year Army veteran chaffed with impatience to use them once again.

As the 301st historian predicted, not everyone got a chance

to fly as often as they would have liked, especially the gunners. Sandy flew only five missions between November 18 and December 11. Although these five missions garnered him another oak leaf cluster to his Air Medal, the gunner craved more flying. Bad weather in December, and primarily in January, 1945, made it next to impossible for Sator to fly as much as he wanted. By January 21, 1945, with four months in Italy, Sanchez had increased his mission count to only ten. This brought him his ninth oak leaf cluster to his Air Medal, but the squadron aircrew scheduler didn't post Sandy for any missions until February 19, 1945.

The weather had improved considerably, and the group mounted more missions. Sator's crew flew more, but in addition, when Sandy's crew wasn't flying, he volunteered himself as a replacement gunner for any crew who might need him. Oddly enough, when Dallas M. McLaughlin, the waist gunner on Sanchez's regular crew, expressed interest in volunteering as Sator did, Sandy emphatically pleaded with him not to, citing the increased danger. Despite his warnings to others, Sator continued to volunteer. His persistence paid off.

On March 12, 1945, Sandy's crew flew against an oil refinery at Vienna, Austria. On the way, Sandy noticed another 301st B-17 leave the formation and turn back to base. It wasn't an unusual sight; many bombers developed mechanical problems and had to return to base prior to getting to the target. However, in reality, Sandy watched the beginning of a series of events which, once started, would have a lasting impact on him, his family, and a number of people not even yet born.

It was First Lieutenant Dale Thornton's crew in the B-17 winging its way back to base. The aircraft suffered no mechanical problems, but Sergeant Schratz, the top-turret gunner, neared death. Schratz had accidentally hit the power switch for the turret, which immediately swung around and caught his left sleeve and parachute harness, and broke his arm. Drag out of his seat, his oxygen mask knocked off, Schratz couldn't reach his intercom switch to call for help. Without oxygen, he passed out. Schratz's condition became known to his crew when he didn't answer during the mandatory oxygen check-in, conducted every five minutes whenever the aircrew flew above 10,000 feet. Carefully Schratz's crew disentangled the unconscious gunner, while Thornton returned to base. The crew's quick action and procedural routine saved Schratz's life. But now Thornton's crew needed another top-turret gunner.

The very next day, March 13, Sandy joined Thornton's crew as their top-turret gunner for a raid against rail road yards at Regensburg, Germany. First Lieutenant Leslie J. Tyler, the navigator for the crew, remembered the enlisted men holding Sandy in awe. With Sator's combat record, obvious ability, plus his congenial personality, he was gratefully accepted into the crew immediately. Sandy now had the situation he liked. The weather permitted flying every day, and as long as the weather held out, he could fly a mission every day. Half the squadron flew on even days, the other half on odd days. Sommers' crew flew on even days, and Thornton's crew flew on odd days. However, with the increase of flying, casualties also multiplied. When Sommers'

crew arrived, in early October, 1944, until the time they started to fly missions, in mid-November, only four aircraft from the 301st were lost to enemy action. In their first five missions, six B-17s fell to anti-aircraft fire or mechanical problems. In their second five missions, seven group aircraft failed to return. In Sandy's third set of five missions, February 19 through March 13, 1945, another seven bombers fell to enemy action. Of those seven, four were due to anti-aircraft fire, the other three to mechanical problems.

Starting with March 12, the 301st lost a bomber a day for the next five days. Of those five, three were to flak. The March 13th mission passed uneventfully for Sandy, flying with Thornton's crew, despite watching another 301st bomber plummet to earth, never to return to base. This mission qualified Sanchez for his tenth oak leaf cluster to his Air Medal.

Sandy flew his 60th combat mission the next day, March 14th, with Sommers' crew, hitting rail road yards in Komaron, Yugoslavia. Again, another unit B-17 fell victim to flak, but Lieutenant Sommers' aircraft and crew returned to base unscathed. Looking at the posted schedule for the next day, Sandy saw with satisfaction that he would fly with Thornton's crew again. He may not have thought about it, but exactly two years previous, he'd stopped a runaway airplane in California. How far he had come.

The next morning, March 15th, groups of aircrew scuffled into the large briefing room. A mist of rain delayed the day's schedule for an hour already, and most thought the mission didn't have a chance of getting off. After the preliminaries, the

intelligence officer pulled back a curtain and displayed the mission route. A stunned silence pervaded the room while the men soaked up the sight. The target lay just south of Berlin, Germany; over 700 miles away, by far, the longest mission ever attempted by the Fifteenth Air Force. Slowly, a buzz started to fill the room as each man turned to his neighbor to explain the obvious.

The Intelligence Officer walked back into the center and signaled for their attention. "All B-17s groups of the Fifteenth Air Force are going to make a deep penetration to attack the Schwartzheide Synthetic Oil Refineries, in Ruhland, Germany," he began, pointing to the target on the map. Turning back to his audience, he continued.

"Preliminary weather forecast suggests an unusual opportunity for a large scale strike against the last remaining one-quarter of the German gasoline production. The Reich, which has the minimum requirement for full scale Army and Air Force operations of 200,000 tons per month is producing only 50,000 tons. The coming of favorable weather and a new Allied offensive on all ground fronts create a particularly critical situation for the enemy." Here the officer looked up from his notes and squarely into the eyes of the aircrew. "If gasoline production can be kept down to 50,000 tons per month, the German army can be immobilized." He waited a moment for this statistical forecast to impress his listeners, and continued reading from his notes. "The recent attacks on synthetic oil refineries has eliminated all major oil producers with the exception of Ruhland, and Moosbierbaum. The

primary objective of the counter-oil program has been to deny to the Wehrmacht all supplies of aviation and motor vehicle fuels. The denial of aviation fuels has almost been accomplished and can be accomplished if the synthetic plants equipped to produce aviation fuel can be kept from operation. Today, gentlemen, while other units of the Fifteenth go after Moosbierbaum, we're going after Ruhland."

A quick parade of briefers came and left. The enemy aircraft situation especially interested Sandy. "Present capability of the enemy is 40 to 50 single engine fighters, and there are indications that under favorable weather conditions, the enemy will exercise his capability," informed the briefer. "Don't worry to much about them," encouraged the officer, "Fifteenth Fighter Command will provide a very strong close escort for us on penetration, over the target, and on withdrawal." Finally, the Flak defense expert guided them over enemy occupied territory, and which directions they should fly to avoid the larger concentrations of anti-aircraft guns. "Both the Moosbierbaum and Ruhland groups will fly together, giving us an axis of attack designed to make parallel and simultaneous bomb runs between 24,000 and 26,000 feet, to split flak defenses. Our group will be at 24,000. There are over 300 guns in the area. The defenses will be entered about ten miles from the refinery. At seven miles from the target, our formation will be within the range of approximately 50 guns. This number builds up to about 120 guns covering the refinery." The men looked uneasy. "However," added the expert, hopefully, "if you make a very sharp turn as soon as

bombs are dropped, the maximum number of guns won't be encountered." No one felt any better.

While the rain still sputtered, crews rode out to their B-17s. Sandy seemed even more animated and excited than usual. "Today we will see the real action!" he bubbled to crewmates. Undoubtedly, Sanchez believed the mission, so deep into Germany, would bring up enough fighters for him to have a chance to increase his victory credits. The prospect of getting a shot at a German jet fighter was also an exciting possibility to him.

The crew had the honor of being the deputy lead aircraft for the 301st Group, which meant they flew a B-17 with Radar bombing equipment. Despite the predictions of clear weather, Radar equipped B-17s normally lead the unit on a mission, in case dense cloud cover prevented a visual bomb run on the target. The Radar equipment replaced the ball turret, sticking out underneath the belly of the aircraft. Consequently, the ball turret gunner flew with another crew for this mission, and Lieutenant Stephen Stofko, a Radar Navigator who operated the new equipment, took his place.

As both the top turret gunner and flight engineer for the aircraft, Sandy performed his duties, making sure all guns were snug in their places, fuel and hydraulic tanks were filled, and the twelve 500 pound bombs were secure in the bomb bay. After all the crew completed their own specialized checks, they sat inside the bomber waiting for the signal to either go or cancel. Some thought the weather wouldn't let the mission go, but soon the rain stopped, and the radio crackled to life with only three words: "Execute Plan Able." The mission was on.

A cacophony of whines, coughs, and roars split the air as 33 B-17s started engines and trundled off to the runway. One after another lifted off the ground and circled, awaiting the whole group to form up. Finally, the 301st Bombardment Group joined up with other B-17s of the 5th Bombardment Wing, which in turned combined with other wings of the Fifteenth Air Force. The whole armada, over 600 bombers, headed north.

Flying parallel with the Italian mainland, the bombers flew over the Adriatic Sea, until reaching northern Italy. Once over Venice, a gentle right turn brought the aircraft heading east, and over Trieste, the last large city before leaving Italy. Soon the parade of bombers crossed the Yugoslavian border, and made a sharp left before reaching Zagreb, aligning the aircrews once more with their northerly route. By now, the fleet had gained an altitude above 10,000 feet, and First Lieutenant Lester Rury, the bombardier, ordered everyone to put on their oxygen masks. From then on, every five minutes he conducted a roll call of every crew member to assure no one suffered from oxygen deprivation.

Higher the bombers climbed, and crossed over the boarder into southern Germany. Previous targets passed below their wings, and higher and higher they flew. The bomber stream split apart as it approached the Danube River. Four hundred B-24 *Liberators*, another type of four-engine American bomber, proceeded to attack targets in Austria, including Moosbierbaum, Schwechat, and the Floridsdorf oil refinery at Vienna. The B-17 formation, a little over 200 bombers, droned on northward.

"Frontroom Deputy, this is Frontroom lead. Thornton, you got

it." The leader had mechanical difficulties and had to turn back to base. Sandy's crew now led the whole 301st towards the target area. The Americans left Germany, briefly, and winged their way over the Alps, and into Czechoslovakia, skirting to the left of Prague, then back into Germany. Passing Dresden, the target, laying north of that burned out city, came into view. Although 29 miles away, flying at 24,000 feet, at a speed of 150 knots, the target lay only nine minutes away.

The top turret is a cramped place. Mindful of the accident of the previous gunner on Thornton's crew, other crewmembers don't remember Sandy having his parachute harness on. Events unfolded quickly. Six minutes away from "bombs away," the first barrage of flak blossomed, right in the lead formation. Sanchez's *Fortress* lurched to the left. "We've been hit!" Thornton called over the internal intercom. The burst of flak blasted a large hole in the left wing, and the number two engine ceased to function. "Feather number 2!" ordered Thornton, but the co-pilot, Second Lieutenant Edward Narracci, had already started that sequence. The propeller failed to turn into the wind, increasing drag. Instead, it started to "windmill" and escalate the likelihood of fire. "Waist gunner to pilot," it was Staff Sergeant Richard L. Lake. "Number two is smoking." "Roger. Pilot to Bombardier--jettison those bombs. Navigator, can you give me a heading to the Russian lines? I can't keep altitude much longer." It was true. Thornton and Narracci fought the controls. After the first burst of flak, the B-17 dropped down, and to the right of the formation. First Lieutenant Joseph S. Rainey, flying off to the side of Sandy's

aircraft, wrote afterward, "The plane peeled off to the right, out of the formation and seemed ready to come back in. Then it went out again, down and under the...formation."

Finding himself in this position, Thornton hoped to circle and pick up the group on the back from the target. Lake's report, however, cancelled all such plans. "How's everyone? Is everybody okay?" asked the pilot. All crewmembers checked in, including Sandy, with an "Okay." Lieutenant Tyler, the navigator, gave Thornton a heading, and promised everyone they'd be over Russian-held territory in five minutes. Lake, startled, shouted out over the intercom, "It's on fire!" The pilot jerked around and looked at his number two engine. The propeller spun so fast you could hear it screaming. Huge amounts of oil streamed back from the cowling, and flames licked their way back towards the trailing edge of the wing. The game was up. Pulling the alarm bell as a signal to parachute to safety, Thornton tried at the same time to keep the B-17 steady so the crew could escape.

Second Lieutenant Roger H. McMillan, in another aircraft in the formation remembered: "It was losing altitude, flying level, and looked under control. It started to make a left turn, but instead, it rolled over on its back and started straight down. Then it started to spin....fire was coming from the ... wing." What McMillan saw was Sandy's aircraft, now on its back and spinning, its left wing in flames.

Men left the stricken bomber. First the navigator, then the tail gunner, followed by the co-pilot, and the two waist gunners, then the Bombardier. The pilot held the plane as long as he

could. It was time to leave. Setting up the autopilot to give himself and anybody else left on the plane a chance, Thornton kept his eyes on the instruments as he backed out of the cockpit and dropped through the front escape hatch and into space. Meanwhile, the Radar navigator and radio operator were in the radio room, just behind the bomb bay of the bomber. Both men went their separate ways. Stofko, the Radar navigator, headed for the open door in the rear waist section, while Sergeant George Marich, the radio operator, headed forward to the open bomb bay. It is presumed Sandy, at this time, stayed at his guns, knowing full well the danger of enemy fighters seeing a stricken American bomber. Now that the pilot had jumped, Sator could leave his position also. At that moment, the aircraft went into a spin, at first tossing Stofko and Marich violently around the inside of the dying plane. Then, as the spin increased, they were pinned to the sides. The autopilot, trying to correct the erratic flight, caused the aircraft to suddenly pull nose up, and Stofko used this chance to reach *up* and grab the *bottom* opening of the waist door. Pulling himself towards the opening, Stofko yelled, "Oh God, is this really happening to me?" At that moment, the plane exploded, blowing Stofko out of the door and Marich out of the shattered waist section. Shattered Plexiglas and jagged metal fragments flew past Sandy's face, then blackness.

An American fighter pilot, seeing the stricken B-17 falling away from the formation started over its way to protect it from any enemy fighters in the area. Suddenly, a bright light engulfed it, and shattered, broken, burning pieces fell to earth. The

fighter pilot looked at his aircraft's clock, it was 1410 hours, and the rest of the bombers, having just dropped their deadly loads, were heading back to Italy. He didn't see any chutes, so his attention went back to the bomber stream.

No one saw any parachutes that day. However, nine of the crew of ten did escape safely to earth, only to be quickly taken prisoner by the Germans below. Captured, Stofko and Marich, were led down a narrow dirt road when a German armored car, loaded with a German officer and a number of soldiers, pulled up to them and stopped. The German officer showed Stofko personal belongings of Sandy's, including his wallet, identification card, and some photos. "Do these items belong to one of your crewmen, Lieutenant?" asked the enemy officer. Stofko refused to respond. The German shrugged and said, "It makes no difference. These items belonged to a man we found dead near the wreckage. We buried him next to the plane. His head and legs were smashed." Stofko and Marich were led away.

Eight days later, Headquarters Fifteenth Air Force published an order awarding Sandy his tenth oak leaf cluster to his Air Medal, for the period of February 19th through March 13th. Back in Lockport, Illinois, the dreaded Western Union telegram from the War Department arrived, stating regretfully, Sandy had been declared missing in action since March 15th. A list of the other lost crewmembers' names and family addresses were supplied to Belen Sanchez, Sandy's adopted grandmother, so the families could support each other through the mail. Belen couldn't read or write English, so a family member read and responded to all the mail.

Six weeks later, the war was over. Thornton's crew was released, and while their families rejoiced over the news, and wrote to each other with the glad tidings, Belen waited. In a May 28th letter to Freda Tyler, the navigator's wife on that fateful trip, Belen shared her hope for Sandy's return. "I am very happy to hear the news you received about your son. As of yet we haven't had any news about my grandson.... But I'm not giving up hope. And I hope it won't be long before I will get the good news too."

By October, 1945, Sandy's body had not been recovered, so all the reports by all the surviving crewmen were gathered together, and a casualty board determined that Sandy had died that March afternoon. A Purple Heart was now added to Sanchez's record, posthumously.

Sandy's body was never found. Some believe that a United States Army casualty team recovered his body, but without any identification, listed it as an unknown, and is now buried at one of the many American military cemeteries in Europe. Others believe he is still buried some where nearby the crash site. Belen Sanchez always believed, to the end of her days, that Sandy would eventually come home. After her death, and when Germany became one country again, other members of the family started looking for Sandy. The navigator, Leslie Tyler, and Dan Murphy, a member of Sator's extended family, travelled to the crash site in 1993. All they found was the tail of the ill-fated B-17 being used as a wall for an outside storage shed.

The United States Army has also looked, from time to time,

but so far, no one has found him. In September, 1994, a local veterans group in Joliet, Illinois, successfully had a park named after Sandy. Many in the Hispanic community of Joliet receive inspiration from Sandy's memory. A spokesman for the park dedication noted, "Here in Joliet we don't even have a street with a Hispanic surname, let alone a public facility. We need our kids to identify with something other than a lot of negative stuff that people identify the Hispanic kids with." A generation after inspiring members of the Army Air Forces with his heroics in California, his record setting commitment to fight for his country from England, and his selfless act of protecting his aircraft, costing him his own life over Germany, Sandy is still an inspiration. As so many of his medal citations noted, Sator reflects the highest credit upon himself and the Armed Forces of the United States.