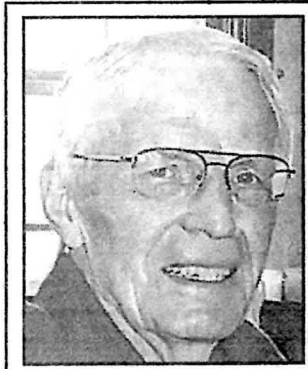


Washburn During The War Years a—The Boys At War—7

CS 9/29/11

In an interview with the Times in September 1943, Captain Archie J. Rantala, son of Mr. and Mrs. J. Ernest Rantala of the town of Oulu, related his experiences during the 34 bombing missions over Africa and Europe in which he had participated up to that time. He was a navigator on a B-24 Liberator bomber named "Shoot Luke." "The Palesti raid was for by far the worst I was ever in. Even the farmers out in the hayfields were shooting at us. If we didn't expect the Rumanians to put up a good fight we were greatly mistaken. They went right behind their anti-aircraft guns. Even though we flew at tree top level after we crossed the mountains for some 500 miles, and though they couldn't sight us, it seemed almost like a suicide mission. But it turned out to be highly successful. The farmers had rifles and there was machine gun fire and we were so low they could have thrown stones at us. We had to look up to see the chimney tops.

"It was my job to lead the squadron to the target and then the bombardiers took over. When we reached our target I dropped my maps and grabbed a gun. We pumped the storage tanks full of holes. The explosions when the tanks blew up were more dangerous than the enemy attack. Our



Lars Larson
Guest Columnist

plane was thrown 500 feet into the air by an explosion directly beneath us, but it didn't get a scratch. Some of the other planes didn't fare so well. If an enemy gun sights you at that low range you're a goner. I thought I'd said my last prayer during those 20 seconds or so when we were over the oil field. I really didn't have to go on the mission because I had completed my 'tour of duty,' which consisted of 25 missions. Now, in the Eighth Air Force, the number of missions has been raised to 30 before a man is taken off combat."

Captain Rantala was injured in only one of his 34 bombing missions and that was in the raid over Vegesack, Germany. The American planes were attacked by 150 German fighters. There were only a few Lib-

erators with the Flying Fortresses and the Germans concentrated on the Liberators. The fighter dived on Rantala's plane one right after the other. They attacked every part—tail, side, bottom, nose. A shell came through the nose of the plane and Rantala's steel helmet was all that saved him. He received a bad cut under the eye and that was the only injury her ever suffered. Seven of the 10 men in the bomber were injured. The plane started going straight down once and Rantala thought the pilot was hurt but questioned him and found he was all right. The air battle lasted about two and one-half hours. "Judging from my own experience the reports you get about the number of planes we down are not a bit exaggerated. Yet the Germans have very good planes and men."

In addition to the Vegesack and Ploesti raids, Rantala has been in raids on Brest, Antwerp, Bordeaux and other targets in France and Germany. In the African campaign he took part in raids on Tunis, Sousse, and Bizerte. He also raided points in Sicily and Italy in the Sicilian Campaign. In Africa Rantala was in one of the end planes on a formation and saw the lead plane get trapped at the target by an intruder plane waiting for

the attack. When that happens, he says, the rest of the squadron turns back. It's impossible to sight the intruder planes, which are painted black, unless it's a moonlight night. He says that he never saw a ship patched up as much as 'Shoot Luke.' Several times he thought it was lost and almost bailed out but changed his mind every time and always got back to his base safely. Referring to the Sicilian campaign, in which he played an active part, Captain Rantala says: "You should have seen the boats at the time of the invasion. The fish were screaming for room to swim in!"

There were several raids, conducted from bases in Africa, on the oil fields at Polesti Rumania, which provided a substantial proportion of Germany's oil requirements. The raid on Vegesack, Germany in March 18 1943, struck the submarine yards located there.

Captain Rantala entered the Army Air Force in October 1941, serving in Africa and England. He was awarded a Purple Heart, an Air Medal with four oak leaf clusters, a Distinguished Flying Cross, and a Silver Star. Four of his brothers were also in the services.

Letters to the editor

World War II Letters Wanted

CS 9/29/11

To the editor,
I plan to publish a memorial album of letters written by Bayfield County men and women in the armed forces during World War II (1939-1945) in which they describe their experiences and impressions of their

training, countries and locations where they were stationed, combat in which they may have participated, and so on. I would be grateful if anyone having wartime service letters, who would like to contribute copies to this pro-

posed memorial album, contact me—Lars Larson 381 Eagle Court, Whitewater, WI 53190, (262) 473-4637, or larsolb@gmail.com. If I collect enough letters I will prepare and publish the memorial album at my expense (non-profit) for distribution to schools, libraries, and museums in

the county, and to individual letter donors. I have written three books on Bayfield County and the Chequamegon Bay region that may be viewed on my website chequamegonbay-history.com.

Lars Larson
Whitewater