

THE MISSION TO POITIERS--MARCH 1945

by George Orloff

On 31 December 1943, three aircraft failed to return from a mission from Cognac/Chateaubernard. One aircraft was a Sgt. Alex Dominski.

Some time during February of 1945, the Red Cross of the F.F.I. sent a letter to Gen. Eisenhower's headquarters stating that Sgt. Dominski had parachuted from his disabled aircraft, and for one reason or another, was unable to evade to the United Kingdom. He joined the F.F.I., and with a small group, engaged in combat with the Germans at St. Cloud de Charente. He was killed in this battle which took place in March of 1944, and when his body and the body of his best friend (a member of the F.F.I.) was found, their original wounds were not fatal, but each had a bullet hole in the head, indicating that the Germans had killed all wounded. Their bodies were taken back to Poitiers and buried.

A directive came down from SHAEF to USSTAF, then to the 8th Air Force Headquarters and First Bomb Division to investigate. About the end of February, 1945, Capt. Ed Weizer, knowing that I was conducting classes in French prior to our move to the continent, came up to me one evening and said, "How well can you speak French?" I told him pretty well, not knowing what he had in mind, and let it go at that. A few days later he came up to me again, and asked if I would like to be an interpreter on an investigation which was going to France. I liked the idea although I knew nothing more about it. We were put on orders by First Bomb Division, and on the 5th day of March, six of us, three crew and three passengers left for temporary duty at Le Blanc, France.

The crew consisted of Lt. Col. Harry Holt, pilot; Capt. John Mazanek, navigator; Sgt. Morris Camus, engineer. The passengers were 1st Lt. Charles Garvin, Headquarters First Air Div.; Capt. Edward Weizer, 92nd Bomb Group; and 1st Lt. George H. Orloff, 1755th Ord. Co. as interpreter. Lt. Garvin was from personnel section of the 1st Division, and his responsibility as I recall, was to assure whether or not our Dominski was involved here and to determine disposition of any insurance he might have had. I don't believe he had any relatives or dependents. Capt. Weizer went along as representative of the personnel section of the 92nd Bomb Group, and of course, I went along to interpret.

We left from Kimbolton in a C-45 and flew directly to a U.S. Air Field at Dreux, where we refueled and had lunch and took off again for LeBlanc, it being the nearest point at which there was a known airfield. During the flight Col. Holt kept teasing me about my ability to speak French, and when we landed at LeBlanc said, "O.K. go find out if there is an airfield like this at Poitiers". A French Sgt. and a crew of maintenance men approached the aircraft and I went over to speak to them and asked them about an airfield at Poitiers. They understood me--I understood them. There was an identical field at Poitiers, and we took off again. It was only about a 10 minute flight, but when we landed at Poitiers, there were already a half dozen cars waiting for us, comprising a group of local F.F.I. personalities. They took us into Poitiers where on the way we were stopped by a French police officer who insisted on seeing our identification cards. It seems that the Germans had dropped some paratroopers in the area the night before and being strangers we were suspects. However, our escorts identified us and we went into town with no further difficulty.

Poitiers is a city over 1,000 years old, quite picturesque, and had suffered little battle damage of any consequence, and up until that time had seen no Allied soldiers, except one Canadian convoy which passed through the city rather quickly. We were welcomed with great enthusiasm as representatives of the liberators. Our driver took us first to the F.F.I. Hq., then to the City Hall, where the Mayor's secretary, a non-English speaking Frenchman introduced us to the Mayor. The Mayor was a professor of Greek at the local university and considered himself a Mayor of opportunity. The Col. and I went up to see the Mayor who spoke a passable English. We explained our mission to him--he was fully aware of the circumstances and the situation concerning Sgt. Dominski's demise. He made arrangements to have us driven to the cemetery with his secretary as a guide where we were shown two graves, one marked "X" and one marked "Y". It was indicated to us that "Y" was Sgt. Dominski's grave. We were unable to make any further identification from the grave and asked the secretary how he could be sure that this was in fact Sgt. Dominski's burial place. He assured us there would be no problem because the Surete' had photographed both bodies and had on file in the police headquarters full face and profile photographs. We, too, had identification photographs and since Sgt. Dominski had a very distinct profile, there would be no difficulty in identifying him. We went to Police Headquarters and tried to get the pictures that afternoon, but it was after working hours and the files were locked. The secretary assured us he would have the photographs for us in the morning and not to disconcert ourselves, but to go out and enjoy ourselves for the evening.

He made arrangements at the only hotel for our evening meal, to which we invited him. He also made arrangements for us to be billeted with local families. Col. Holt stayed at the home of the secretary General of the Dept. of Vienne (Secy. General being the equivalent to a state Governor) the rest of us were scattered around the area with civilian families. The next morning we gathered at the City Hall, were taken to the Police Headquarters, compared the photographs which showed it was in fact Sgt. Dominski. We said our farewells and went back to Dreux to refuel, came to Podington, but could not land because a mission was returning, were diverted to Thurleigh and returned to Podington by truck. Mission successfully accomplished.