

AVIATION WALL OF HONOR



First Lieutenant Dana Vane Varvil Bomber Pilot USAAF WWII

Dana Varvil was born in 1915 in Effingham, Illinois. The Varvil family moved first to Stephenson, Michigan and a few years later to Iron Mountain-Kingsford where Dana attended high school. He enlisted in the Army in 1942 and was stationed at Fort Sheridan, Illinois in an anti-aircraft battalion.

After Pearl Harbor, he was temporarily stationed in Everett, Washington before joining the Army Air Corps and initial flight training in Santa Ana, California. From there, it was primary flying at Ontario, California and then basic at Lancaster, California and advanced at Stockton, California. After graduation in June 1943, he had attained his pilot wings and the rank of Second Lieutenant. The next stop was Davis Monthan Air Base, Tucson, Arizona, where he was trained to fly the B-24 Bomber. In short order, Varvil was made 1st pilot, assigned a crew, and after final training sent to Alamogordo, New Mexico to join the 450th Bomb Group.

Their trip overseas started at West Palm Beach, Florida with first stop at Trinidad, next Belem, Brazil, then Natal and over to Dakar, Africa. After that was Morroso, Tunis and finally their European base at Manduria, Italy. From there they flew over targets in Italy, Germany,

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Austria and Romania. Missions started in the middle of January 1944. As the missions got longer and tougher, more planes were lost. February 22nd, 23rd and 25th were the worst when 18 planes and crews went down. Varvil was on all three and his group received their first unit citation.

He described one of them: "Around 100 miles from the target, the Regensburg ball bearing plant, we were hit by the first German fighters. It was a continuous running battle to and from the target. There were hundreds of fighter planes in the sky. It was a clear day and as far as you could see there were planes going down and parachutes all over. I felt safer over the target in the heavy flak than in the running battle.

Both the 15th Air Force and the 8th Air Force were on target that day. Our group alone had eight planes shot down. The chances of making 50 missions were pretty slim. I flew a number of missions in March and April. On April 4th we hit the railroad yards in Bucharest, Romania and on the 5th the oil refinery at Ploesti. We won our second unit citation on that mission."

"I flew two more missions to Romania before getting shot down on April 24th. On the day before, returning from a long mission over Germany, we ran out of gas near our field. I just made the end of the runway with two engines out; a third ran out as I hit the runway. With one engine left, I cleared the runway by pulling off in the mud. They called us a lucky crew that night but got shot down the next day.

I was leader of the high right box on the 24th of April over Ploesti. On the turn after bombs away, our ship took a direct hit from flak, blowing a large hole in the side of the ship about four or five feet back of my seat and the leading edge of the wing. This knocked out our #1 and #2 engines. The throttle linkage and gas lines were severed. We immediately fell below and back of the group.

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That was the most helpless and loneliest feeling I ever had - watching our group getting smaller in the distance as they headed home.”

“The smell of gasoline was strong as the ruptured lines and tanks were spraying out into the ship. Hoping the fighters would not spot us, I gave orders to lighten ship - the two waist guns, all the ammo, the flak suits, oxygen bottles, anything loose but the parachutes.

We had two engines going full r.p.m. but #3 was also hit. The engine head temperature was rising. I was hoping to baby the ship along to reach Yugoslavia before bail out.”

“In the meantime, Culver was reaching out of the hole in the fuselage to try to connect the fuel lines to #1 and #2 engines. However, in a few minutes, he had to give up. His hands were cut badly and frozen, and we were still at 12,000 feet.

Our luck held though. The ship didn't catch fire and no fighters saw us. At about 75 to 80 miles from Ploesti and at about 3000 feet, it was evident we wouldn't last long so I gave the order to bail out.”

“Everyone but Culver and Bahti responded. I yelled at them to hurry up. Flying now at about 1500 feet, I raised the left wing up, set the trim tabs, buckled on my chute and started for the bomb bay. The left wing dropped and the ship started turning left. I stepped back, straightened the ship, set the trim tabs more and started for the bomb bay again. The wing dropped again and the ship was turning again. This time, I got the wing up, gave it all the trim I could and, without looking back, hurried across the flight deck down into the bomb bay, rip cord in hand and out. One jerk and a white explosion of nylon. What a jerk that was! One of my boots flew off with the snap. I could see it tumbling ahead of me.

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My ship was now a quarter of a mile away, with the wing dropping again and turning to the left. I watched helplessly as it turned in about a half-mile circle, losing altitude at the same rate as I was in the chute. Completely turned now, it was headed straight at me with the roar of the two engines at full r.p.m. I thought, Oh, God, after all this and getting out, I'm going to get killed by my own ship!"

"At around 300 feet altitude and the ship about 200 or 300 yards, a few seconds away and still coming straight at me, miraculously #3 engine blew up. With the loss of power, the trim tabs swung the ship back to the right and down into the ground, exploding in flames a hundred yards in back of a small village.

I was drifting down on the opposite side of the village on a small hillside. I had hold of the shroud lines to lessen some of the shock of the landing, but the ground came up so fast I hit so hard I couldn't move. I was sure I was dead as everything faded out and I slipped into unconsciousness. But then my vision returned and I was able to get to my feet. I unbuckled my chute. I knew I should run to avoid capture but I was in such a state of shock I couldn't remember where to go. I couldn't even remember what country I was in. That problem was quickly solved as four or five farmers came running over the hill and surrounded me with raised pitchforks. They motioned me to elevate my arms and then, after searching and finding no weapons, herded me to the village."

"By then my state of shock had worn off. My mouth was very dry and I made signs I wanted something to drink. A woman came out of a house with a bottle and a glass. Pouring the glass full she offered it to me, but seeing me hesitate, drank it to show it wasn't poisoned. Then I had mine; it was really strong, like Italian Grappa.

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For the next hour, I stood in the street as the whole village, men, women and children, looked me over. I was beginning to relax more. About then a small group came up the road, two soldiers, a few civilians and Bahti and Culver. Then we were marched to a larger village a few miles away. Here they had a small garrison and a captain who could speak English. He informed us the rest of the crew had been captured and were in a village some distance away. He went through our wallets and escape kits, taking the money from the wallet and my Parker 51 pen from my shirt pocket. He let me keep the empty wallet with pictures of three nieces and a girlfriend. After looking them over he asked me if I liked women and children. When I said yes, he asked, "then why do you come over here and kill ours?" Of which I could make no reply."

"After finishing his official paperwork with name, rank and serial number, he shoved out the curious villagers who kept coming in to get a look at the American gangsters. One girl, about 16 or 17 who had been in and out a few times, was his daughter. Afterward she brought us a basket of food. This was the last good food we were to have for over four months. There was a loaf of white bread, hard salami, a bowl of Easter eggs, all colored, and a bottle of wine. It was really good. We were each given a blanket and the floor to sleep on.

The next morning, we were marched to the railroad station to take us to a larger town and garrison. The people in this area were quite curious and friendly not having been bombed. Here we were joined by the remainder of the crew, except Boyle who had been taken to a hospital with a broken ankle. I persuaded the Romanian lieutenant in charge to get a doctor to check Fili's eye and get some bandages for Culver's hands."

"At the garrison, we were introduced to the food we would have to live on in the months to come. Breakfast was usually a cup of synthetic tea and a boiled egg. Lunch and supper were a

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piece of sour brown bread and a bowl of thin barley soup with paprika for color. Later in the summer, it was mostly cabbage soup.

Our next move was by train to Bucharest. On the way, our guards had to use their rifles to protect us from the civilians. We had an hour or two wait in the train station at a town that had been bombed the day before. I am sure the crowd would have killed us all. Later, a few miles from Bucharest, the train could go no further, another bombed out railroad yard. We finished the last few miles by bus which, by design or accident, we had a tour of our bombing. What stands out in my memory today was what had been a beautiful cemetery was now a shamble. Stone burial vaults were blown apart, coffins and parts of them strewn about.”

“When we arrived at the prison camp, a Romanian army barracks, we met a lot of our squadron and group who had been shot down during the month of April. Four months later, August 23rd, Romania capitulated and we were set free. On the 31st of August and 1st of September, over 1100 of us were flown back to Italy and, in a couple of weeks, were on our way by boat for home.”

Varvil was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with three Oak Leaf Clusters. He was credited with 32 missions and attained the rank of First Lieutenant. He spent his remaining military duty at Romulus, Michigan, ferrying B-24's out of the plant at Willow Run until the war with Germany was over.

He came to Marquette, started a small cabinet shop which eventually turned into the Varvil Lumber Company. In 1946, he married the former Fern O'Donnell.

TJ Mudge, May 2004