

Where's That Bomber? It Was Here Just a Minute Ago

By MAJ. RICHARD THRUENSEN
and LT. ELLIOTT ARNOLD



(This article is taken from *Mediterranean Sweep*, a book to be published about November 1, by Duell, Sloan and Pearce, of New York.)

BACK around Christmas of 1942, an American fighter Group covering the retreat of Rommel as part of the Desert Air Force received some new pilots. One of them was a whopping, square-jawed, blue-eyed second lieutenant named William Benedict, who had just transferred from a Hurricane Wing of the Royal Canadian Air Force.

Benny arrived at the Group's desert base at Daragh, near Misurata, during the late afternoon. At the entrance to the landing ground, he identified himself. Then he asked for the parking area. Benny drove his staff car there. He was followed by two soldiers on two motorcycles—Benny's motorcycles—and two flat-bed trucks—Benny's trucks. On one of the trucks was a small bungalow—Benny's bungalow—equipped with bunks, furniture, radio and lights. After dismissing his drivers—hitchhiking soldiers—Benny set about getting his house in order.

The commander of the squadron to which Benedict had been assigned took one look at the personal motor pool which surrounded his new pilot and choked.

SQUADRON COMMANDER: Is this all yours, lieutenant?
BENNY: Yes, sir.

SQUADRON COMMANDER (wistfully): We're awfully short of transportation—just have a couple of jeeps and a truck which doesn't run very well.

"I gave them the staff car, one of the trucks and a motorcycle," Benny relates. "It was nothing. That staff car, now—a nice new Ford. Good rubber, leather seats, everything. I picked it up in Cairo when—well, as I was saying, it was nothing."

A year later, a crack pilot and a good leader, Benny commanded that squadron himself. And he had formed a partnership which had "owned" and operated nineteen airplanes, ten trucks, one tank, five staff cars, four sedans, and motorcycles and jeeps without number. The cost was simply ingenuity, and the gain some of the most singular adventures of the war.

This practice of fighting a war with nothing but the best is known as scrounging. Scrounging is a development of the something-for-nothing illusion. Every boy from five to fifty has dreamed that he has been let loose in a toy factory, an automobile plant, a gun shop or a confectionery store, surrounded by whatever

The riotous account of two Yanks and their astonishing achievements in the fine art of scrounging—i.e., borrowing something without pestering the owner for permission.

objects his heart most desires at the moment. The idea is that you can have anything you can take away with you. It's wonderful.

Wartime scrounging is that dream come to life. The North African campaign, with one highly mechanized army retreating in disorder before another, presented the most fertile scrounging ground in history. It simply took a couple of born scroungers, like Benny and Charley, to appropriate it for their own enjoyment and use.

Benny is twenty-seven and a rough-and-ready extrovert. Charley Leaf is five years younger, a lean, quiet boy with the courage of a lion. Both Benny and Charley left school in the States to join the Royal Canadian Air Force in 1941. They met for the first time in December of '42, in Cairo, where they were waiting for orders which would transfer them from the RCAF to the American Ninth Air Force. By good fortune, they were assigned to the same Group and the same squadron. It was at Daragh, halfway through the Libyan campaign, they started a collaboration which resulted in the most impressive scrounging record of the war.

The team's scrounging activity, it must be stressed, was extracurricular. Charley and Benny are fighting the war, and fighting it brilliantly. Each wears the D.F.C. with cluster, the Air Medal with clusters, the British D.F.C. and the Croix de Guerre. Their swoops on unattended chattels were simply after-hours relaxation.

Before forming his partnership with Charley, Benny had done a little scrounging as an RCAF pilot. As his squadron moved forward on the first lap of Rommel's retreat, he managed to collect several pieces of motor transport. Finding a flat-bed truck

which had lost its rear wheels to a mine, he repaired the vehicle by removing parts from another wreck. Then, trying to salvage two abandoned jeeps from the desert, he ran over an antipersonnel mine. One of the truck's rear wheels was blown off for a second time.

Repaired once more, Benny and the flat-bed went to Cairo on leave. There, two MP's took the truck away from him when he couldn't produce papers proving ownership. It was a rainy night and Benny was 200 miles from his base at Mersa Matruh. He walked over to the MP headquarters, speculating on the wisdom of arguing his case. If the truck wasn't his by right of reclamation, it surely wasn't the MP's. But he knew it was no use. You don't argue with MP's.

"I'd picked up an enlisted man I was going to take back to camp," he relates. "There we stood. Strangers in a strange city. Forlorn. Tired. It began to rain harder. Then I noticed that in front of the MP place there was this staff car—a Ford sedan—empty. So we got in just to keep out of the rain. Sitting there, I noticed the keys were in the car. The tank was full of gas. We had to get back to Mersa Matruh. So —"



It was at Kairouan that Benny and Charley scrounged their one and only tank.

It was with this staff car and several other pieces of equipment he picked up along the road that Benny arrived at his new station and found Charley Leaf waiting for him. The neophyte had a loyal collaborator now and the road ahead was littered with equipment left by the two armies. The period of abundance was about to begin.

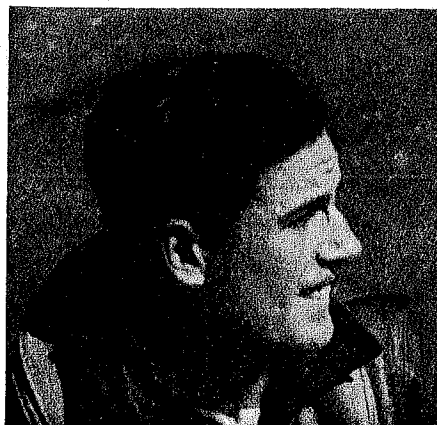
The first acquisition of the new team was long remembered as one of their greatest prizes. Shortly after they began to fly Kittyhawks for their new squadron, the great airfield of Castel Benito fell when the Axis was chased out of Tripoli. Benny and Charley waited a week for the sappers to clear out the mines the Germans had buried, then closed in on the abandoned equipment. Being well ahead of the regular salvage corps, they got their pick in the Green Goose, a trimotored Italian Savoia-Marchetti bomber. The ship was in flyable condition, if you knew how to fly it. Neither Benny nor Charley did. In fact, neither of them had ever flown anything larger than a single-engined aircraft.

Nothing daunted, they spent a morning inside the cabin, studying the controls and trying to translate the Italian on the dials and instruments. Finally, breathing a prayer, they started the engines and took off. The Green Goose flew, but it wasn't till many flights later that they found the two small levers which raised and lowered the landing gear.

With the Goose safely back at Daragh, the boys went to work with a paintbrush and replaced the Italian insigne with the American star. Then they serviced the machine and took themselves on some



Benedict, ex-scrounger, now leads a comparatively tame life as squadron commander.



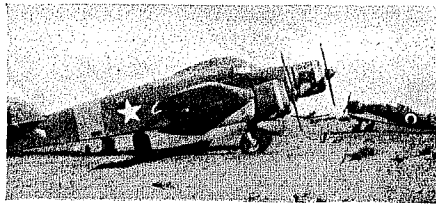
Leaf, able accomplice of Benedict in the flabbergasting adventures recounted here.

indoctrination flights. Benny would fly while Charley walked around the cockpit and cabin, pulling levers and twisting controls, and seeing what happened, and then Charley would fly while Benny explored. The ship became the group transport and was used to ferry mail, supplies and personnel back and forth across the desert between the operational landing grounds and the rear bases.

The boys carried a motorcycle in the big plane's bomb bay—a scrounged German motorcycle—for use as ground transportation after they'd landed. Gas and oil were always available, from either Allied supplies or abandoned Axis dumps. The Green Goose might have continued indefinitely as a personnel transport, but, unfortunately, after a month of good service, its various ailments indicated the need for a thorough overhauling. There wasn't time for this, so at Soltane, a landing field just behind the Mareth Line, the boys turned the ship into living quarters. Bunks were installed in the cabin and the spacious cockpit made into a lounge. A floor was laid over the bomb bay, the interior was carpeted and furnished—obtaining this equipment in the middle of the desert called for a little petty scrounging—and a British staff officer's bathtub was placed under the upper gun turret, which leaked when it rained. Resting quietly at the edge of an olive grove, the Green Goose made a delightful home. The boys lived in her a month, and left her at Soltane when they moved on.

An incident which took place at the Castel Benito airfield outside Tripoli points up a neat example of minor scrounging. The British Prime Minister was stopping off at Castel Benito on one of his trips, to felicitate General Montgomery and the 8th Army on the taking of Tripoli. On the day of his arrival, the Warhawk squadron had been stood down, so Charley and Benny drove one of their trucks over to the airdrome to pick up a few spare parts for the Green Goose and their various cars. They were also on the lookout for something which could be used as a bar for the squadron mess.

"Unfortunately," as Charley tells the story, "the regular salvage units had been busy as beavers. Around the bombed-out hangars there were big piles



The Green Goose, bomber, after Benny and Charley had adopted—and repainted—her.

of equipment, but each pile was under guard. Then, as we were about to give up, there was a great clamor out on the field. Mr. Churchill had arrived. Everybody, guards and all, rushed over to the center of the airdrome where the meeting between the P.M. and Monty was taking place. Everyone, that is, but Benny and me. We looked at each other. We were alone with all that treasure surrounding us. We took our time, made an unhurried selection from the various piles, loaded the truck and drove away."

The moral is that scroungers must stick to their scrounging and let history make itself.

While they were still at Daragh, Benny and Charley wangled a leave and went to Cairo. Coming back, they were off-loaded at Castel Benito. While they were trying to figure out how to scrounge an untended German Volkswagen, a British pilot with a Savoia-Marchetti flew in. The Englishman was catching transportation home, and had no further use for the big ship. No one else seemed to want it and time was pressing, so he gave the plane to the two boys.

Benny and Charley moved their bags into the new ship and started up the engines. Two of them caught fire. The plane went up in flames, taking the boys' clothes with it.

The war moved on, and so did the boys, scrounging as they went. It was at Kairouan that Benny and Charley scrounged their one and only tank. It was an

Italian medium. Charley found it in a ditch on one of his scouting expeditions up near the front line and brought the news home. It was decided that a tank was just what the team needed to while away the long evenings, so the next day the boys returned to the spot with one of their trucks. First, a thorough inspection was made for booby traps. Finding none, they hauled the machine out of the ditch. The engine ran perfectly. Then followed a protracted period of experimentation while they taught themselves how to drive the machine. Their arrival back at the airfield was a sensation. The tank had several machine guns, a small cannon and a complete stock of ammunition. Every evening after that the two-man armored force made the countryside surrounding Kairouan hideous as they clattered out for target practice.

The tank episode came to an ignominious end one evening when Charley noticed smoke while they were tooting down the road in search of something to shoot at. The tents of a field hospital lay just off the road, so the boys turned into the area in search of water—thinking the engine was probably overheated. It was. While they were searching for water, the tank burst into flames. It burned down to a blackened hulk just a few feet from the hospital tents.

The Me-109 is a vicious little German fighter which will be in the news as long as the Luftwaffe is. Benny and Charley have scrounged and flown ten or a dozen of these planes, and with them had some of their most nerve-racking scrounging experiences. Their first 109 set the pattern for the rest of the stable.

It sat under guard with another 109 at a field the British had taken over on Cape Bon. The guard said yes, they were flyable, but the gentlemen were not to fly them. Orders. Benny and Charley climbed into the ships, fussed with the controls and looked yearningly at the guard. Finally, the officer in charge of the field was called, and it was arranged that the boys should fly the ships once or twice around the field. The boys successfully negotiated several turns about the field, landed safely, blandly thanked the officer in charge and rode away.

The next day, Charley drove Benny up to the edge of the field and waited

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DRAWINGS BY JAMES R. BINGHAM

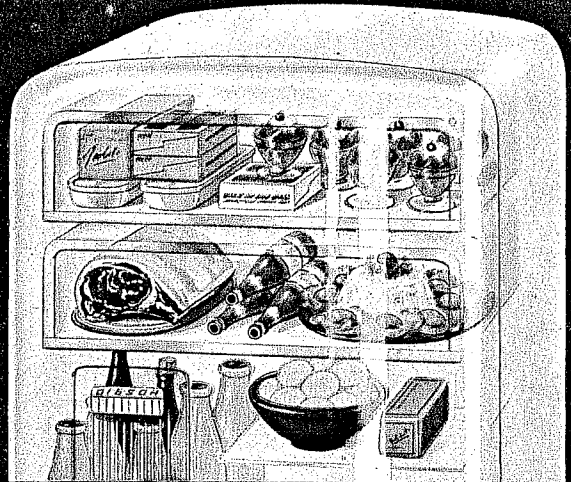
Charley saw the door burst open. A hat sailed out. Then a shirt. And finally the Italian guard. The boys and the trailer sped off down the road.



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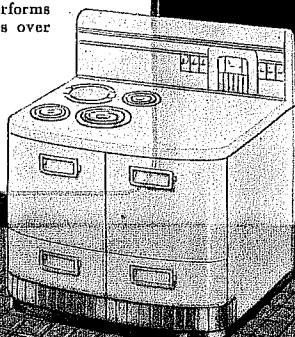
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while his friend exchanged a few words with the guard, climbed into one of the Me-109's, started the engine and flew away. Then Charley, in the jeep, beat it hell-for-leather down the road. A mile from the field, the jeep sputtered to a stop—out of gas. Charley buttoned up his leather flying jacket, put on his sun glasses and walked back to the field, gas can in hand. The officer in charge, busy on the phone trying to trace the Americans who had taken the 109, graciously gave him gas. When Charley arrived back at his own field, Benny was already repainting the 109.

That ship gave the boys some valuable flying experience, but never won their allegiance. This first 109 expired at 5000 feet, when the engine froze with Benny at the controls. He landed safely amidst a herd of camels. During later experiments with Messerschmitts, Benny had three more forced landings—two in the water and one more over land.

The period following the Axis collapse in Africa was a vehicular scrounger's paradise.

"It was wonderful," recalls Charley. "Why, on Cape Bon you couldn't travel fifty feet without running across a new piece of Axis equipment. Half of the stuff was thoroughly booby-trapped, so the amateurs stayed clear. The day Tunis fell, we drove up from Kairouan. A German pocket was still holding out to the south, you'll remember.

"We got into Tunis about midnight. On the outskirts we came across a German reconnaissance car standing in the middle of the road. Brand-new. Keys in it and everything. Benny just stepped in and drove it off. Down near the docks,

where they'd apparently collected stuff for possible evacuation, we picked up a completely equipped trailer. By the time we finished that night's work everybody in the squadron had his own car."

The invasion of Sicily found the boys and their squadron with enough motor transport to equip a regiment. All of this had to be left behind in favor of standard Army vehicles. Abandoning their trophies was hard, but it gave the team some rather spectacular opportunities to bestow favors. Benny, who had been squiring a Red Cross girl, left his competition—and the young lady—flabbergasted when he casually presented her with a new Opel sedan.

Sicily paid off the two scroungers heavily in aircraft. Many of the fields used by the Nazis had been surrounded by paratroopers and were littered with intact equipment. Working on orders—which for once made their venture a legitimate one—Charley and Benny salvaged six Me-109's from the much-bombed field at Comiso.

While scrounging the Me-109's at Comiso, the boys had spotted one of the greatest prizes of their cadging careers. The German Fieseler-Storch is a light, two-seater liaison plane which can practically land and take off in a good-sized back yard. This particular Fieseler-Storch, immobilized by some minor damage to its landing gear, was sitting in one corner of the field amidst some wrecked fighters. A few hours' work would put it in flyable condition. The only trouble was that the field was due to be taken over by another unit, which would inherit the prize. A heavy operational schedule prevented the boys from getting back to the Comiso field for several days. Meanwhile they tormented themselves with the picture of some other scrounger making away with their jewel.

Finally, a day of low clouds—and no operations—gave them their chance. They drove madly to Comiso. The new

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RIVETS



THE SATURDAY EVENING POST



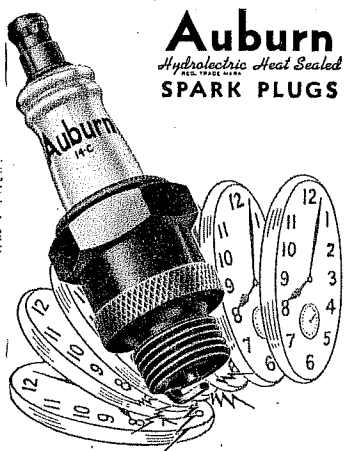
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unit was just taking over the field. Some of their planes were already on the ground and the administrative staff was moving in. The boys rushed out to the Storch and started working against time. With the job half done, they spotted a new danger—a group of salvage officers was inventorying the abandoned equipment.

Wrenches slipped, bolts stuck, everything went wrong. When the final adjustment was made, the salvage group was just fifty yards away. Starting the engine, Benny threaded his way carefully among the wreckage of the fighters and took off with a cold motor. The surprised shouts of the inspecting officers followed him down the runway. Charley stealthily made his way around the edge of the field and followed in a jeep.

The Storch proved to be one of the team's most useful acquisitions. The boys flew it for 500 hours and landed on half the pastures and roads of Sicily. The only other Storch in Allied hands at the time was owned by Air Marshal Coningham. Charley and Benny, before a windstorm demolished their machine by turning it over on its back, traded spare parts with the air marshal. It gave that particular scrounge a bit of tone.

Another prize taken from the Comiso airdrome was a small Italian trainer. The trainer had an abbreviated career—a crew chief stood it on its nose and broke the only available propeller in a taxiing accident several days later.

The disappointment at this tactical error was so evident among the ground crews that the boys drove to Catania, where they'd heard there were some small airplanes in a warehouse. There were, but the planes weren't much good. The boys had to dismantle three of the trainers before they had parts enough for one good ship. Using the little plane, they gave flying lessons to the enlisted men in the squadron. Charley finally crashed the trainer in an olive orchard during a bad storm. The plane was shorn of its wings, but Charley emerged unscathed.

Shortly after this accident, Benny came down with pneumonia and the team suspended operations. Flown to a hospital in Africa, Benny celebrated his recovery by scrounging a Henschel 126, a large, German, single-engine observation aircraft. The circumstances surrounding this piece of cagging in an area so far removed from the fighting are Benny's secret. All he'll say is that he found it in a vacant lot. The ship flew perfectly, but it had no compass or navigation instruments, so Benny flew it back to Sicily, across the Mediterranean, by the sun. The Henschel was a faithful old workhorse and served out its time as a small transport.

Borrowed Wings

Despite the fact that it was a two-seater, Charley once flew it around the field with seven passengers piled into the back seat. When the Group moved to Italy, the Henschel went with them.

Italy introduced a period of gradual decline in the scrounger's art. The Italians, from being enemies, suddenly became cobelligerents with rights of their own; the Germans abandoned their wild retreat and began to salvage more of their equipment, and the whole conduct of the war became more formalized. As Charley puts it:

"There were just too many people watching what equipment was left around. Competition with legitimate salvage projects was fierce, and sometimes, as you left hurriedly with your prize, there was a suggestion of impending violence in the air. Why, once an Italian even shot at us."

Wandering innocently into the airfield at Taranto a few days after Italy's surrender, they spied a Piaggio 1008—a four-engined bomber about the size of a Flying Fortress. The mammoth ship was sprinkled liberally with Italian

guards. Charley and Benny inspected the plane and studied the controls until they felt they could fly the machine. There was no gas in the plane, so they wet down the tanks with the contents of a dozen five-gallon tins that they found in a near-by hangar. The puzzled Italian guards were enlisted in this work.

With everything ready for flight, the boys started the engines. The guards began to get a little edgy. Finally, Charley cleared them all out of the ship. This was done by looking stern and talking rapidly in English. As the guards retreated, Benny warmed the engines. Spying a jeep carrying an Italian officer and an American colonel bearing down on them, Benny opened the throttles and took off down the field. The ship just cleared the boundary, as neither of the boys could find the controls which changed the pitch of the propellers.

Kidnaping a Home

Once in the air, their troubles really started. The weather was foul, with a low ceiling and scattered rain squalls, the country was strange to them, and nothing they pulled or pushed would retract the landing gear of the lumbering giant. Their gas supply, they figured, would last about fifteen minutes. Within five minutes they were lost. Within ten minutes they were worried. As the fifteen-minute limit approached, they began to regret the whole venture.

"Boy," says Charley, "it was lonely up there, just the two of us in that big crate. We flew in circles, trying to find someplace big enough to set her down. Finally, dead ahead, Benny sighted this field. We made our approach and it began to look familiar. It was, of course, our own field. We got her down just as the motors began to cough."

Living in wartime Italy lacks all the comforts of home; tents are cold and drafty, and buildings damp and full of fleas. Charley and Benny decided to remedy this situation, and found the answer to their problem in a trailer on the back street of a small Adriatic town. Inconveniently, there was an Italian guard sleeping inside. The boys quietly hitched their jeep to the trailer, raced the engine and started off with as much noise as they could manage. Watching developments in the rear through the mirror, Charley saw the door burst open. A hat sailed out. Then a shirt. Then a suitcase. And finally the Italian guard. The boys and the trailer sped off down the road.

The circumstances being what they were, the team decided that placing their new home on the living site at the airfield might smack of ostentation, so they chose a well-concealed spot next to a haystack, about a mile from the field. Commuting proved a problem until they discovered a little Fiat car which their scrounger's instincts told them was behind a bricked-up wall in a local garage. The Italians had succeeded in hiding it from the Germans, but not from a couple of expert cadgers. A mile of telephone wire, from the camp site to the trailer, completed their domestic arrangements. The trailer had its own lighting system, bunks, furniture and radio.

This little home on wheels—in which the boys are still living as this is written in the spring of '44—just about completed the team's active scrounging. The changing times and new responsibilities have chastened the boys and turned their energies to new fields. Benny is now a squadron commander and Charley his operations officer. The problems of leadership and of dive-bombing technique now occupy the hours which used to be spent in quest of trucks and planes and jeeps and tanks.

It is a more settled life, a soberer existence, but at least—as Benny says, with a sigh—they have their scrounging days to look back upon. Others will pick up the fallen torch and carry it onward.