

“...To begin with I would like to say that Fonner was the best friend I ever had in the army. We started out in pre-flight together at Kelly Field, Texas, and were together at every field thereafter except one. When we came overseas I took fever and had to go to the hospital for two weeks. During this time Fonner was assigned and requested that I be sent to the same outfit, which I was. When I was assigned, Fonner had 6 missions to his credit. On his 11<sup>th</sup> mission, m 76<sup>th</sup>, he was assigned to fly right wing in the lead element. This was on July 16, and we were going on Messina docks. Before we reached the target the left wing man in the second element pulled out with a bad engine and Fonner pulled up in his place. When we reached the target we started on the run from north to south. There were a couple of three groups ahead of us so by the time we got there they really had the anti-aircraft batteries warmed up. It was the worst anti-aircraft fire I had ever seen before or have ever seen since. The sky was literally full of lead. I felt my ship get hit three times before we dropped (the bombs) but it continued to fly good so I kept on. Just as the bombs started away I heard the tail gunner call that the ship was on fire, so I turned over to the co-pilot and started to look around. My ship wasn't on fire but I could see Fonner was in trouble. His ship was limping badly and trailing smoke. While I was watching him the ship peeled off and started down in a slow spin and I saw three chutes. The plane then went out of my sight so I called the tail gunner and told him to watch it on down. He called in saying he saw another chute and then that the plane exploded, then that the ship had hit and exploded again. It went down on the Italian side of the Messine straits near the town of S. Giovanni. That was all we knew for awhile.

Later the Allies captured all of this territory. When they invaded across the straits they captured a hospital. Fonner's engineer, Sgt. Geno was one of the patients, also Fonner's tail gunner, Sgt. Arnold. Sgt. Geno was almost well and was returned to the Squadron but the tail gunner (Arnold) was taken to an allied hospital.

Sgt. Geno's story is this:

He was up in the top turret looking for fighters. He kept noticing smoke around but thought it was from the exploding anti-aircraft shells. Finally the smoke got so bad that he couldn't see so he got down out of the turret and opened the door to the bomb bay. A big sheet of flame hit him in the face so he told Lt. Fonner that the bomb bay was on fire and closed the door. Fonner gave orders for the crew to bail out and the ship got out of control. Geno started to go out through the nose but it was also on fire. He then crawled back to the bomb bay and tried to open the bomb bay doors but the handle had burned off, so he went back to get Fonner to open them with his lever. Fonner and the co-pilot were trying to get out of the window and couldn't get back in so Geno decided to try to run the bomb bay. He started through and found a shell hole in the top of the bomb bay and started through it. When he was about half out – the ship exploded and blew him the rest of the way. He saw two other chutes besides his own. The ship hit the ground and exploded. When Geno hit the ground the Italians captured him and took him to the hospital. There they questioned him. Among other things they asked him how many there were on a crew. He wouldn't answer so they told him that there were six bodies on the ship. They also told him they captured the man with the gold tooth which was the waist gunner (Sgt. Wm. Jackson). After about an hour they brought in the tail gunner (Sgt. Arnold) which made three accounted for. There were nine on the ship.

Whether or not the Italians told the truth about there being six bodies or not I couldn't say. Neither do I have any way of knowing whether my tail gunner was mistaken or not when he reported four chutes. One ship reported six chutes. All captured officers are sent to Germany so I have no way of knowing for sure what really did happen.

Mrs. Fonner, this has been an awkward sort of letter to write for obvious reasons. I hope I haven't bungled the job. I wish to express my appreciation for your feelings and send my sincere wish that Fonner can somehow have gotten out safely." *From a letter written by 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Robert W. Goen, Jr. (301<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group, 353<sup>rd</sup> Squadron), to Frances Fonner, dated Oct. 28, 1943.*

[Robert Fonner and father Ramsey](#)