

St. Alphonsus Church, Baltimore, Maryland

306th Heavy Bombardment Group, U.S. Army Air Corps

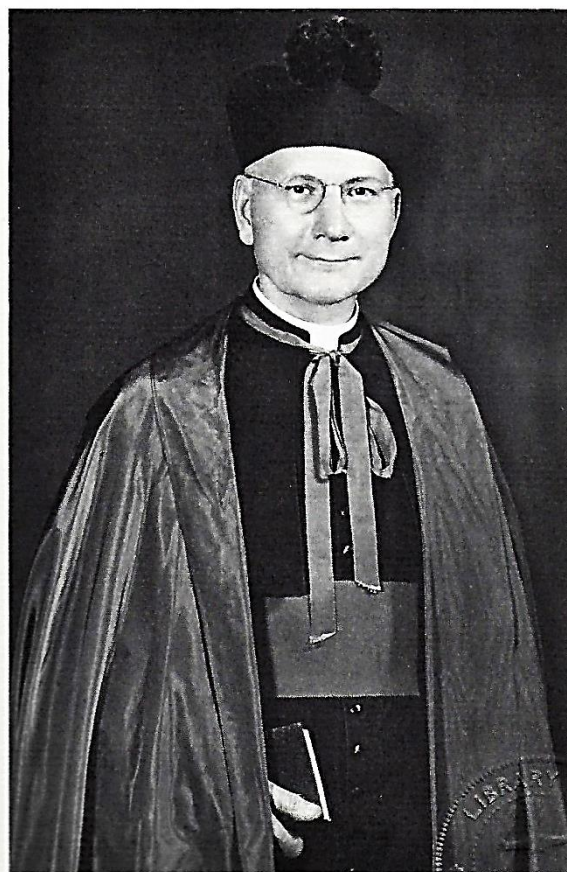
World War II Silver Wings Story

by Henry Galdis

General George S. Patton is frequently quoted as having said "For over a thousand years Roman conquerors returning from the wars enjoyed the honor of triumph, a tumultuous parade. In the procession came trumpeters, musicians and strange animals from conquered territories, together with carts laden with treasure and captured armaments. The conquerors rode in a triumphal chariot, the dazed prisoners walking in chains before him. Sometimes his children robed in white stood with him in the chariot or rode the trace horses. A slave stood behind the conqueror holding a golden crown and whispering in his ear a warning: that all glory is fleeting." Although said as a historical commentary of the past, General Patton's quote was also a prediction of what would occur in the future. Today the glory won by blood, sweat, and tears and all too frequently to the loss of hundreds of thousands of American lives the saving of western civilization from Fascist rule is being forgotten. Our Finest Generation, which turned depression and war into prosperity and power, is diminished daily and their glory forgotten.

As a young boy attending St. Alphonsus Church and parish school every time I went to church to hear mass, I would always at some point fixate by gage at the frame glass case hanging from church's main front pillar. For a young boy growing up in the immediate post World War II, I heard story told about my father, uncles, and all of the other Baltimore Lithuanian Community heroes who had fought in the war. This glass case containing a hundred or more coveted silver wings awarded to our aviators upon being certified for combat and simply bore a Victory Eagle with a cross American and Vatican flags above the wings with the dedication "In token of gratitude for Our Lady's intercession from Catholic Personnel – 306th Heavy Bombardment Group". Maybe because my own father has served in one of the U.S. Air Force Bombardment units or because the movies and radio programs of the time gloried the deeds of such flyers, I could not stop thinking about the stories each pair of wings could tell about each of their previous owners. I was old enough to know these flyers flew on combat and surely pray before each and every flight known that they might never return hope. Maybe these wings and growing up among

these heroes were the reason, I joined the U.S. Air Force myself immediately after graduation from college. I was not blessed to have been chosen to be flyer; I have never lost the awe that I had as a child for such heroes.



REVEREND MONSIGNOR
LOUIS JOSEPH MENDELIS, S.T.D., LL.D.

Recently, I have researched the 306th Heavy Bombardment Group history and learned the story behind how these coveted silver wings came to be hung in honor of the Blessed Mother and these heroes in St. Alphonsus Church. Although there were surely Lithuanian Americans serving in this unit and very possibly one of their wings is in this case, the story of the 306th Heavy Bombardment Group as one percent of all Americans fighting in that war were, just a few of our Finest Generation who fought and many died for their country. Hopefully this story will stall off the loss of Our Lady's intercession in their

lives and these flyers their quickly fading glory a little longer.



Exterior of St. Alphonsus Church – Baltimore, MD



Interior of St. Alphonsus Church – Baltimore, MD

The American involvement in World War II started with the surprised Japanese naval attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, which caused the United States to engage in a four year long life and death global struggle against Japan, Nazi Germany, and Fascist Italy, for its very survival as a free nation. This world war directly involved more than 100 million people from over 30 countries and

was the deadliest of all conflicts in human history. It is estimated that 50 to 85 million fatalities resulted with most having occurred in the Soviet Union and China caused massacres, genocide, the Holocaust, strategic bombing, starvation, disease and the first use of nuclear weapons.

Immediately after the declaring of war against the axis nations the U.S. Army Air Corps (USAAC) as it was known at the time began reconsolidation of its existing units and recruiting and forming new units that would be needed for the struggle. The 306th Heavy Bombardment Group constituted from already existing formations, on January 28, 1942, and activated on March 1, 1942 and immediately underwent combat training with the B-17 Flying Fortress at Gowen Field, Idaho and Wendover Field, Utah. The B-17 was the most modern four-engine heavy long ranged bomber in the American arsenal at the time. The aircraft was commanded by a pilot and manned by a co-pilot, bombardier, navigator, radio operator-gunner, ball turret gunner, left and right waist gunners.



St. Alphonsus Church WWII Air Force Wings – Lithuanian Museum Collection. Photo by: Gintaras B.

Upon completion of its training the unit was assigned to the Eight Air Force based Thurleigh, England, as the European Theater of the War was then considered to be vital for the survival of Western Europe and the units assigned B-17s had the long-range capability of reaching the enemy's homeland. From this base in England the 306th Heavy Bombardment Group flew combat missions from October 1942 to April 1945, primarily against strategic targets, striking locomotive works at Lille, railroad yards at Rouen, submarine pens at Bordeaux, shipbuilding yards at Vegesack, ball-bearing works at Schweinfurt, oil plants at Merseburg, marshalling yards at Stuttgart, a foundry at Hannover, a chemical plant at Ludwigshafen, aircraft factories at Leipzig, and other objectives on the Continent. Several of the unit's most historic missions was the first American bombing mission on Berlin, bombing missions in preparation of the Normandy D-Day invasion landing, helping stop the advancing German forces during Battle of the Bulge, and supporting the airborne assault across the Rhine which led to the defeat of the Nazi forces. During the unit's existence it took part in Air Offensive (Campaigns) in Europe; Normandy; Northern France; Rhineland; Ardennes-Alsace; Central Europe and besides individual awarded medals and decorations the unit was twice awarded Distinguish Unit Citations for its combat missions into Germany in January 11, 1944 and February 22, 1944.

Although the unit's combat history has accurately been presented in an abbreviated form the words are bureaucratic and provide nothing about what these heroes experienced or thought about while their lives were solely in God hands. It is frequently said and I believe most readers would agree that people pray more during stressful times. There surely cannot be many great stressful times that what these aviators went through when awaiting or actually taking part in a combat bombing mission over the skies of Nazi Germany where any second they could lose their lives. There is little doubt that these aviators turned to prayer and we have documented accounts of the unit members turning to the mass, the rosary, and the Novena in Honor of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal before each and every mission.

During my research, I was fortunate to learn of the existence of the 306th Heavy Bombardment Group Historical Association, Park City, Utah, and not only learned a great deal of information about the unit, but Father Adrian M. Poletti who was the unit Catholic Chaplain that the one who collected the Catholic unit member wings. They also provided a copy of an article written about Father Poletti's service and an

article he wrote himself about his military service. In these articles, Father Poletti clearly confirms that these silver wings were given him by Catholic crew members of the 306th Heavy Bombardment Group as token of gratitude for Our Lady's intercession in their survival of their after completing their required number of flown combat missions.



**St. Alphonsus Church – Baltimore, MD
– Rev. Adrian Poletti offers Mass.**

Father Poletti was born on August 15, 1928, in Union, New Jersey, to Emile and Abigale Poletti, nee Mead, and ordained a Catholic Passionist priest on April 28, 1934. He volunteered in 1942 to become an Air Force Chaplain and served with the 306th Heavy Bombardment Group during World War II. In July 1944, Father Poletti was featured in a Sign Magazine article entitled "Bomber Base in England" and wrote his own recollection in a section entitled "The Chaplain Speaks" for the First Over Germany, A story of the 306th Bombardment Group, by Arthur P. Bove, Putnam, Connecticut, which was published in 1946. When interviewed Father Poletti described his three year service with the 306th Bomb Group as having been "some of the happiest of my life" and doubted that any other group received better religious attention.

In his article, Father Poletti again recounts his war years with the unit, which included the following passages. "...I remember Lt. Becker graphically too, because he used to wake me up for briefings and was always the first one in the chapel. He received Holy Communion before every mission and then would devotedly kneel before the Shrine of Our Lady in the Post Chapel and light a candle. Toward the end of the war, the custom began of the combat men's leaving their wings here when they finished their missions and went home. It was the morning of the first daylight and first big American raid on "Big B," it was also Becker's last mission, his 35th. He came to me before he left the Chapel and said, "Well, Father, this is it, my last one; tonight you can pin my

wings up there with the rest." The ships took off with Becker flying "Rose of York." The ships came back and crew didn't have a chance.

These were but two out of the hundreds, but every one of us can recall these and many more similar incidents. This is what Victory cost." Through this short passage, Father Poletti clearly recounted one of his many unit members' religious devotion and praying on his knees in candle light before the Shrine of Our Lady in the Post Chapel for deliverance. Lt. Becker's Silver Wings are not among those on display as he gave all for his country.

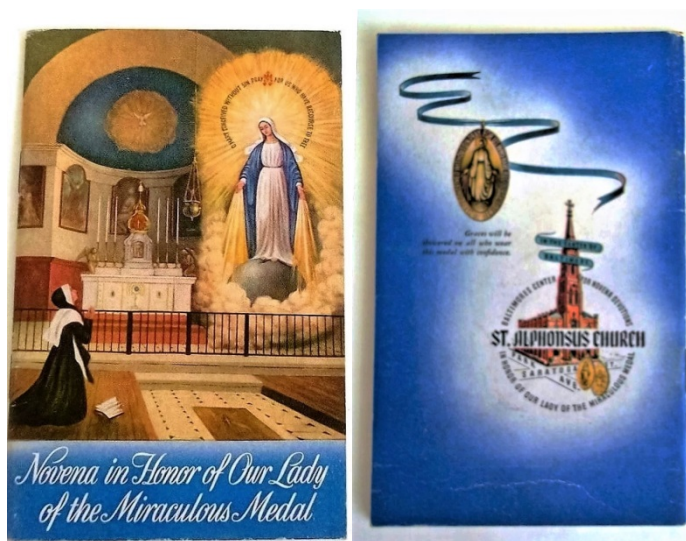


306th Bombardment Group (H) Insignia on display at St. Alphonsus Church – Baltimore, MD

During his military service Father Poletti rose to the rank of Major and was awarded both a Presidential Citation and a Bronze Star Medal. After the war, he was assigned as the pastor at St. Joseph's Monastery Church, Baltimore, Maryland, where he is remembered as having worked for the beautification of the church and his love for taking photographs of parish events. In 1970, he became a field representative for Sign Magazine, which required that he frequently travelled from parish to parish which required him to get permission from their pastors to speak to their parishioners about subscribing to his magazine. Father Poletti died on December 24, 1980, and is buried in the Passionist Community Section, New Cathedral Cemetery, Baltimore, Maryland.

Although specifics details are lacking concerning why St. Alphonsus Church was picked over Father

Poletti's own Baltimore parish or any other parish to hang his collected and framed Silver 306th Heavy Bombardment Group wings is the rest of the story that will become self-evident. In the years before the start of the war, St. Alphonsus Church located in downtown Baltimore had become noted for its Novena in Honor of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal and its pews became over flooded with people during the war years attending its novena services during their lunch hour. In addition, Reverend Louis J. Mendelis (Later Monsignor) then the pastor obtained permission and raised funds to print and distribute a million copies of the St. Alphonsus Church, Novena in Honor of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal booklet, which he had sent to Military Chaplains for distribution to American service men and women. There is virtually no doubt that Father Poletti received and distributed copies of the St. Alphonsus Church novena booklets to the members of the 306th Heavy Bombardment Group and visited St. Alphonsus Church the most popular church in the city while seeking increased subscriptions to the Passionist Sign Magazine. Father Mendelis made it a practice to invite or asked for second plate donations for worthy religious needs. Hence, the presentation of Father Poletti's Silver Wings frame collected and presented "In token of gratitude for Our Lady's intercession from Catholic Personnel – 306th Heavy Bombardment Group".



Front and Back covers of the Novena Booklet used at St. Alphonsus Church – Baltimore, MD.

