

AERIAL HITCH-HIKER

An Eighth Air Force Bomber Station, England, ~~April 27, 1943~~ July 4, 1943

When S/Sgt. Paul Vardis, a ball turret gunner from St. Louis, Mo., extends his thumb for a ride, he points up instead of forward. Ace among aerial hitch-hikers, the sergeant recently found need of his unusual persuasive powers.

Leaving the states with his crew in their ~~trip~~ Fortress "Ricky Ticky", he got as far as the second stop on the southern route, Natal, Brazil. Here Sgt. Vardis contracted a sore throat and was immediately hospitalized. The plane had to leave without him, and so he was instructed to catch up with his crew as best he could.

Nine days later he was hanging around the operations room at the nearest Pan American Airlines station. He finally jumped on a C-47 and got as far as Dakar, Africa. It took him two days to find a ride to Marrakesh, French ~~MARRAK~~ Morocco.

His orders read that his crew was finally destined for Oran. A ride was leaving for Oran the next morning, so he arranged to go along, and started off for an evening's sightseeing. When the time came to get back to the base, no transportation was to be found. His frantic questions to the natives resulted in either delighted giggles or blank stares. Sign language didn't help, so, in desperation, he started walking. Walking all the way, he arrived to find that the plane with all his clothes, parachute, orders, paybook and equipment had left an hour previously. In the midst of ~~this~~ this extremely embarrassing situation, he found that his crew had had their orders changed, and were headed for England. A few days later he managed a ride to England on a B-17 where he joyfully rejoined his crew.

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The only ones who resented his unofficial flights were the Luftwaffe boys. In ten missions, Sgt. Mardis racked up a score of one destroyed and one probable.

The sergeant's thumbs no longer point upwards. Now they point in ~~the~~ forwards, in the same direction as his twin fifties.