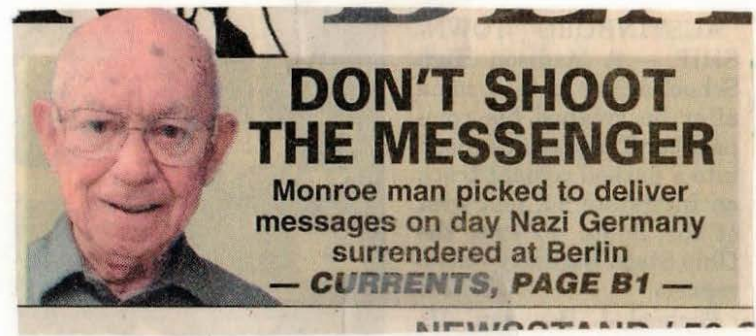


CARL E. FEATHER / Star Beacon

LOUIS MURTHA holds the English (left) and Russian versions of the message he was to deliver to the officer commanding at Tempelhof, where Berlin was surrendered. His mission was scrapped at the last minute and Murtha was told he could keep the papers, which he later had laminated.



LOUIS MURTHA in his days as an Army single-engine reconnaissance pilot during World War II.

Memorial Day 2005

Don't shoot the messenger

Monroe man picked to deliver messages on day Nazi Germany surrendered at Berlin

By **CARL E. FEATHER**
Lifestyle Editor

The 60th anniversary of the surrender of Germany holds special meaning to Monroe Township resident Louis Murtha, who played a small role in the events of that day.

Murtha, who served with the Army Air Forces as a tactical reconnaissance pilot, was chosen to deliver a message to the staging area, placing him in the hub of the official surrender activity near Berlin, May 8, 1945.

The Allegheny County, Pa., native had completed his required 75 combat missions as a pilot and was waiting for his orders to go home when the special assignment came through. Murtha says the operations officer for the day wore a big grin when he told him that he had "a special trip" for him.

His assignment was to hand deliver a written message to Air Marshal Arthur William Tedder at Stendal, a staging area for the officials who would then travel to Berlin to sign the official documents. The message was that French General Tassigny would not attend.

Murtha says he flew into the airfield and a colonel showed him where to park the plane.

"I was probably the lowest ranking officer to land on that field,"

says Murtha, who was a first lieutenant. "That was the first time I'd had a colonel show me where to park."

The colonel immediately wanted to know the nature of Murtha's business and told Murtha he'd deliver the message for him. But Murtha insisted that he follow his orders to the last detail and he would be the one to hand deliver the message to Tedder.

The colonel left and a few minutes later, Tedder showed up and read the message. Then he told Murtha to wait there.

"I looked over and saw four stars coming toward me," Murtha says. It was Gen. Carl Spaatz, who was a witness to the signing of the surrender document at Berlin that day. Spaatz was commander of the U.S. Strategic Air Force and would later oversee the strategic bombing of Japan, including dropping the atomic bombs.

"He asked me 'What the hell rank are you?'" says Murtha, who never wore any officer ID when flying.

Murtha and Spaatz struck up a conversation based upon both of them being from Pennsylvania. After a few minutes of chit chat, Spaatz told Murtha he had another request for him - to deliver a message to the commanding officer at Tempelhof, the Berlin airport where the surren-

der papers would be signed. The message was for the Russians.

Murtha said "Yes, gladly," as if he had any choice in the matter.

Murtha was escorted to Spaatz's C-47, which had two finely decorated rooms; the forward room was for his secretary, a beautiful blonde major.

Spaatz explained that they were awaiting a Russian fighter escort for a C-47 bringing in German officials. He was given two handwritten messages, one in English and a second in Russian, and told to fly over Tempelhof at 3,000 feet, lower his gear and flaps, and rock his wings.

The message read: "Party from SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force) waiting at STENDAL for escort. If escort not available inland arrive unescorted in one hour from time of writing this message, which is 100 Greenwich Time."

He got back in his plane and started to taxi down the runway, but a sergeant in a Jeep flagged him down before he could get off the ground.

"He told me I could go back to base," Murtha says. "I asked the

sergeant about the messages and he said 'Take them with you.'"

Murtha says the Russian fighter escort had already arrived, making his mission unnecessary. He looked up, and saw the Russian planes overhead.

He returned to his base at Braunschweig, where he waited out his remaining two months in Germany before heading home. The messages accompanied him.

Murtha moved to Ashtabula County in 1950 and worked 25 years at Linde Air. Murtha says he did some recreational flying, but it just wasn't the same as combat flight. But to this day, he maintains an interest in flying and aircraft, especially those of World War II vintage.

"I flew best when I had a purpose," says Murtha. "That P-51 (F6) ruined it for me for any other flying."

"I enjoyed the fighter planes, but I don't think I'd like to fly one of the new ones," Murtha adds, saying that they are too dependent upon computers.

"Back then, (the pilot) had to do all the work," he says.