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page 28 8th Air Force October, 1944 - September 1945

709 Sq., 447th Bomb Grp. (H), 4th Combat Wg, 3rd Bomb Div.

Newspaper Article on Lt. Gen. Jame H. Doolittle Commanding General, 8th Air Force

Into the Air Against Germany [by Ralph L. Minker, Jr. circa 1946]

"Hey men, the board is red and the sky is clear; get some sleep!"

Combat bomber crews prepare for bed at 20:00 (8:00 P.M.) in East Anglia for the 8th United States Air Force is alerted to fly a bombing mission against enemy Germany tomorrow. But before turning in letters are written to mothers, wives and sweethearts back home; there is sporadic exchange of idle gossip and some speculation as to the target for tomorrow while in the background A.F.N. (Armed Forces Network) broadcasts the raucous singing of "Rum and Coca Cola" by the Andrews Sisters.

At 0230 (2:30 A.M.) the C.Q. (charge of quarters) calls the men from their fitful nervous sleep. We dress, slowly, silently and methodically; we wash and stop for a tasteless breakfast of soggy powdered eggs before reporting to group briefing room. A pilot looks at the black sky and shakes his head; two gunners stop at the small mission hut chapel, if they come back today they will be eligible to return to the states for a rest. Gradually all file quietly into the large bare briefing room and sit as crew units fidgeting nervously on the plain wooden benches or staring blankly at the big white sheet covering the central map of Europe and the combat route for today.

Promptly at 0330 (3:30 A.M.) Captain Van Rangen, the briefing officer, pulls back the sheet and instantly, intently, fearfully and prayerfully, we all focus on the end of a small black tape marking our mission for today -- Frankfurt au Main. An excited buzz breaks forth: "That place is too damn well defended to suit me"; "we were sure hit hard by the Luftwaffe over there last month"; "This ain't no milk run brother." All quiets down as Van Ringen begins briefing the target M.P.I. (mean point of impact) -- the city railway marshalling

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yards, hub of the communication and transportation lines between the vital enemy areas of the Ruhr, Bavaria and Berlin. He tells us the check points, the bomb run and possible enemy opposition, flak and fighters, radio interference and decoy planes and messages. With a touch of pathetic bitter humor Van Rangen tells us not to hit the house where he was born thirty years ago during an earlier war against Germany, "a war to end all wars." Weatherman Captain Hall flashes a meteorology chart on an improvised screen and gives important

weather data for the mission; visibility, winds, temperatures, cloud layers and storm activity are covered, and he warns us about fog at takeoff. Veteran Major Hogan, who fought with the R.A.F. (Royal Air Force) in the Battle of Britain before America and the A.A.F. entered the war, gives the operations briefing of takeoff, route and landing times, formation procedures, altitudes for flight, emergency procedures, communications, fighter escort and assembly procedure. C.O. Colonel David emphasizes alertness, tight defensive formation and bombs on the target, and wishes us happy landings. Pilots, navigators, bombardiers and radio operators now divide for further specialized briefing; and gunners go to dress before going to the planes to put their fifty calibers, and the guns of their delayed crewmates in fighting order.

Dressing for a high altitude combat flying mission where the temperatures may be 65 (degrees) below zero centigrade at 30,000 feet is quite a task. And every airman has his slightly special way. Over form fitting, olive drab, long winter underwear I wear khaki summer pants (my lucky pair) and khaki shirt, and over that I wear a green, electrically heated, rayon suit. I then pull into a medium weight cotton flying suit of green and a green wool lined flying jacket. My feet are protected by heavy wool sweat socks, light felt electrically heated slippers and large wool lined flying boots; my hands are guarded by skin tight silk inner gloves and electrically heated leather outer gloves, which I dislike

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intensely for their clumsiness. Just before takeoff I will add a wool lined flying helmet equipped with earphones, plastic sun goggles, a parachute and a "Mae West" , water float which inflates about the chest when necessary. I must not work up a sweat for it will freeze and chill me at icy high altitudes. By 0430 (4:30 A.M.) I get to our ship, the B-17G, Boeing Flying Fortress # 719, Kirkland "A" Able, the old reliable "Blue Hen Chick". (Her name is the same as that given to Delaware soldiers in Revolutionary War days by their British opponents who likened the rebels spirit to that of a champion breed of fighting cocks.) Al Cordova, our very capable, dark Portugee crew chief from the mountains of Tennessee, says that the four engines preflight okay and that the "Chick" is ready to fly again. (Al, and his blond Connecticut assistant, Art Schuetz, have been up all night working on number two engine fuel line which gave us trouble on yesterday's war strike.) Jim Shannon, our 23 year old Brooklyn Irish engineer, tells me that the crew is ready to go and that our ship has been thoroughly double checked. We call a last minute briefing of the crew, (Shannon; radio operator Olaf Larsen, twenty seven year old Phi Beta Kappa father from Pittsburgh; Harold McKay, big nineteen year old Georgian hill billy, armorer; extra eager eighteen year old Arizona ball turret gunman, Max Shepherd; twenty one year old tail gunner sleepy Joe Trambly of New Mexico; Johnny Rosiala, suave twenty four year old from Pennsylvania bombardier; lanky twenty two year old South Carolina navigator Wesley Pitts; Gordon Dodge, big tough twenty six

year old Minnesota father, co-pilot; and Ralph Minker, slender, blond twenty year old pilot and Captain from Delaware), to make sure that we all know the particulars of our mission, to make sure that every piece of equipment has been checked and is in place, and for a quiet moment of humble helping-binding prayer together.

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At last we start engines. Number one sputters, coughs and then turns over with a steady blasting roar. We start the other three fans without undue trouble, warm up carefully, and slowly taxi out in the line of thunder birds ready to takeoff. We take a last ground check of our engines and after a green light flash from the mid-field control tower, roar down the long black runway and into the air at 0530 (5:30A.M.) No matter what tension exists the powerful forward surge and lift of a plane into flight always thrills me for "I have slipped the surly bonds of earth..."

For the next ten long hours strength sapping dull and sharp sensations and tensions are felt in every varying degree and composition: the dull tiring monotony as two thousand planes jockey to form squadron, group, wing, division and air force battle line formation; minute England, vague, patterned fairly blue in haze and fog beneath us; English coast out at Felixstowe; the sinister black North Sea; chewing gum to keep mouth moist and to help relieve nervous tension; last smokes by the crew; sporadic artificial crew chatter on plane interphone; climb to bombing altitude of 27,000 feet; putting on oxygen masks and heavy flak helmets and suits; enemy coast in above the old continental resort of Ostend; ugly hypnotizing black flak bursts; dull penetrating cold; number two prop governor surging erratically; sweat; the I.P. (initial point) and turn in for bombing run -- flak hitting cruel, eager and close -- "We are slightly hit in the tail", calls Trambley over the interphone -- "Hold steady men!" -- "Bombs away! lets get the hell out of here!" Our squadron turns and dives sharply away; FW-190 German fighters attack but our fire and formation and the great help of our "little friend" P-51 U.S. fighters soon drives them off without serious damage for today to our plane; our group reassembles, several planes are missing

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from red squadron; enemy coast out of the Zeider Zee at last; Shep (Shepherd) says that one of our green squadron ships is struggling badly; number two engine quits-- we'll have to sweat out the flight back over the damn North Sea; painfully gradual descent from altitude; off oxygen, what wonderful fresh cold air; a delicious frozen chocolate bar; English coast in at Great Yarmouth at last; crew talkative and happy. our beautiful home base at Rattlesden -- circling and finally landing with a squeal of our tires on the asphalt at 1530 (3:30 P.M.) We taxi to our hardstand.

That is it. We are empty and tired and talk in hard jerks as we unload. "Better patch up that tail"; Number two went bad again Al, I think she needs a new prop governor" ; "God". A G. I. truck picks us up at our hardstand and heavily we load up and go in to drink Red Cross coffee, gulp a couple of donuts or sandwiches and down a couple relaxing shots of scotch. Then there is a pilot critique (we hit the target but two of our group ship, and their men, are believed lost); we dress, eat and clean up a bit; we talk eagerly to ease our tautness. We return to the barracks and find that already the damn board is red alert for another mission tomorrow.

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