



*"I did not die, and did not remain alive; now think for thyself,  
if thou hast any grain of ingenuity, what I became,  
deprived of both life and death"  
-Dante's Inferno-*

*"Once one has reached the point of no return--Reality then begins".*

One more time I realize there is that pesky flashlight in my face, and I hear the invitation for—"Breakfast at Five and Briefing at Six." I lay there dragging my eyes open and getting my thoughts together, little did I know how the reality of this fateful day would end.

This will be mission number four. I wonder what hellish target is on that map in the Briefing Room? We've been to Cologne, Bremen, Kassel and flew as a Spare yesterday. If nothing else we are surely learning the geography of Germany. This time around I shaved in warm water, as I had remembered to fill my helmet and put it on the stove before going to bed. There had been hot water last night, so had the luxury of a hot shower. I'm learning as we seem to be getting into a routine as I dressed from the clothes laid out the night before.

As I walked out the door I looked at those empty beds and thought those guys were here yesterday doing the same things I am doing today. Little did I know that by tonight there would be a great many more empty beds as over 60 of our planes would be shot down leaving 600 more empty beds.

Outside, it was not only black, it was foggy. I was thinking, "would they have us take off with this fog"? Walking into the Combat Mess there was that same knot in my stomach, and those eggs were still staring at me. Sitting down at the table there again was Bob (Sgt Robert Smith) with a full plate with a blank look on his face. Resnik (S/Sgt John Resnik) was no longer interested in eating too much after that first mission when at altitude he ended up with terrific cramps. "Soon we were outside and again that hurry up and wait."

I began thinking of some of the things you learn with each mission: (1)using a condom to put over the mike in your oxygen mask to keep it dry, (2)squeezing your oxygen mask so the ice doesn't clog it up, (3)then shaking the ice out. I then began getting smart enough to carry two masks. Using a condom to urinate, tying a knot in it, and then throwing it out as a gift to Germany (When my children ask what I had done during the war I told them, "the pleasure of pissing all over Germany").

On the first mission I had noticed soon after we left the target many of the planes would again open their bomb bay doors and you would see one or two cardboard chaff boxes come tumbling out (chaff were thin strips of tinfoil used to confuse the German radar). When I ask about it I received a big laugh and was advised this is "Our Secret Weapon", you will soon find out! On the trip to Bremen one of the crew had to answer nature's call. He used one of the chaff boxes and we were also able to bomb Germany twice on that trip.

Suddenly the doors to the Briefing Room swung open. Soon we are all enveloped in a heavy smoke haze, with temperature increasing noticeably from the body heat and everyone sweating out the mission. As I look around I notice everyone is sitting at all angles and postures. Some are sitting up straight as a ramrod, and some are even sound asleep. Others are engaged in animated conversations with their neighbors while the rest are staring straight ahead at nothing. You can feel the fear, the dread, and the underlining thought of death in the room, but we are all are confident in our training and each other.

Suddenly a nattily dressed Major (a ground-pounder) steps on the stage and begins roll call, calling the names of each crew commanders. Each answers for his crew. The Major then moved to the back of the stage and drew the black curtain of doom. This revealed the map, which dictated our lives for the next fourteen hours. There is a hushed silence as everyone leans forward looking at the fateful end of the red yarn. "It's Schweinfurt" the Major says with a smile, and gives us time to think. Abruptly a buzz of voices breaks out, and one voice says "Sonofabitch! This is my Last Mission." And it was, as he was one of those who never made it back.

The Security Officer steps forward and instructs us; "Do not talk about the mission once you have left the room, and this also applies to a Scrubbed Target. Anyone flying this mission who has not had POW (prisoner of war) instruction report to the S-2 officer after this briefing. Be sure to wear your dog tags, GI shoes, and don't wear any insignia. Carry your rank, name and serial number, and no billfolds, pictures, nor letters. No one will leave this briefing until dismissed." We were told this at every briefing.

Everyone is sitting up attentively listening to the intelligence officer. There is no longer any screwing around for his instructions are life and death to us. There is an immediate feeling of immense doom which goes through the briefing room, and no one tries to look at one another. We are all thinking the same thing, "Who will be missing from here tonight?" "How many crews will get it today?"

We are advised the flak should be light enroute although we will pick up some south of the Ruhr. The target will be defended by about 500 88mm guns and the gun crews are very good. We would be under aimed fire from the flak for seven minutes. The enemy fighters will be persistent and aggressive. The fighters will try to break up the formation with head-on attacks. Don't panic and try to dodge. This would leave you wide open if you straggle. Always stay in the defensive diamond formations and if someone ahead of you gets out of the formation, move right up into his place, for he has either been hit and will go down anyway, or he is stragging. We never dally around, because it's our necks.

The weather officer takes the stage and is the least assuring of all. The weather is lousy. The visibility is down to 1/4 of a mile but we were assured it would be up to one mile by take off. That is a lot better when you are rolling down a runway which is only a mile long and the belly of our plane is pregnant with stifled hell. The wings on the B-17s contain three thousand gallons of 100 octane flaming inferno. Everyone starts to leave as there it is, but some wait. They soon assemble in little groups as men slip to their knees before their chaplains-Protestant, Catholic, and Jew.

As we walked into the ready room I was suddenly hit with this deep depression and a feeling of dread as I thought, "This is not the glamorized Wild Blue Yonder we had all heard so many times." We will be fighting 5 miles above the earth. There are no foxholes to hide in up there. Most of the time there isn't even the opportunity of fighting back, you just sit there and take it. We live by the laws of chance as we drive through the flak, which seems thick enough to walk on. There is always that chance to be where the projectile shot at us by random from the ground would intersect the plane and ourselves? We are continually facing the life and death struggle of the plane with all of us inside. Maybe some dead, perhaps some wounded, and some not even scratched. At that moment all of our lives would reach a crisis in the heaving and smoking plane from the freezing hostile sky. It wasn't the anxiety of maybe being killed before the day ended, but a deeper far-off feeling as if I weren't operating within my own body. As I dressed, in preparation for the long mission, I looked at the rest of the crew with a detached and lonely sadness wondering will we still be together tonight? No way did I want to expose my feelings to the crew for fear they would feel I was not equal to doing my part, all of our lives depended on each other.

In kind of a dream I proceeded to our plane, and went through the motions of the checklist for pre-flight. I was there, physically doing all things which were necessary, but seemed detached and totally out of my body I had the feeling I was in another dimension watching what I was doing. I was there, but wasn't there. Knowing we were in for a rough mission and catch hell from the fighters we loaded many additional boxes of caliber 50 ammunition. We rechecked our flak suits and helmets then all of us made one last trip to the bushes to relieve ourselves.



All too soon we were starting the engines, taxiing into position, moving down the runway and again skimming those damn trees. We formed up at 28,000 feet then heading for Europe for what we didn't know and into Germany. I was there, but as if I was doing everything necessary only by the numbers.

Suddenly I heard on the intercom from the top turret "Bandits 9:00 O'clock High" instantaneously followed by the tail and the nose of fighters coming in from all directions. Immediately you could feel those 20 millimeters going through the plane. The sound of a cannon shell hitting a fortress depends on where you are. If you aren't too close it is like a metallic woof and you feel a jar that shakes the whole plane, which reaches you and leaves you instantly. If the shell explodes close to you there is nothing gentle and it certainly isn't a momentary tremor. It is like a giant slapping his hand on the water. There are two sounds one from the impact and the second of it exploding. It's like firing a shotgun into a bucket which all comes back exploding in your face. For a moment you aren't scared because your senses are dulled. Your bowels seem weak, (you tighten your pucker string), your stomach shrivels up until you can figure out how much you are hurt. It was as if a huge electrical shock had hit me and from then on to this day I have never felt fear. It was as if my mind had gone into a corner to hide and had then come charging out to do battle.. In talking to others later, I found we all have gone through some factors of this type of withdrawal. Some retreated from themselves and would no longer be able perform.



I immediately found myself in a world alien to everything I had ever experienced. There were ME-109s and FW-190s leaping into existence from everywhere without warning. When they opened fire you saw sudden flashes of light winking at you from the distance. All at once there existed a canopy of cannon shells and bombs, aerial mines and rockets exploding everywhere. Each one was intent on hitting us and our pregnant bomb load. We are no longer in a stately march in tight formation through the upper heavens. We try desperately to return to the crisp efficiency of our tight formation, but it is impossible to achieve in this raging space of time. We find ourselves slogging our way through a thickening mass of exploding flame and smoke, with the equal determination of every member of the crew. We are driving ahead through a solid whirlwind of steel splinters, flame, and jagged chunks of red hot metal. The steel is everywhere, it crashes into wings, engines, bulkhead and airplane bodies; and into the bodies of men-spewing blood, tissues, intestines, and brains.





The plane seemingly is alive with lights as all the guns are firing and the noise is deafening. There is the continued on the intercom shout of “incoming bandits” from all around the clock (fighters). The fourteen caliber 50 machine guns of our plane can be heard and felt above all the roar of the plane. Our world seems to plunge into insanity as the sounds of air battle are all around us seemingly merging into an inhuman shriek. Our ship doesn't seem to be occupied by men, we are transformed into beings from another world, with the strange breathing systems dangling beneath our faces.

As quickly as it started the fighters are gone and we are alone with only the extremely bright sun. Our enemy now is the temperature which is minus fifty degrees and never seems to relax its vigil against us for any exposure to sensitive flesh and frostbite.

Central Germany is now below us and in the distance we can see the first black specks of flak over the target. We now begin to assess what battle damage we had taken. Was everyone OK? Soon, everyone was checking in: Tail OK, except almost out of ammo and was reloading the belts; Waist OK, lost my flak helmet somewhere; Ball, one of the side windows was hit, can't see anything except straight ahead; Radio, OK; Top Turret, “think I was hit in the leg and my ammunition boxes are gone”. It turns out that a 20 mm came through the turret knocking out the ammo boxes on each side and tearing off his flight suit at the thigh. He had a slight red mark on one leg. Ammo boxes were moved in and connected to both guns with the hope they wouldn't jam.

In the cockpit the gauges were still working but the glass on the dials looks as if someone had taken a hammer to them. The radio compass is shattered and the other radios are hanging by their connecting cords. All seem to be working, at least the intercom is OK. The right portion of the windshield in front of the co-pilot has two vicious looking cracks in it. The co-pilot's flak helmet was

knocked off and has a huge hole in it. He doesn't have a mark although I think he is turning gray. In the nose one of the cheek guns is out, the navigator's table is shattered as well as his instruments. For all the holes our plane is still flying. It's a miracle nobody has been seriously wounded.

When we have turned on IP the bombardier is already looking for his aiming point as the plane controls are hooked to the bombsight. Again the fighters are coming in all directions, but this time it is the squadron ahead of us. Soon the sky around us filled with flak burst, paving a solid black-steel asphalt roadway to Schweinfurt. The explosions sound as if someone is throwing rocks at you when they burst close. Those flak gunners on the ground are good. Normally the fighters will usually leave when you get into the flak from the target, this time they are flying through their own flak. Apparently, they have been ordered to defend the target at all costs. These fighters may be the enemy but I have never seen braver men. All the German efforts to keep us from the target have so far failed, but we have paid a tremendous price in men and planes. The stakes were high but the "Devil" was the winner. The target below is now fast deteriorating into smoke and debris as our strings of bombs walk through the city. The dead will outnumber our losses by a great number. Finally we feel the plane lighten in little jerks as the bombs pass out the bomb bay on their way to Germany. We are now at the halfway point of the mission as we begin a wide turn to the right. There is little need to get into formation as everyone is staying close. As we make our turn one can see the other formations behind us. They look ragged and are still under attack from the fighters. The fighters are leaving the "cripples" alone, going for those planes still carrying bombs. As we turn you can see the target below and the sticks of bombs on their five mile flight to the earth. The target is covered with smoke and gray dust is rising from the impact of the bombs.



As we look out there are no fighters roaring in against us with their guns winking at us. It seems so quiet and good to only hear the noise of the engines and the air rushing by as our faithful girl hurtles us towards our base in England. We are soon over France and a few fighters appear in the distance but do not press any attack against us. We wonder are they as low on ammunition and as tired as we are? We also now look for our little friends and assume they must be busy somewhere else. The

cloud cover comes up to 20,000 feet and we are told to let down over the channel. Each group will proceed to their base individually. We soon see the angry water of the channel, then are flying up the "Wash" (a large estuary on the east coast of England). When the smokestacks of Peterborough are in sight we turn southwest and there is Polebrook below us. What a wonderful sight, and how many times in the past twelve hours have we all wondered if we'd ever see the base again?

As we cross the field preparing to break into the landing pattern we can see the men on the handstands, the meat wagons with the large red cross on the top, and the fire trucks parked all along the runway. They are all watching us and counting the bombers and trying to read the symbols as we fly over. All at once, there are many red flares indicating wounded on board, and they will proceed into the pattern and land first. Soon we are lined up with the runway on our final approach, crossing the boundary of the field, begin the flare and soon the wheels are finally touching the runway. We are again down on mother earth. As the tail settles to the runway, there is a terrific bang as if the plane had been ripped apart, followed with a loud screeching of metal! Not only had the tail wheel blown, but the whole tail assembly seems to be dragging behind the plane. The tower tells us we look like a giant sparkler and as soon as we have completed our roll to pull off the runway and get out of the plane. We find later that during the fighter attacks the total frame just forward of the horizontal stabilizer had been totally torn apart by the 20mm shells. Only the skin and the control cables held it together. We complete our roll and moving off the runway into the grass and mud. The faithful engines' roar dies out and the silence is followed by a mad dash of everyone from the plane. As we are leaving the plane a fire truck and ambulance are johnny-on-the-spot.



Our plane, "Morning Delight" just seemed to set there panting. That gallant lady gave us all she had and more for that total effort during the past 10 hours. She never flew again as she was so heavily damaged and became another "Queen Bee's"--(used for parts). You don't live and fly a fortress for months without coming to know the plane in the most intimate way. You know the sturdy construction



she represents and how forgiving she is to fly. She is there in our hearts, for all of us for the days to come if by chance we survive this war.

We retrieve our gear from the plane and are picked up by a truck. We pass the handstands (parking and maintenance area for the plane) with their waiting crews. They all wave and give us the victory sign. However, many of these ground crews will soon silently and sadly return to their headquarters as their plane and crewmen, which were a part of them did not return. They will wait for a new bomber with a new combat crew. We have the truck stop at our handstand so we can tell the crew chief and his people that we made it. If it weren't for the maintenance on that plane we would probably be down somewhere in Germany and now a statistic. It is a little wonder we have come to the realization it is impossible to complete a full tour. Everyone comes to the conclusion you will either get it, or be shot down eventually.

As we all proceed to de-briefing you look around and the faces this morning, which had the look of expectation are now gray and blank. We are all thinking of too many friends who have gone down in flames before our eyes. What about tomorrow, and the tomorrow after that? There are too many concrete handstands stained with oil and grease where the bombers had once stood so majestically are now standing empty, only a terrible aching void remains. A ground crewman is seen aimlessly walking off looking as if he had lost his brother.

In the de-briefing room we all sit around the table and this time the questions are quietly asked with a great deal of consideration. How many fighters, types, and methods of attack? Were there any special weapons or markings? How about the flak, how much, did it appear accurate?

THE FOLLOWING IS A QUOTE FROM A POST MISSION BRIEFING OF A B-17 PILOT, OCTOBER 12, 1943:

"I had accepted the fact that I was not going to live through this mission. It was as simple as that. I was calm; it was a strange sort of resignation. I knew for certain that it was only a matter of seconds or minutes. It was impossible for us to survive...." (This sums it up for all of us).



The de-briefing were usually not so solemn, however, this time all of us are totally engulfed by the shock of the mission. Most of us still didn't believe we are here, safe on the ground. We are bone tired (I still remember how tired I was all the time I flew combat) and feel sick with the reflection of all that death. We somehow survived but our friends and brothers were struck down, never to return from that undiscovered country from whom no traveler returns. We all stare at the floor with eyes glazed, smoke cigarettes, and drink tasteless coffee. As we are leaving the briefing room we notice that Bob is stumbling along. We see as we look closer that he is crying—for all of us thinking of those who didn't get back. Despite all these attacks against our formations the 8th Air Force was never turned back by enemy opposition and always bombed the target.

Thus ended the fateful day when I was introduced to reality.

## EPILOGUE

We will remember the battle, which took place five miles up in the air where we fought to the death. There is no way anyone could ever re-visit the battleground as it took place in the sky, which today is now washed clean. There are no scars and no one can walk the battleground and say here by that hill is where it all took place. There were no bystanders nor any noncombatants with a first hand look. All those who saw the battle were on the ground five miles or more away, and they saw only the flaming planes, the parachutes, contrails, explosions, smoke, and the charred bodies. Nor did they see the flak and bullet riddled planes as they struggled home to an asphalt runway across the English Channel. There no longer exists the roar of all those planes, the flashing propellers, open hatches with the smoking 50 caliber machine guns. The punishment of the long hours, at sub zero temperature, breathing oxygen in the frozen uncomfortable oxygen mask because of the thin rarefied air.

That page of blazing history is now closed, although the scars of those of us who came home will always remain. It is always easy to write of the battles won with the enemy conquered. We fought and

struggled to reach the target and on the way were mauled and shot to pieces by the fighters and flak guns of the enemy. The German pilots knew only too well the effectiveness against our bombers. They also witnessed the burning planes, bombers with the wings torn off, crews tumbling through the air, and the burning bodies. How could those bomber crews take such punishment and hand it back while continuing to fly towards the target? There never was a question of not reaching the target, no matter how many formations were split apart, how many bombers were in flame, and how cruel the test. We still continued on with white knuckles and a tightened pucker string.

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