

CHRISTMAS 1944

Written by Jack Paxson

It was in the winter of 1944, December 24. I was stationed in England as a ground crew man of the B-17's at the base in Bassingbourn. Our troops were catching the brunt of Hitler's last gasp battle, the Battle of the Bulge. On the 24th of December, we had been perhaps a week and a half into this battle, but due to the heavy English fog, the Eighth Air Force had been grounded for several days.

But on the particular day, the 24th, the word was for weather clearing, so we began to prepare for a mission. In preparation for a 5:30 a.m. take-off, the bombs, oxygen, ammunition, and gas were loaded. At 2:30 a.m. the line chief came beating on the door. We all got out of bed and headed for the mess hall and breakfast, so we could get down the line to pre-flight. It was awful cold and there was snow on the ground. It was quite a problem getting to the mess hall – slipping and sliding. Finally we hitched a ride on a bomb truck for the final mile and a half from our quarters to the field.

About 4 a.m. we got to our plane. As soon as we'd pushed the props through to make sure there was no oil in the bottom of the cylinders, we wound up all four engines for a pre-flight check on full power, and then shut them down. After building a big fire in our tent alongside the field area, we settled in to wait for the crews. About 4:30 a.m. the crews arrived. They still had to load the 50 calibers that were taken out and cleaned after each mission. One final check was made on everything, and we topped off the Tokyo tanks, adding another two to three hundred gallons of gas to replace what we'd used in pre-flight checks.

Exactly on time, the flare came from the control tower and the first flight taxied and took off. It was so foggy they could hardly see. We wondered what would happen next, but there was nothing we could do. Our plane was on a mission, and so we went back to bed to get some rest. Along about 10 a.m. there was a pounding on my door and the line chief yelled, "Send someone to the hangar as quick as you can get there...winter clothes and be ready to go!"

Upon arriving at the airfield, we found that the planes hadn't been able to drop their bombs due to inclement weather. They had flown all over one side of Europe trying to get some clear weather but couldn't get back to our field. They were landing at a place called Berry Saint Edmonds, an RAF base on the North Sea on the east side of England. We had to somehow get up there carrying ammunition, engineering equipment, extra blankets, extra food, and everything for the crew. By 2:30 in the afternoon everything was all set to go. We had a convoy of about thirty trucks, but only two of our crew went up on this trip. There just wasn't any way to get the rest of the ground crew there.

So, we started out towing a bomb trailer. There were eight to ten inches of snow; colder than hell and so foggy I couldn't see. When we got to Berry Saint Edward, it was dark. I can remember distinctly riding in the back of a big semi - a canvas covered bomb trailer. We wrapped ourselves in extra GI blankets, and it took about five hours to get there. The MPs met us and we found our planes scattered all over in this mess. Planes from other squadrons were landing any place they could. Fortunately all eleven of ours had managed to get to the base at Berry Saint Edmonds which wasn't a big base and not equipped to handle a lot of bombers – especially planes the size of ours. The RAF was doing a magnificent job.

The MP asked the number of our plane. I told him LGQ and we followed the MP jeep to where our plane was sitting on a hard stand. Fortunately, it was frozen solid and we could operate it off the ground

until we were able to put it on the taxi straps and runway. Believe me, the crew was pretty cold. They'd been in the air about seven and a half hours and up since two-thirty that morning and were sure glad to see us! The MPs were trying to bring coffee and take a few men into eat, but there were just too many. Our crew ate the rations we had brought with us and kind of bedded down inside the plane. At about 10:30 p.m. that night, we checked our plane. Two gas trucks serviced our plane. I remember lying blankets on the wing and having a crewmember boost me up. Suddenly, I lost my footing and fell. I slid down the right wing and don't remember much about hitting the ground. After awhile, one of the crew was shaking me and asking if I was all right. I wasn't, but we still had to finish gassing that airplane. So, I got back up on the wing.

Got very little rest that night. The planes took off the next morning, Christmas Day, right on schedule. The RAF had good de-icing equipment; we knew our plane wouldn't have any problems. Of course, they still had their load of bombs to drop. Our convoy loaded up and left the RAF base about 10:00 a.m. I was sitting in the back end of the truck. We were going through these little towns, which were snowed in solid with hardly any room to move. But, finally, we went around one too many corners, and the bomb trailer began to slide. We slid into a big hedge in front of a little house. The trailer rolled and the equipment scattered almost up to their front porch. Luckily, no one was hurt and we sat there kind of paralyzed. The convoy went on and left us. We had on MP jeep stay with us, and we started to gather up the vast array of engineering equipment, load it onto the bomb truck, and tie it down securely.

From the house emerged an elderly gentleman and his wife, with a young woman in her thirties and a little boy. They asked us to come in, get warm, and have a cup of tea. Well, we were about done, so two of us went in to get warm. They were sitting down to their Christmas dinner. They asked us to join them, but after looking at their table, I said no. I knew that everything they had in that house was on their table, and we did have some K rations. We joined them for tea and our K rations and a little Christmas.

We asked the boy, about seven, what he had gotten for Christmas. "I didn't get a package from my dad because he is in Africa, but Grandpa gave me a Christmas present." Well, can we see it?" I asked.

He went into his room and brought out a little toy wagon about ten or twelve inches long, with a rope that his grandfather had carved out of wood. We talked awhile, and you can guess there were a couple of American soldiers with tears in their eyes. I thought we ought to do something, so I asked his grandfather if he could have a knife. His grandfather said yes.

So I took out my GI knife and called him over and he sat down on my knee. "This is a Merry Christmas from those of us who were able to spend Christmas with you for a couple of hours in 1944," I said to him.

The little boy's eyes were unbelieving and open in amazement. Then he didn't take the knife but turned to his grandfather and asked, "Can I have it?"

Grandfather replied, "Yes, you can have it."

So we wished them farewell. I often wished that I had written the address down, but there were so many small towns and we were so exhausted and anxious to just get back to base. It wasn't until 11 that night that we returned. The planes had returned safely and the line chief said, "We've got stand down. Go ahead and get yourselves some Christmas dinner." On the 26th, the weather cleared and that gave the fight pilots and light bombers a chance to get back in the game.

Well, when somebody asks me to write about what I did in Europe, it's pretty hard to pick out one story. But when Christmas comes around every year, I think about Christmas 1944, Berry Saint

Edmonds, and the little boy I gave my GI knife.

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