

THE MILLION DOLLAR SEAT

Written by Edwin R. Ehret

D-Day, June 6, 1944 ... Invasion of the Continent

Last night, fortunately, I hit the sack early, about 2200 or 10:00 PM double British war time (two hours ahead of GMT).

It was hardly 21/2 hours later on the morning of June 6, 1944 I was aroused by the voice of Sgt. Klien, C.Q., shouting "Breakfast At 0100; briefing at 0200" followed by "You've 'ad it today ol' boy", meaning I could expect most anything. I quickly dressed, freshened up with a dash of cold water and thence out into the cool June air to combat mess for the usual powdered scrambled eggs. They had cheese mixed with them today, which almost camouflaged the awful distaste we had for the E.T.O. food. The meal was topped off with wheat flakes and powered milk, very tart canned grapefruit juice and very, very strong black coffee.

Out into the extra cool June night air again for the mile trek to the briefing hut. This sudden trend of early events started to bring our reasoning powers more in focus. GI rumors as to the impending mission had been flying fast and furious in the mess hall. Fred Cascone, tail gunner on my old crew, and I talked over three possible conclusions as we walked along. Taking the time of briefing into consideration, the number of ships our squadron was flying and the bomb load for each ship (38 - 100 lb. Frag.) we boiled our flight plan down to Big "B" (Berlin", our first shuttle raid to Russia or -- INVASION!

We entered the briefing hut, sat down along side other combat men on flimsy wooden benches and waited tensely for briefing officers to draw the curtains covering the huge map on the wall. The map has red yarn strung around pins to indicate the mission for the day from our base to enemy territory and return.

Something big was in the wind! The base photographer was busy with flash bulbs and camera taking shots of us waiting for briefing.

Here's the briefing officer . . .

– tense silence -- he speaks: "THIS IS IT, MEN! THIS IS INVASION DAY!"

Then he launched into the details of our flight plan. Altitude, weather, rendezvous, zero hour, friendly activity, target, photos of it were flashed on the screen, etc., etc. "11,000 Allied Aircraft will be over this morning. Keep on the alert to avoid collisions." "There should be little if any flak or enemy fighters. The enemy's heavy 155 mm coast gun emplacements will be too busy answering the Navy's challenge to fire at you". (We hope). "4000 ships will be in the Channel down below you so don't test-fire your guns; you might hurt your own men or hit one of those 11,000 planes filling the sky about you. Remember your POW instructions and special invasion instructions in case you go down. Chaplain Regan is in the back if you wish to see him when you go out. Any questions?" "Will we use chaff?" "Only when your pilot receives orders and informs you over interphone." "Any more questions?" "What's the ETR?" "About 0900!" "Okay, men, stations at 0250. That's all."

Now to the communications room in headquarters building for my private R.O. briefing. T/Sgt. O'Niel, former Deputy Lead operator for the 322nd Squadron conducts it today. He completed his tour about 70 days ago and now acts as ground school instructor. He's a "Paddlefoot" now but today he really envies

us. What a ride; we'll be right in the very throbbing heart of history being made and O'Neil feels a bit put out. Finally he can't suppress himself any longer. "Who feels sick?" "Who doesn't want to go?" No soap, everyone ignores him. We pick up our flimsies, jot down call signs, N/f d/f frequencies, M/f frequencies, special instructions, etc. IFF will not be turned on at all today.

Next I rush to the equipment hut to don my "Zoot Suit", flying suit, Mae West, parachute harness and pick up other necessary equipment: gloves, headsets, throat mike, oxygen mask, helmet, etc. All equipment is tossed aboard the waiting trucks and we head to the hanger B to pick up our guns from the armament shop.

Station time finds us out at our ship 033-D busy installing guns, loading ammunition and setting up other equipment. A June shower rattles noisily on the skin of the ship like thousands of hard little pellets dropping on a tin roof.

Normally, with weather suck as this, the flight would be 'scrubbed' but not today. Nothing whatsoever can interfere today. Precision timing of all Wings, Groups and Squadrons has been planned. We'll bomb by small units of 6 planes each with one-minute intervals between groups. There'll be no turning back, no abortions, too many planes behind - steady stream of them like cars on a super highway.

No. 1 engine is started at 0400. Ten minutes later we start to taxi out from the dispersal area to the main runway. The squeal of brakes can be heard as we twist, turn and slowly crawl along behind the many other ships ahead of us. The rain has ceased and a light streak on the eastern horizon signifies an early dawn and a history making day.

RAF planes are just coming back from their nightflight. Their green and red wing lights dot the black sky over our field. I wonder how they made out? All night they have been thundering across the Channel -- being the first to start the gigantic invasion machinery to roll like the headwaters of a devastating flood. Now and then the soft full moon filters through thinning clouds; tiny star's blink down -- the weather looks promising.

Our engines are being revved up now with a deafening roar. How's the oil pressure? RPM? How many pounds mercury indicated on the panel gauge? "Co-Pilot to Waist Gunner! Check Flaps!" "Flaps down okay". "Flaps up okay!" The ship ahead of us guns forward and disappears from view. Others just ahead of it are already circling the field and starting to climb to altitude. 0450 O'clock, a surge of speed and power as 4 mighty Wright Cyclones lift 63,000 lbs. Plus 3,800 lbs. of bombs toward the heavens. We're airborne! A silent prayer to the Powers Above to give us all courage and guide our ship safely.

The tail gunner has his instructions for the rendezvous. Today we use an Aldis lamp with a red lens to identify our ship with the group we belong in. Our tail gunner will blink out the letter "D" when we start forming.

Time - 0515, altitude - 10,000 feet. "Co-Pilot to crew. Co-Pilot to crew; prepare to go on oxygen".

Dawn is breaking; we're above clouds now. The moon is big, round and a rich creamy color. A small strip of gold appears on the eastern horizon and in a matter of seconds the first rays of the sun dazzle before us. Now they splash across the fleecy clouds below tinting them a delicate pink.

Thoughts come easily. You think of the Creator and thank Him for all the beauty about us. But now the world of reality enters; this is a man-made mission. Somehow with god's help we must get back again, safe and sound!

Altitude, 16,000 feet - temperature, minus 10 degrees centigrade. We're coming up to the rendezvous. Ships are circling at three levels. What a sight! From a distance they look like angry bees swarming

around their hive. A fast approach and a sharp bank to the left sucks us into this huge whirlpool intent on mass destruction. We are just another ship up here seeking its lead ship. Our proximity now reduces the effect of swarming bees and instead, the great 'forts' take on an appearance of slow circling buzzards.

0618 O'clock and the groups have all finished forming. We are in our briefed PX (position) off left wing No. 2 ship in 2nd element of lead group. The course is set and we are on our way. It's daylight now and the sun's rays make a person drowsy; the vibration of the ship makes you drowsy. Gads! Only 2 1/2 hours sleep last night! Some of the boys came in late from pass and didn't even touch the sack. Wonder how they're making out?

Soft fluffy clouds are below us. They look good enough to eat; like whipped cream heaped on one of Mom's homemade pies. Those wispy ones look like an enchanted fairyland with deep blue shadowy canyons craving to be explored. If it weren't for treacherous air currents, it would be fun winding your way through the high walls and narrow openings in a small pursuit ship. London is this way. Scattered clouds reveal an occasional glimpse of the edge of this huge city. Soon we will be leaving the English coast.

Fortresses fill the sky ahead. . behind . . below . . to the sides . . they're everywhere. Underneath the clouds one will probably find hundreds of fighters and medium bombers shuttling across, having the same destination as ours. Too bad the heavy cloud coverage below will be hiding the greatest of spectacles of allies have intensely waited for these many months.

We are well out in the Channel now. Ten more minutes to the I.P. The Groups ahead have already dropped smoke flares. Now we can see them clearly -- dripping from the sky for miles along the invasion coast of France. An odd sight these target smoke signals, hanging in the blue in lazy grotesque forms. Like twisting serpents crawling through the heavy cloud lying below us.

Bombardier over interphone: "Bombay doors opening." Radio Operator to Bombardier: "Roger! Bombay doors are open". We're not far from landfall now. A thin cloud-break below reveals hundreds of navy boats and landing craft streaming in the direction of the continent.

The lead ship in our squadron has released a target smoke signal. BOMB AWAY! Impressive isn't the word for it as hundreds of forts go over their respective targets each dropping its load of destruction from their yawning bomb bays. Down the bombs tumble through the soft clouds, like ears of corn falling out of a bushel basket. Thousands and thousands of them speeding on their downward journey to hit the target and DESTROY! And here we ride, like kings reigning above all; helping to set the stage for the greatest and most horrible show the world has ever witnessed. Right here we have a million-dollar seat high in the blue above the screaming and pounding of our bombs. Then minutes later, ships, landing barges, troops, equipment and all the necessary instruments of war will pour onto the beaches of a great continent in siege.

I wonder if any of the "big-wigs" back home would like a seat to this great show going on in the air, in the water and on the land thousands of feet below us. There's only one price and it might come high. It could be your own skin.

Another silent prayer for the boys down there. They'll be pushing open the very jaws of hell. We're upstairs - no noise - no muss - just the click as the bomb bay racks release their hold on their missiles then a lurch or lift of the ship as almost two tons of bombs drop away.

It isn't always a joyride though. It can be hell up here too. We've just left our target which was about three miles inland from the inlet on Cherbourg Peninsula near the towns of Mont Fleury and Ver-Sur-

Mer. Our altitude is fairly low, only 16,000 feet with a temperature of minus 10 degrees c. We're having a bit of trouble now. The Bomb Bay doors are stuck. Get the crank, Engineer, climb down in that cold, cold air and turn 'em up by hand before the flak comes up. Open doors and an accurate burst of flak in dangerous. That's just one of the many things to sweat-out up here. Thank gosh the flak batteries are quiet. Navy dive bombers and Army fighters must be on a strafing party. Good ol' pursuits - P51s, P38s, P47s - I love 'em all!

"Radio Operator to Bombardier. Bomb bay doors are closed." "Roger Dodger." We've delivered the goods; now to get home. "Pilot to Crew. Keep on the alert, men. Watch those clouds for enemy fighters. Keep your eye on those two con trails at 7 o'clock high." We're crossing the Cherbourg Peninsula and won't leave enemy coast for 25 minutes." "Bombardier to Crew: Oxygen check. Check in please." "Tail Gunner, okay." "Waist gunner, Okay." "Ball Turret, Roger." "Radio, okay." "Engineer, Okay." "Co-pilot, okay." Roger."

Flak is plenty accurate at this altitude. When the hell are we going to reach the coast? The groups behind are just starting their bombing runs. Smoke signals still linger everywhere.

"Navigator to Crew." "We will cross enemy coast in two minutes. I advise you to leave flak equipment on as we will pass over a couple islands soon."

These islands were named Jersey and Gurnsey. I recall the briefing officer saying they were very heavily fortified.

Tense, nervous excitement subside somewhat as we get out over the Channel. Jersey and Gurnsey Islands proved no threat and before long we can feel our ship start her letdown. It's a gradual downhill ride as we lose more and more altitude. A too quick let-down is liable to result in punctured eardrums and sharp pains but thanks to the interphone the pilot can make periodic checks to see how everyone is.

Now we're low enough to remove those clammy wet oxygen masks; light up a cigarette; pull the plugs on our heated suits; remove our flying boots and get comfortable. Of course a Radio Operators jot continues until the plane lands and the engines are off. I have to keep a constant monitor on the ground stations and make log entries to prove there hasn't been any "gold-bricking" on my part.

Another hour and we should be circling home base. It's a funny thing, when returning from a mission it's natural to acquire a sense of security once the Channel has been negotiated and England comes into sight, but it's dangerous to relax completely. There have been many occasions on record when a few bold Jerries have slipped in on the tail end of a returning formation in one of our own B-17's that they had previously captured and repaired. It usually occurred on a late mission about dusk. The climax of the trick came after our ships started landing. That was Jerries cue to swoop down and have a strafing party, then scuttle off.

This mission, my 22nd, on Tuesday the 6th day of June 1944 appears to be winding up as a first class milk run. No flak; on fighters and now after 5 hours and 20 minutes of flight including 2 hours and 50 minutes on oxygen, Bassingbourn Field comes into sight. We slip into the traffic pattern, circle and await instructions from the tower for our turn to land. Lt. Hayen brings our ship 033-D in for a smooth landing at 0930 and after a 4 minutes taxi to the dispersal area the engines sputter off. My last entry in the radio log: Off watch 0935, mission accomplished.

SPECIAL ORDERS FROM HEADQUARTERS, 91st BOMB GROUP, 1st DIVISION, 1st COMBAT WING:

No passes will be issued. All combat crews will remain on base and stand by for one or possible two more missions today.

Suggested reading: The Unauthorized Mission (Tales of the 91st)

Review “B-17 Photo History.” “View B-17 View of D-Day 1944.”

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