

UNAUTHORIZED D-DAY MISSION

Written by James H. McPartlin B/Gen., USAF (Ret.)

With a title like this, one has to wonder how this could happen. But it did! I would like to tell you how. We airmen in the Eight and Ninth Air Forces had waited a long time for the D-Day order. It finally reached the 91st Bomb Group on June 6, 1944. Our mission was to bomb targets in support of the invasion ground forces who were to hit the Normandy beaches at 07:30 a.m.

Col. Terry, our Group C.O., conducted the briefing with all of the DO's and DON'Ts to follow. It was estimated that from 11,000 to 12,000 aircraft would be in the area and everyone must stay on the briefed course, no aborts. Intelligence predicted limited fighter opposition and light flak in the target area.

After the briefing, I went to my operations office to help with the details of seeing that the squadron crews were taken care of. I personally was feeling a bit sad that I would not be going on the mission. Policy is the 91st Bomb Group was that the squadron commander flew only when his squadron let the group and was not my turn as squadron commander.

I was on of the original 91st Bomb Group pilots and had waited a long time for this moment.

The entire 91st Bomb Group got airborne on time without incident. I settled down with a cup of coffee and was shooting the breeze with a Sergeant Birdie, our operations NCO.

Within 30 minutes the phone rang. Sergeant Birdie answered and said, "Major, General Gross wants to talk to you." B/Gen. William Gross was commander of the First Combat Wing.

I was not accustomed to talking with the General but got on the line immediately. He said, "Mac, do you have a bird flyable that is not on the mission today?" I said, "Yes sir, we have an old G model ("Old Faithful") that we use for transition and practice missions. It has no bombs or guns or ammunition.

The General replied, "That's O.K. Can you get a skeleton crew together? I want to catch up with our combat wing formation and observe the bombing and the landings." "Yes, sir," I said. "I'll check on a crew and call you back ASAP." Frantic phone calls recruited a skeleton crew to include: Engineer George Parrish, Tail Gunner Eugene Letalion, Weather Observer Larry Atwell, Navigator (?), Pilot James McPartlin and Co-Pilot G/Gen. William Gross.

I called General Gross and asked him to meet us at the airplane. We had a quick briefing and off we went to catch up with our combat wing. The Navigator gave me the headings and we climbed out at full power to 23,000 feet, which put us on top of the complete overcast. For as far as we could see, there was a continuous stream of Forts and Libs heading toward the French coast. Finally, about half way across the English Channel, we identified our combat wing.

We flew alongside the formation until we saw the bomb bay doors open and soon it was bombs away. There was a fair amount of flak but not a sign of an enemy fighter, nor did we see any of our aircraft go down. A milk run compared to missions flown over Germany prior to D-Day.

At this point I expected we would do a 180 turn and return to our base in Bassingbourn, England. NOT SO! General Gross said, "Lets go down and observe the landings."

I asked the Navigator to give me a heading to the landing area on Normandy and he said, "WHAT?" No way was he prepared for this request but said, "O.K., give me a minute or two."

I pulled off the power and started a descent. Soon I had a new heading, with periodic corrections. Down we went through solid overcast in an area that we were forbidden to be in! This was a perfect scenario for a mid-air collision.

We finally broke out of the overcast at about 700-800 feet above the water in light rain and low clouds but visibility was surprisingly good.

What a sight to behold! Ships everywhere. I asked the General, "What now?" He said, "Make a right turn." This would give him a full view of the beach area. During the course of the turn, I began to see black puffs of flak and hear the familiar sounds like rain on a tin roof.

The battleship guns on my left were flashing and it was my guess that our Navy was shooting at us!

I said to General Gross, "We don't belong here" and immediately without waiting for his reply rammed the throttles and RPM full forward and began a climb back into the overcast while asking the Navigator for a heading back to England.

We broke out of the overcast at about 18,000 feet and continued directly to Bassingbourn without further incident.

On landing, we discovered minor flak damage. I felt we were very lucky to escape with only minor damage and no injuries.

General Gross thanked the crew and was gone. I heard later via the grapevine that Maj. Gen. Williams, our Division C.O., gave General Gross a verbal reprimand for ordering us to go on an unauthorized mission with NO BOMBS, NO GUNS, NO AMMUNITION and NO CREDIT FOR A MISSION.

If my memory serves me correctly, all of the 91st Bomb Group aircraft returned safely to base.

- - - - -

THE ABOVE STORY IS THE PROPERTY OF THE AUTHOR AND MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED WITHOUT THE AUTHOR'S CONSENT

www.91stbombgroup.com