

# **A MOST MEMORABLE CHRISTMAS**

**Written by Marion C. Hoffman**

As it must be with most people, there is no doubt being Christian; a special Christmas stands out in life among all of them. Especially, if the person is three quarters of a century years old. Yes, this was Christmas Eve Day, December 24, 1944, during a period five months, unknown, at that time, before the end of World War II. With the war definitely in the favor of the Allied Armies, and 8th Air Force, we were to experience a day in our personal combat history that was beyond comprehension. Yes, this was the Air War over Europe country, Germany.

It so happens, our crew of 8th Air Force, 91st Bomb Group, 323rd Bomb Squadron, McConnell's crew were near and ready to fly their 23 mission on this date. The night before, at 2100 hours on December 23, posted on the Bulletin Board our crew was on alert to fly a mission. Unknowing, what the target may be at this time. It was not known to be maximum effort either. As with most alerts, we were not too much startled at the notice of alert. With the inclement weather hanging over East Anglia, England and the Western battlefront on the continent, since December 16, 1944, "The Battle of the Bulge", we took everything in stride as just another mission.

The next morning wake up call at 0500 hours, we looked at the clock and decided it was not going to be a long mission, or the wake up would of been earlier. We had the usual breakfast, and briefing and at the briefing the good news. In briefing we were told we would not return to our airfield that night, due to a weather front moving in, closing our airbase. We would be diverted to another airfield about fifty miles to the eastern most section of East Anglia. This 23rd mission could create quite a situation.

Finally, the weather was to break over Germany, near clear skies, good for bombing. We were informed at this briefing, the mission would be maximum effort that means everybody flies, all aircraft flyable will be flown. At this time with 23 missions we were a distinguished crew, flying Lead or Deputy Lead position. We had graduated from Tail End Charlie by merit, to this position. By the attrition rate of losing a bomber group aircraft too, this we do not know. It's terrible to think through the loss of so many airmen's lives we gain a position in a Bomber Formation. This is war; this is the way it had to be. Many prayers were said again this day, for a safe mission and return.

It was pointed out in 91st briefing; the target for this mission was going to be Merzhausen airfields. Other bomb groups bombed bridges and roadways to stall the German's retreat back into Germany. Due to the cloudy weather conditions over the continent from December 16, Battle Of The Bulge to this day. The weather was clearing up over the continent, making it good for bombing and support of the Allied ground troops.

We as a crew were transported to our aircraft; "Margie" located in the dispersal area, garden approach to Wimpole Hall. Aircraft engines were warmed up, guns in place, all was ready waiting for flare gun for taxi near one-half mile to the head of runway position for take-off. When we arrived at take-off position, there was another wait for flare gun for our planes to take off. A designated altitude was given to the officer briefing for rendezvous of all 91st Bomb Group aircraft. From taxi to take-off and rendezvous there were various times had to be met. We crewmen were ordered to man our various positions. After rendezvous a time had been given to go into the bomber stream and be in position for mission to continent. The 91st Bomb Group put up fifty B-17's for their part in maximum effort.

Going out over the English Channel from the tail position there was no end to the bomber stream that day. The bomber stream I would estimate is 50 to 75 miles to the rear. In asking permission to go to the front of our plane to see the bomber stream from that position, permission was granted. The sight in looking forward appeared to be another 50 miles it was the most awesome one could ever imagine. It was recorded for history there were 2046, B-17 and B-24 bombers plus 853 Fighter aircraft in this mission. We were flying about midway of the bomber stream it was estimated to be 150 miles long.

Going into Germany, flying high to our right of Bomber Stream was the American Fighter Aircraft, P-51's and P-47's, flying air cover protection for us. Soon going back out of enemy territory to England were the fighters, going in high to the right, low on the return to England. The Luftwaffe was up in force but caused no effect on 91st bomb runs. The bomb runs were all near milk runs, hardly any opposition from German Fighters or anti-aircraft guns. On the return flight back to our airfield in England the First Air Division was in a bomber stream of our own. Our group was coming in over England, complete cloud cover. We had been diverted to this other airfield and when it was time to descend through the clouds. It was described to us as a Storm Frontal Approach. Our aircraft was flying in three plane elements, each element descended together through the clouds, with landing lights on, because it was getting dark, the time was about 1630 hours. It was one of the most eerie situations with flying, descending big B-17's through clouds. A mid-air collision in the making. After the descent, we leveled off at about 500 feet, right below the clouds. With all the landing lights on, and hundreds of B-17's with landing lights on, circling this airfield, waiting for their turn to land. It was another of the most awesome sights; one human could ever witness. This circling maneuver continued for twenty minutes to half and hour, each plane given its turn to land. There were other aircraft calling in to the tower for priority landing, because they were running out of gas. Finally, we got down landing safely, but were ordered to stay in our aircraft. A tractor with tail hook grabbed our aircraft and pulled it off the end of runway, into a safe place, so more aircraft could land on the active runway. Finally, we as a crew were given permission to leave our plane. There was nobody waiting like usual in a truck to take us for debriefing. We walked over toward a Quonset Hut, beside an aircraft storage hanger, where our officers placed us, as they reported a safe landing and accounting to the airfield commander. The night of the 24th weathered on with no report as to how we would get back to our airbase. The next morning, Christmas Day, for breakfast, we went out to our aircraft to get some K Rations to eat, we were hungry. We had not eaten since the breakfast of the 24th and we were getting quite hungry. Finally, at 1100 hours we received a report, trucks were being sent over to haul us back to our home 91st Bomb Group base. The trucks arrived about 1300 hours and as slow moving as they were got us back to our equipment shack about 1600 hours. After we got back to our barrack dormitory, a good shower and word went out, welcome back home, your Christmas Dinner will be served beginning at 1800 hours. With this day, this 23rd mission ending like this I am sure it aged us considerably. But with a bountiful meal as was served this day and giving thanks to Almighty God for a safe mission and return, we can say this was one of the most memorable days of our lives. Enough said.

Little did we realize that two missions later, one on New Years Day, January 1, 1945, then our fateful mission on January 6, 1945. Yes, it was on our 25th mission we were shot down. Descending, into an uncertainty, an unknown situation, which we will never forget a memory of happenings we take to the grave.

**THIS CHRISTMAS EVE WILL ALWAYS STAND OUT AS THE MOST MEMORABLE DAY IN MY LIFE.**

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