

THE VILLAGE FLIRT

Written by Phil Mack

After re-reading your story about the several missions you flew, I am reminded of a mission I was on, the first mission to Leipzig. We hadn't hit Berlin yet. The date was Feb 20, 1944. It was my 20th mission and first mission after I got checked out in the left seat. Actually I filled in for Lt. Gorby's Co-Pilot who had gotten ill and couldn't fly. I didn't like the situation at all. I had had a few beers the night before since I was on stand-down. I was awakened after briefing. When the wake-up guy came in and told me to get my butt over to Operations, and that I was to fill in for a Co-Pilot who got sick, I asked him "When did he get sick? Before briefing or after briefing?"

It didn't matter. I was going. My former pilot, Dave Bramble, had become Sq. Operations Officer and he told me he wanted me to go because Gorby was assigned to lead an element for the first time and my experience flying on a lead crew would be helpful to him. He went on to finish his tour. He passed away a few years ago but his wife remains an Associate Member.

After takeoff, we assembled and took up our assigned position as leader of the second element of the low squadron, in the lead Group. About mid-Channel, the flight leader abruptly aborted. Gorby asked, "What do we do now?" I answered, "I've got it. We take over the flight lead." I pulled into the flight lead position and that's where we remained for the rest of the mission with two exceptions, one was at the start of the bombing run and one upon descent over England.

The bomb run was from North to South. Looking ahead I could see that a 10/10ths cloud cover extended from the south northward. It was uncertain whether the clouds covered the target or not and whether we'd make a visual bomb run or give the lead to the "Mickey" ship that was flying on the Group Leader's left wing. I didn't have to wonder very long. The Mickey ship began its own bombing run and so did the Group leader. Mickey was veering off to the left of the main formation. My thought was that if there were any doubt as to whether we could bomb visually or by radar, the thing to do was to take the surest method--bomb by radar. If we started a visual run and found the target obscured when we got to the release point, it would have been too late to switch over to radar.

As leader of the low flight, I began following the Mickey ship. It didn't take long to notice that the Group leader was still making his own bomb run. We were making two bombing runs! I said to Gorby, "I'm pulling back into the main body of the formation. I saw my duty was to stay with the Group leader, but I felt sorry for the Mickey ship out there all by itself. Fortunately, there hadn't been any enemy fighters. For that matter, we didn't see any escort fighters.

As we got closer to the release point, the flak began coming at us and it was heavy and accurate. Our bomb bay doors were open and we had just released the bombs when "Whooumpf," a flak shell exploded below the bomb bay.

The first indication I had that we had a problem was when my right rudder pedal was hanging loose. The control cables are cut! Well, it turned out that only the right rudder cable was severed. Next, we checked the engine instruments. The manifold pressure gauges read "zero" for the outboard engines and 46 inches. for the inboards. This was a B-17G with electronic supercharger controls. In preparation to feathering the props on the outboards, I retarded the outboard throttles and noticed the manifold pressure needles were moving counter-clockwise from zero down from the end of the scale past 55 inches. The waste gates of the outboard superchargers must have gone completely closed.

We were probably pulling about 70 inches. Hg! And the inboards were at takeoff manifold pressure, 46 inches. I glanced back at our wingmen to see if they were still with us. They were but they must have been wondering what we were doing!

We turned off the target and headed home. England was still overcast with a low ceiling. As the Group began its descent for an instrument let down, we realized we couldn't lead the Flight--our electrical system was also knocked out by the flak hit and we had no radios. Our hydraulic pumps were inoperative. We'd have only enough braking for what pressure remained in the accumulator. (I seem to recall that the second brake pressure accumulator was deleted from the "G" model.) That was not our immediate concern. Come to think of it, we must have had to close the bomb bay doors manually.

As the Group began to spread out for the cloud penetration, we aborted the lead and dropped back behind the last ship in the Group. We noted his heading and descended at the standard airspeed but increased the descent rate to 1000 ft/min instead of the standard 500 ft/min. We broke out of the clouds at about 500 feet and leveled off holding the same heading. Not long after, the ship we had been following appeared out of the clouds a safe distance in front of us. We followed him back to the base.

The landing was routine. The damage to the airplane was actually worse than we knew. The flak shell fragments went all over the bomb bay smashing the electrical junction box and the electronic supercharger controls. The broken control cable hung loosely in the bay but no other cables were cut. The base of the projectile went up through the ceiling of the bomb bay and out of the airplane. There was a hole in the top of the hull about six inches in diameter.

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