

THE LAST MISSION OF THE 91ST

Pandemonium Over Pilsen: The Forgotten Final Mission

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By mid April 1945 the war in Europe was winding down rapidly. The Soviets were fighting in the suburbs of Berlin, and had occupied much of the eastern region of Germany to the north and south of the city. From the west, American and British forces were moving swiftly in a broad front across central and southern Germany. General Patton's Third Army was closing on the Czechoslovakian border. It was obvious to all that the final collapse of the German ground forces was only a matter of days. Still, the air war was continuing unabated. Heavy bomber missions were being flown almost every day. However, substantive strategic targets were becoming fewer and fewer. Most heavy industrial plants were either in Allied hands or lay in ruins. The rail transportation system was in shambles. There was little opportunity for the Germans to move war materials that were being produced to their collapsing front line forces.

The German fighter command was ineffective. Although a large number of fighter aircraft were available, many of them Me-262 jet fighters, there were neither enough experienced pilots nor adequate fuel supply to put sufficient numbers of aircraft in the air to disrupt our bomber formations. Allied fighters controlled the air over Europe. Anti-aircraft defenses, on the other hand, were potentially effective around the few remaining targets. German gunners were capable of throwing up large quantities of accurate anti-aircraft fire. The 8th Air Force was therefore faced with the problem of identifying targets of sufficient strategic importance to warrant risking lives of the airmen. One of the few major industrial plants not yet damaged by allied bombing was the Skoda Armament plant at Pilsen, Czechoslovakia. Although long a potential strategic target, it had not been bombed because of its location within a Czech city.

The Skoda plant produced tanks, heavy guns and ammunition. While some of these materials were being sent directly to the front, most of the production would not reach the front in time to have an effect on the allied advances. Therefore, the Skoda plant did not seem a target worthy of the risk. However, other factors came into consideration when evaluating the priority of the Skoda plant for targeting.

By Spring 1945, it had become obvious to the Western Allies that the Soviets were positioning themselves to lay political claim to as much of post-war Eastern Europe and Germany as possible. Bickering and lack of cooperation on the part of the Soviet negotiators over plans for governance of the liberated countries of Eastern Europe and of occupied Germany had raised the specter of the coming "Cold War" in the minds of many at the higher political levels in England and the United States. It was also assumed all usable industrial machinery would be stripped from factories in occupied territories and shipped back to the Soviet Union to rebuild her postwar industry. This industrial capacity would be put to use in strengthening the military posturing against the Western Allies. Destruction of the Skoda plant would prevent usage of its industrial machinery by the Soviets.

Concern was also growing over what would happen when the main forces of the approaching Soviet and Western armies came together. Some feared that the Russians may keep driving westward to ensure their perceived territorial prerogatives. A bombing mission in strength that deep in Europe, combined with other strikes, would provide a show of force as to the air might of the Western Allies. Although the mission request came from General Eisenhower at SHAEF, the above political factors most likely

weighed heavily in the decision that resulted in Field Order No. 696. The Field Order was sent out from the 8th Air Force at 2323 hours on 24 April, laying on a mission to the Skoda Armament plant at Pilsen the next day.

One sticky problem needed to be resolved in this decision. There were approximately 40,000 men and women employed by the Skoda plant. These workers were primarily Czech civilians and conscripted (slave) laborers. The death of innocent Czech workers would not do much to foster post-war good will between eastern Europeans and the Western Allies. To reduce the potential of civilian deaths, the night before the BBC had begun broadcasting warnings to the Czech workers that a strike on Pilsen was imminent and that they should stay away from the Skoda plant. On the morning of the 25th of April Allied Headquarters released the following warning over the BBC: "Allied bombers are out in great strength today. Their destination is the Skoda works. Skoda workers, get out and stay out until the afternoon." This was the only time a warning of a target had been issued ahead of the mission.

Field Order 696 sent eight Groups of B-17s of the 1st Air Division to Pilsen. Ten Groups of B-24s of the 2nd Air Division were targeted for rail centers at Salzburg, Bad Reichenhall, Hallstein, and Trauenstein. Nine Groups of B-17s in the 3rd Air Division would drop food supplies to several German-occupied Dutch cities during the afternoon of the 25th. The mission of the 3rd Air Division would later be rescinded because of adverse weather conditions.

In the 1st Air Division, the 40th Combat Wing sent the 92nd and 305th Groups. The 92nd was the Division Lead, with the 305th following. LTC William H. Nelson, call sign "Foxhole Able", was the 1st Division Air Commander. The other two Combat Wings each sent all three of their groups (listed in their order in the strike force): 41st Combat Wing--303rd, 379th and 384th; 1st Combat Wing--398th, 91st and 381st. The 92nd and 398th Groups each put up four squadrons while the other Groups sent out the usual three squadrons. The 91st Bomb Group, flying out of Bassingbourn, had as its target the airfield at Pilsen. About 100 German aircraft, many of them fighters, including jet Me-262s, had been observed on the field by reconnaissance planes. The other Groups were targeted on the Skoda plant itself.

The 91st formation for the day included the 322nd Squadron, flying as Group Lead, the 323rd High Squadron and the 324th Low Squadron. The 401st Squadron was stood down for the mission. LTC Donald H. Sheeler, call sign "Swordfish Baker", flying as copilot with Cpt Rayolyn W. Schroeder's crew, was the Group Lead. 1Lt Leslie S. Thompson, Jr. was first pilot and Squadron Lead for the 323rd Squadron.

First pilots and planes from the 324th Squadron for this mission were as follow: First (Lead) Element: Lead plane, 1Lt William J. Auth, No. 588 ("Klette's Wild Hares"), with LTC Immanuel ("Manny") L. Klette, the 324th CO flying as copilot and Squadron Leader (this was Manny Klette's 91st bombing mission); Number two position (on the right wing of the lead plane), 1Lt John E. Nichol, No. 623; No. 3 position (left wing of the lead plane), 1Lt Edgar M. Moyer, No. 000 ("Extra Special"). Second element: Lead and Deputy Squadron Lead, 1Lt William E. Gladitsch, No. 884; No. 2, 2Lt Armando P. Crosa, No. 889 ("Chippewa--The Milwaukee Road"); No. 3, 1Lt John L. Hatfield, No. 061 "General Ike"). Third Element: Lead, 2Lt Gordon A. Woodard, No. 959 ("Rhapsody in Red"); No. 2, F/O Louis Schafts, No. 880; No. 3, 1Lt William P. Steffens, No. 772 ("Sweet Freda"). Fourth Element: Lead, 1Lt George S. McEwen, No. 153; No. 2, 1Lt Earl G. Pate, Jr., No. 844 ("Yankee Gal"); No. 3 (Squadron "Tail-end Charlie"), 2Lt Raymond W. Darling, No. 936.

Since this was to be a long mission, with an early departure, the crews were awakened in time for breakfast at 0200. Briefing was at 0300. The bomb load for the Lead and Low Squadrons was twenty

250 pound General Purpose bombs; the High Squadron aircraft each carried six 500 pound General Purpose bombs and four M-17 incendiaries. The Aiming Point (AP) for the 322nd and 324th Squadrons was the center of the runways, while the 323rd was to aim on the west hanger on the south side of the field. The crews were briefed to make every possible attempt to keep their bombing patterns within the target area to avoid unnecessary damage to nearby civilian areas and loss of life to Czech nationals. As were the orders to all eight Groups, bombing on the primary target was to be visual only. Bombing altitudes were: Lead, 22,000 feet; High, 22,500 feet; Low, 21,500 feet.

The secondary target was a visual run on the railway traffic center on the east side of Munich. The AP for the 322nd Lead Squadron was the Goods Depot, for the 323rd High Squadron, the main station and for the 324th Low Squadron, the bridge over the rail yards. The Number three target was a H2X drop (bombing by radar bombsight) on the Main Railway Station in Munich.

A scouting force, call sign "Buckeye Black", consisting of six P-51 fighters would provide target weather conditions to "Foxhole Able" 45 minutes prior to time over target. A screening force of four mosquito aircraft, call sign "Small Leak Blue", would rendezvous with the 91st Lead at 0955, 40 minutes from the primary target. The target to be attacked would be determined at that time. Upon receiving this information, "Small Leak Blue" would accompany the Group Lead to the appropriate IP where the screening aircraft would pull ahead and drop chaff (aluminum strips designed to foil German anti-aircraft radar) in the target area.

The 324th Squadron crews were at station at 0430. While Lt Steffen's crew was going through their preflight checks, Sgt William L. Swanson, the radio operator, tuned in to the BBC. The message to the Skoda workers in Pilsen telling them a strike force was being sent out today and that they should not go to work was going out over the air. The planes started engines at 0515, taxied at 0525, with the Group Lead aircraft lifting off at 0530. Lt Auth's Lead plane of the 324th Squadron became airborne at 0540. All 324th planes were in the air by 0605.

Although ground fog prevented terrain observation and high cloud cover over East Anglia was 10/10, weather was not a major problem for the 91st Group assembly. The Group Lead aircraft reached the assembly altitude of 5,000 feet at 0540. All 91st aircraft were in formation seven minutes before the briefed departure time. The group left the base area at 0642, only one minute behind schedule.

The 398th Group was a little early in arriving at the 1st Combat Wing assembly and had to do a small "S-ing" to get into position. On the whole, the 1st Combat Wing assembly was very good. However, the Division assembly was somewhat ragged. The 1st Combat Wing was slightly early and the 40th Combat Wing slightly late in arriving at the Division assembly point. The 1st Combat Wing had to make a big "S-ing" to allow the two Combat Wings ahead of them to slip into the proper position.

The English coast was crossed at 0727, at 5,000 feet and the continental coast at 0737, still at 5,000 feet. Someone else in the 1st Combat Wing was using the 91st Group Lead's call sign, confusing communications within the 91st Group. Further, the 602nd High Squadron of the 398th Group just ahead of the 91st, continually flew wide and back, getting into the way of the 91st. It was difficult for the 91st to stay in formation and maintain the proper separation.

At 0818 the 1st Division started climbing to the bombing altitude, reaching 22,000 feet at 1022, four minutes before the IP. About half way through the climb, the 381st Group passed the 91st, relegating the 91st to the eighth, and last, place in the Pilsen strike force for the rest of the mission. Radio operators in many of the 91st planes were listening in on the BBC to break the monotony of the long flight. At about 0930, only an hour before the target, the BBC once again was sending warning messages to the Czech workers in the Skoda plant that a strike force was on its way to Pilsen. The

workers were told to get out of the plant immediately. This established a reasonably precise timing as to when to expect the bombers over Pilsen.

The 324th Squadron formation was a little ragged from the time the Group left the continental coast to the IP. The third and fourth elements, in particular were flying loose and too far behind the formation. As the 91st approached the IP, there was a jamming up of squadrons as they began their bomb runs, on slightly different headings and at too close intervals. Between the IP and the target, however, the 324th tightened up with the planes tucking in close together.

Up to this point, the Pilsen mission was progressing routinely. However, as the strike force approached the target, things became exceptionally confused and harrowing. For starters, "Buckeye Black" had gotten lost and reported cloud conditions over Prague (0/10) instead of Pilsen. Cloud cover over Pilsen was 7-8/10. This was discovered only as the Lead Group approached the target, too late to switch to the secondary target. Further, the German anti-aircraft artillery were waiting for them. The BBC messages to the Czech workers obviously had been heard by the Germans. Mobile flak batteries had been concentrated in and around the target area.

Tracking flak hit the strike force starting about three minutes from the target and ending just beyond Bombs Away. Most of the bursts were black, with a few white bursts mixed in. As the first Groups went over the target, the flak was designated as "meager and inaccurate. The German gunners did not yet have the proper range. Because of the dense cloud cover, the Lead Squadron bombardiers in all groups had trouble identifying their APs. In the 92nd Lead Group, the Lead Squadron bombardier could not see the AP and the squadron made a 360 to the right to go over the target, and through the flak, again. It dropped on the second run. The High Squadron also failed to see the AP and made a 360 to drop on the second run. Both the Low and Low-Low Squadrons had to make two 360s before spotting their APs, finally dropping on the third run over the target.

None of the three Lead bombardiers in the 305th Group could spot the AP and the entire Group made one 360, dropping on the second run. The 41st Combat Wing Groups also experienced trouble in identifying their APs. All three squadrons of the 303rd Group failed to find their APs on the first run over the target. After making a 360 and picking an alternate AP, all squadrons bombed on the second pass. The Lead Squadron of the 379th Group was unable to bomb visually on the first run so aborted and made a 360 and dropped on the second run. Both the Low and High Squadrons were able to see their APs and dropped on the first run. For the return to England, the Low and High Squadrons headed on back from the rally point without waiting for the Lead Squadron. After completing its second pass over the target, the Lead Squadron joined up with the 91st Group for the trip back across the continent.

On the first pass, none of the bombardiers of the 384th Group identified their APs and the entire Group made a 360.

On the second run, the Lead and Low dropped, but the High Squadron had to make another 360 before identifying the target and dropping on the third pass over the target. The last 384th Group plane dropped at 1116, presumably the last bombs dropped on Europe by the 8th Air Force. The Lead and Low Squadrons circled in the vicinity of Frankfurt until the High Squadron caught up with them for the trip back to their base at Grafton-Underwood.

In the 1st Combat Wing, none of the four squadron Lead bombardiers of the 398th Group could find their AP. The entire Group made a 360, with all squadrons dropping on the second pass over the target. The available records for the 381st Group are unclear. It appears at least one squadron made a 360 back over the target, while the other two squadrons dropped on their first pass.

As they approached the target, the crewmen in the 324th were obviously nervous because of what they saw happening ahead of them. Since it was last in the bomber stream, the 91st was flying into utter chaos ahead. Entire Groups or individual Squadrons were making 360s and trying to find space to wedge back into the bomber stream for another pass over the target. Other Squadrons were heading to their Group rally point and making 360s there while waiting for the rest of the Group to complete their 360s over the target and join up for the return flight.

The 324th crews saw planes in the groups ahead of them going down, as well as from Squadrons now moving in behind them for another pass over the target. >From the Lead 92nd Group No. 369 with Lt Lewis B. Fisher's crew aboard went down (6 KIA); from the 305th Group, No.300 ("Fancy Pantz"), Lt. Gerald S. Hodges' crew; from the 303rd, No.447, Lt Warren Mauger (3 KIA); from the 384th Group, No. 501 ("Sweet Chariot"), Lt Andrew G. Lovett; from the 398th Group, No. 266 ("Godfather's Inc"), Lt Allen F. Ferguson, Jr. (6 KIA) and No. 652 ("Stinky Jr"), Lt Paul A. Coville (1 KIA). In addition, two aircraft from the 379th Group (No. 178, "Seattle Sue", Lt James M. Blain and No. 272 "The Thumper", Lt Robert C. Evans) collided in mid air as a result of flak damage. Both planes went down in allied territory.

All nine crewmen aboard "Seattle Sue" and the tail gunner aboard "The Thumper" were killed. A number of other planes were falling out of formation with engines out or fires aboard. The crewmen in the other planes could only assume these aircraft were going down, too.

Further, the flak became much more intense and accurate with each run over the target. By the time the 324th approached the target, it was especially intense. Most crewmen in all three squadrons of the 91st Group, as well as many of those in the other Groups, said the flak was among the most accurate and intense they had encountered on any mission, including those to Berlin. Seeing the flak concentration over the target and other planes exploding and falling out of formation obviously made an impression on the pilots of the typically vulnerable Low Squadron. As a result, the 324th formation became exceptionally tight as they headed in over the target.

In spite of the heavy cloud cover, the Lead bombardier in No. 852 of the Lead Squadron, 1Lt Stephen Lada, got a visual fix on the AP and dropped his bombs. The rest of the squadron toggled on his smoke streamer. Just after bombs away, No. 306 ("The Biggest Bird"), the lead plane in the Fourth Element, was hit in the right wing, knocking out both No. 3 and 4 engines, disabling the supercharger on an engine on the left wing, and severing the rudder control cables.

When the togglier, S/Sgt Francis N. Libby, toggled the bombs, 11 of the 20 250 pounders hung up and would not drop. With only one functional engine, the pilot, 1Lt Robert Marlow, took the plane down to the deck to regain power in the engine without the supercharger.

Although the crew dumped out all loose equipment, it became clear the aircraft could not make it back to Bassingbourn with the added weight of the bombs. The bombs could not be jettisoned since by then they were over occupied Allied territory. The bombs were pinned to prevent them from becoming armed and were kept aboard.

Lt Marlow looked for the nearest emergency field, finally putting down on a former German grass airstrip about 50 miles north of Nurnberg. When they touched down, Lt Marlow discovered the brakes had also been shot out. The plane careened over the grass, ground looping and eventually coming to rest in some woods at the edge of the field. U. S. Army ground troops came by in a Jeep as the crew was getting out of the plane. The troops told the crew to hide in the woods to avoid German civilians until a truck could get there to pick them up. American bomber crews were not popular in that part of Germany. A truck soon arrived and picked up all of Lt. Marlow's crew. They returned to Bassingbourn

three days later, the last 91st crew to return from a mission over Europe.

2Lt Glennon J. Schone's plane, No. 790 ("Oh Happy Day"), flying as Tail-end Charlie of the Lead Squadron (No. 3 position in the Fourth Element) was hit by flak just before bombs away. Although damage to the aircraft was minimal, the navigator, 2Lt Arah J. Wilks was hit by a piece of flak about the size of a half-dollar that imbedded itself in his right thigh. By only a minute or so Lt Wilks was the next to last crewman in the 91st to be wounded in the air.

Both No. 596 ("Sweet Dish"), No. 3 in the Second Element and No. 308 ("Stinky"), No. 3 in the Lead Element were hit hard by flak over the target, but remained in formation. Both returned to Bassingbourn without problem. Likewise, No. 901 ("Star Dust"), No. 2 of the Lead Element, was hit in a Tokyo tank (outer wing tanks added to the original design of the B-17 to increase its range) by flak just before the target. She, too, remained in formation for the trip home.

As the other two squadrons came over the target, neither Lead bombardier could locate his AP and the Lead planes did not drop. The High Squadron Lead, 1Lt Leslie S. Thompson, Jr., in No. 630 ("Geraldine"), ordered the squadron to make a 360 to go over the target again. This they did. However, there was a lot of concern on the part of the other crews as they did so. The radios were going wild as they headed for the target again. 2Lt Willis C. Schilly, 1st pilot of No. 964, flying in the No. 3 position of the Second Element thought to himself, "If we don't drop this time, I will not go over again." No. 540 ("Ramblin' Rebel"), with 1Lt Leland C. Borgstrom's crew aboard, was flying on the right wing of the Lead plane of the Number Two Element. There was discussion between Lt Borgstrom and the copilot, F/O Quentin E. Eathorne, as to whether they should go over again. Although F/O Eathorne was unhappy about the situation, they stayed with the formation and made a second run over the target.

Other pilots and crews were upset at having to make the second run through the flak, but all stayed in formation. Because the return leg of the 360 was close to the target, and the flak, many thought they were going over the target, assuming they had made three runs, instead of two.

No. 636 ("Outhouse Mouse"), on her 139th mission, with 1Lt Elmer ("Joe") Harvey as first pilot, accidentally jettisoned her bombs about nine minutes before the first run over the target. She stayed in formation with the squadron on the first run. On the bomb run "Outhouse Mouse" took a flak hit that knocked out the No. 3 engine and severed all but two of the elevator control cables.

However, she was able to remain in formation as the 323rd made the 360 and went over the target again. After coming off the target the second time, "Outhouse Mouse" could not maintain her position and had to drop out of the formation to return alone on a more direct flight back to England. She called for fighter support and eight P-51s escorted her most of the way out of Germany. Lt Harvey brought her down at Bassingbourn at 1428, about half an hour ahead of the rest of the squadron.

None of the other planes in the 323rd High Squadron received major damage; six had minor damage and the other five had no damage.

It was when the Lead of the 324th Squadron did not drop that things started falling apart for the 324th. As the squadron went over the target, the Deputy Lead bombardier in No. 884, 1Lt Joseph G. Weinstock, had the target in his bombsight. He saw that the Lead plane did not drop and that the bomb bay doors were going up, indicating to him the Lead was unable to drop and aborting the bomb run. At that very instance, a shell burst next to the nose of the plane knocking out the No. 2 engine, spewing metal off the cowling and causing the plane to start to drop out of formation. The same burst threw a large shard of flak through the skin of the plane hitting Lt Weinstock's shoulder, knocking him to the back of the compartment. As he fell backwards, Lt Weinstock toggled the bombs, at 1037. With

so much flak in the air and planes going down, the other toggliers were concentrating on watching for a smoke streamer on which to release their own bomb loads. When the streamer appeared from the Deputy Lead, all but Lt Nichol's plane, No. 623, dropped. His togglier, T/Sgt Joseph J. Zupko, realized the Squadron Lead had not dropped and held the bombs.

As the Low Squadron Lead plane, No. 588, went over the target, the bombardier, 1Lt Robert E. Finch, said he could not see the AP.

Klette told the first pilot, Lt Auth, "Well, we'll go around." Lt Auth then started a 360 and Klette broke radio silence to tell the other pilots in the squadron to follow him back over the target.

That was when pandemonium broke loose on the radio. All pilots were yelling at once telling Klette that they had dropped and were not going to go around and through the flak again. Someone told him that "If you are going back over again, you are going alone." With all the pilots yelling at once it is unclear what, if any, of the things the pilots were saying that Klette heard. Klette came back on the air telling them to "Be quiet. We are going around again. I don't want to discuss this. It's an order." None of the pilots said anything after that. But after they had made about a 180 turn, the other planes still flying at the briefed altitude broke formation and scattered.

When the No. 2 plane in the Lead Element, No. 623, went over the target it took a flak hit that knocked out the No. 1 engine and blew part of the cowling off No. 2. Engine No. 2 soon went out and the plane began losing altitude. Since his aircraft had not dropped, Lt Nichol attempted to go on around with Klette even though falling below the squadron formation. When the copilot, 1Lt Lawrence E. Gaddis realized what Lt Nichol was doing, he went out of control. He yelled over the intercom that he was taking over the plane and that they were not going through the flak again. He asked someone to come up and get Lt Nichol out of the pilot's seat.

After experiencing the flak over the target once, and realizing it would be even more accurate on the next run, the crew of No. 623 was in agreement with Lt Gaddis. One of the crewmen grabbed the landing gear crank and went into the cockpit to convince Lt Nichol to abort the 360. In the meantime the other crewmen were yelling over the intercom for Lt Nichol not to go around. By this time they were down to 18,000 feet and well below the rest of the Squadron. Finally realizing the folly of going over the target again alone and at such a low altitude, Lt Nichol banked the plane around the air field and let the bombs fly in the vicinity of the target, releasing them at 1047.

Even with the bomb load out, the aircraft continued losing altitude. The crew tossed out everything loose to lighten the plane.

The ball turret gunner, S/Sgt Delbert J. Augsburg, asked permission to jettison the ball turret, but Lt Nichol told him "no." No. 623 finally leveled off at about 7,200 feet. With insufficient power to get back in formation, T/Sgt Carl Greco, the acting navigator for the mission, plotted a course back to Bassingbourn slightly north of the briefed route. They headed back alone, at 97 MPH. Although they had not seen any German fighters up to this point in time, the threat was always there. They fired off flares and called for fighter escort. Some P-51s joined them, but even by lowering their flaps and wheels, the fighters could not slow down enough to stay with No. 623. The fighters had to leave No. 623 and Lt Nichol's crew to make it back on their own.

The situation was less hectic in Lt Moyer's plane, No. 000 ("Extra Special"), on the left wing, in the No. 3 position, of the Lead Element. When the call came from Klette to do a 360 back over the target, the togglier, Sgt V D Stockton, told Lt Moyer to tell Klette that he had toggled the bombs on the Deputy Lead smoke marker.

But, Klette had said he was ordering them to go around. About this time some of the pilots, including Lt Moyer, thought they heard someone coming in over the radio saying that anyone who had dropped could join up with another group for the return. Accordingly, Lt Moyer broke formation and looked for somewhere else to join up before the rest of the crew got unduly agitated. Sighting planes from the 305th Group rallying nearby, Lt Moyer headed for their formation.

Since the Germans were known to put up captured B-17s to infiltrate formations, it took some time before "Extra Special" was allowed to join up. Eventually she was let in and flew on back to England with the 305th. When the formation reached England Lt Moyer left the 305th formation and flew on to Bassingbourn, arriving there about 50 minutes before the rest of the Squadron.

In the Second Element, Lt Gladitsch in the Lead plane, No. 884, had taken flak hits that had knocked out the Nos. 1 and 2 engines. With only two engines pulling full power No. 884 was unable to stay in formation. They had dropped to about 10,000 feet when the No. 1 engine started up again and began pulling a little power. By throwing out all the loose equipment, including the .50 caliber machine guns and the radios, Lt Gladitsch was able to maintain this altitude. Lt Gladitsch broke radio silence and got permission from Klette to abort and return to England. No. 884, although not able to get back in the formation, flew slightly behind and below the 91st Group formation and made it on back to Bassingbourn.

Some 324th planes fell into formation with No. 884 on her way back. In the No. 2 position of the Second Element, Lt Crosa's plane, No. 889 ("Chippewa--the Milwaukee Road") was buffeted badly by the flak as she went over the target.

Sgt James H. Wyant, the ball turret gunner was watching the massive flak bursts breaking under and around him. It was the worst flak he had experienced. It just "kept it up and kept it up." Two pieces of flak came through the nose, knocking out the Plexiglas and a number of holes appeared in the fuselage and wings. Sgt Wyant assumed they would not make it through the flak. He rotated the ball turret to the exit position and went up into the plane where he could get to his chute when he had to bail out. But, No. 884 did make it through the flak without serious damage. As soon as they cleared the flak, Sgt Wyant climbed back into the turret to watch for German fighters.

In the meantime, the Lt Crosa was continuing on a 360 turn along with Klette. Although the crew was surprised that the squadron was making a turn back towards the target, Lt Crosa broke formation, along with 6-7 other planes, before the crewmen understood what was happening and became unduly concerned.

As Lt Hatfield's plane, No. 061 ("General Ike"), flying in the No. 3 position in the Second Element, came up on the target, the crew saw clouds of flak and planes going down. Sgt Emil A. Kubiak in the ball turret tried to call out the flak bursts, but they were all over the place, too many to take evasive action. "General Ike" made it to the target without major damage. The togglier, Sgt Vernon E. Thomas, triggered the bomb release on the smoke streamer from the Deputy Lead. At the same time, the flight engineer, Sgt Victor Maguire, Jr., hit the salvo switch and Lt Hatfield pulled the bomb release in the cockpit. The bombs dropped! Just after they dropped, a flak burst hit the bomb bay doors so that they would not come up.

The tail gunner, Sgt Alfred G. Miller, plugged in his "walk-about" oxygen tank and came up to help Sgt Maguire put out the fires and crank up the bomb bay doors. The radio operator, Sgt Vincent W. Karas, went back and manned the tail guns while this was going on.

As the bomb bay doors were going up, the crew noticed an fire in the bomb bays. Smoke started filling the plane, adding to all the confusion of the flak bursting around the plane. Sgt Maquire pulled wires rapidly, while Sgt Miller fought the fire. It soon was put out.

About that time Lt Hatfield switched the radio transmissions from the Lead plane into over the intercom. Klette's voice came through ordering the squadron around again. Lt Hatfield went part way around with Klette, but broke formation about the same time as did the other planes in the squadron. "General Ike" made a tight 360 inside the other planes about a mile south of the target and started home alone. Shortly after leaving the target area one of the crew reported "bandits" closing in on them. However, the fighters proved to be P-51 Mustangs. Over friendly Allied occupied territory a couple of other planes, with feathered engines, joined up with "General Ike" to continue on back to Bassingbourn.

In the Third Element, Lt Woolard's Lead plane, No. 959 ("Rhapsody in Red") dropped on the Deputy Lead smoke streamer at 1037. However, the plane was hit very hard by flak over the target. One engine was knocked out and another was pulling only one half power. A piece of flak came up through the bottom and imbedded itself behind the pilot's seat. It had knocked out the hydraulic system on the way up into the plane. With the loss of power, "Rhapsody in Red" could not stay in formation and had to drop out to return alone.

No. 880, flying in the No. 2 position with Lt Schaft's crew aboard also dropped with the Deputy Squadron Lead at 1037. The aircraft took only a few minor flak hits over the target. Lt Schaft made a 180 with Klette, before deciding to break formation with the other planes. He formed up on some of the other planes from the 324th that were still flying at the briefed altitude and went on back to Bassingbourn without incident.

Lt Steffen's plane, No. 772 ("Sweet Freda") flying on the left wing of Lt Woolard, dropped with the Deputy Lead at 1037 and took only a few flak hits as she went over the target. Lt Steffens stayed with Klette through the first part of the 360. While doing so, he relayed what Klette was saying to the rest of the crew over the intercom. They started screaming at Lt Steffens not to go around--no way would they go through that flak again. He, too, took their advice, broke formation about half way around to the target and formed up with other 324th Squadron planes to head back to Bassingbourn.

S/Sgt Samuel S. Castiglione, togglier of the Lead of the Fourth Element, No. 153, toggled with the Deputy plane at 1037. However, only 11 of the 20 bombs dropped; nine hung up. No. 153 was hit hard directly over the target. A shell exploded on the left side of the aircraft, between the No. 3 engine and the cockpit.

Fortunately, the blast was directed downwards and did not throw flak into the top turret.

As it was, the right eardrum of the flight engineer, Sgt Robert H. Cleveland was blown out. The No. 3 engine was knocked out, a number of holes appeared in the nose and wing, and a wing spar was almost severed. A piece of flak went through the ball turret, barely missing the gunner, Sgt. John F. Unger. Sgt Unger soon became very cold from the subzero wind blowing through the hole. Other flak hits damaged the tail of the aircraft.

Lt McEwen feathered No. 3 engine and in spite of the damage and the extra load from the 9 hung-up bombs, was able to maintain altitude. They stayed with Klette as he started the 360. The crew saw the Squadron Lead starting a 360 and wondered why they were going around again, but before they got to the panic stage, Lt McEwen broke formation with the others and formed up for the trip home. The hung-up bombs were pinned and taken back with them. Most of the trip home was over Allied

controlled territory where it was not safe to jettison the bombs.

1Lt Earl G. Pate's No. 844 ("Yankee Gal") was flying in the No. 2 position of the fourth element. "Yankee Gal" took a lot of small flak hits as she went over the target, but there was no serious structural damage to the plane. The togglier, S/Sgt George D. Kelly, toggled the bombs on the smoke streamer of the Deputy Lead at 1037.

Lt Pate followed on the right wing of McEwen half way through the 360, but broke formation with the others, forming up on the first plane he saw from the squadron for the trip home. He did not see McEwen's plane the rest of the way back. Although the crew saw they were making a turn back towards the target, they did not get upset since they did not realize what was taking place. "Yankee Gal" broke formation before the crew understood Klette had ordered another run over the target.

Things were much more frantic among the crew of Tail-end Charlie, No. 936, with 2Lt Raymond W. Darling's crew aboard. They, too, were shaken by the intensity and accuracy of the flak. However, the plane took only minor hits as it went over the target and dropped with the Deputy Lead at 1038. As No. 936 came off the target, rallying to the right and out of the flak, the crew breathed a sigh of relief that they had survived. Then, Klette came in over the radio ordering the Squadron to make a 360 and go back over with him.

Lt Darling switched the radio to the intercom so the crew could be told what Klette was ordering them to do. The crew became rather frantic, including Lt Darling. Lt Darling then switched off the radio and asked for a vote as to whether they should go or not go.

The crewmen were yelling for him not to go around and go through the flak again. The tail gunner, S/Sgt Wayne E. Kerr, came on the intercom and said "Lieutenant, I'm married and have a little boy. I'm not going through that again. If you go around, I'm bailing out." Lt Darling told them "We're not going over again", banked sharply to the right and peeled out of the formation. His crew was ecstatic! Some other planes formed up on No. 936 as they reassembled in the 91st formation for the trip back.

When the other 324th Squadron planes broke formation, the tail gunner, S/Sgt Charles L. Coon, of the Lead plane came in on the intercom to tell Klette the rest of the squadron had broken formation and that No. 588 was now by herself. Klette then said, "We'll put the pins back in the bombs and go home." They then set out to catch up with the rest of the 324th Squadron planes that were still at the briefed altitude. Klette was quiet the entire flight back to Bassingbourn.

Strike photos from the 323rd showed good bombing results for the High Squadron. However, because of the dense cloud cover results of the Lead and Low squadrons was unobserved. It was learned later that 70% of the plant had been destroyed. Only six workers were killed. However, bombs did fall in the near-by residential area, killing 67 people and destroying 335 houses. Seventeen German anti-aircraft gunners were also killed.

After rallying to the right off the target, the 322nd Lead Squadron made a large oval 360 in an attempt to allow the 323rd High Squadron to complete its second bomb run and get back into the formation. The rally point, near Wurzburg, was adjacent to the southern arc of the oval. Those planes of spread-out Low 324th Squadron planes still at the briefed altitude and with the 91st Group formation also made the 360 with the Lead Squadron. However, the 323rd was too late in coming off the target to get into its proper position and followed along behind the rest of the Group. The Lead and Low Squadrons made "S's" on either side of the prescribed return route to lose time for the High Squadron to catch up. It never did. The 323rd Squadron, however, was in radio contact with the Group Lead at all times and came into visual contact at 1300, before reaching the continental coast.

The 322nd Lead and 324th Low Squadron let-down was started at 1115, leveling off at 8,000 feet at 1146. Let-down resumed at 1225, with the formation crossing the continental coast at 1354 at 3,000 feet and the English coast at 1407 at the same altitude. The 323rd High Squadron crossed the continental coast at 1359 at 7,000 feet and the English coast at 1410, at 4,000 feet. Aircraft of the Lead Squadron began landing at 1429 and were all down by 1501. The first 324th Low Squadron aircraft, No. 000 with Lt Moyer's crew, who had come back with the 305th Group, had landed at 1335. The last 324th plane, No. 623, Lt Nichol's plane, which had come back alone on two engines touched down at 1530.

Although six of the twelve 324th aircraft had sustained major damage over the target, all but two made routine landings at Bassingbourn. Lt Woolard in "Rhapsody in Red" was struggling to stay in the air as the plane crossed over the English coast. One engine was out and another pulling only one-half power. Further, the hydraulic system was knocked out so that there were no brakes. The landing gear electrical system was out and the wheels had to be hand-cranked down. Lt Woolard reached Klette on the radio, requesting permission to land at Alconbury where the runways were longer. Klette came back on the air and told him he would land at Bassingbourn or "not at all." So it was on to Bassingbourn. With no brakes "Rhapsody in Red" took a "tour of the base" when she landed.

The aircraft rolled off the runway veered to the right and headed across the grass towards her hardstand area, hitting the ground crew's tent with her wing as she spun around, throwing part of the tent up onto the radio antenna like wash on a line. She finally came to a stop with only minimal damage to the aircraft. The ground crew chief, S/Sgt John A. Mabray, was taking it all in, apparently more afraid of damage to "his plane" than concern for the flight crew. Lt Woolard had done a good job of getting the plane down on her, and his, final mission.

Lt Nichol in No. 623 had made the flight back on two engines. Fuel was so low by the time they neared Bassingbourn that he did not have time for a normal approach so as to land into the wind. Lt Nichol had to make a straight-in landing with the wind. Even so, Lt Nichol did an excellent job of putting the underpowered damaged aircraft down on the runway. When the plane came to a stop and crew was getting out, the Control Tower called for Lt Nichol to report to the tower immediately. He brushed off his "wings" as he went back anticipating being commended for making such a good landing under the circumstances. Instead, he was chewed out for landing down-wind!

Shortly after debriefing was over and the 324th crews had returned to their billets a voice came over the PA system ordering all 1st pilots to report to the Squadron Orderly Room immediately.

Those that had undressed threw on some clothes and went over. About 10-11 of the pilots went in to face a fired-up Klette. He was livid and started in chewing them out in royal order. He called them all "Yellow-bellied SOBs" for breaking formation. Klette kept berating them, saying that the war would have been lost long ago if they had been running it. He said he didn't care if they had dropped their bombs, he had ordered them to go over again with him. After several minutes of chewing them out, Klette told the pilots he was going to court-martial five of the ones he felt most responsible for breaking formation, although he did not name names. Further, he said he was adding five missions to the 35-mission quota for all first pilots who had broken formation. Although Lt Gladitsch had a brief heated discussion with Klette for giving the other pilots extra missions, Klette did not give the pilots a chance to talk or explain what had happened. He simply stormed out of the meeting. The pilots were devastated. Some felt it was a death sentence. Several were only 2-3 missions away from finishing their tours. Some of the last missions had been especially scary with heavy flak concentrations. The formation also had been challenged by German Me-262 jet fighters on the Dresden mission the 17th of April.

After Klette left, Lt Auth, the Lead Pilot, got up and tried to calm the others down. He told them "Don't worry about it. There will not be five more missions before the war is over. Five more missions has no meaning." He also told them Klette could not make the additions stick. Higher headquarters would not approve such an increase in the required missions.

Klette was not satisfied with chewing out the pilots. He also called in the Deputy bombardier, Lt Weinstock, and went after him. Although Lt Weinstock held Klette in very high esteem as a combat leader, they had had their personal differences ever since Lt Weinstock had arrived in the Squadron. In spite of their personal differences, Klette had assigned Lt Weinstock as Deputy bombardier for the Pilsen mission. The night before the mission, Klette and his good friend 1Lt David Bullen, a pilot in the 324th, were having drinks in the Officer's Club. Lt Bullen had finished his quota of missions with the Dresden mission on the 17th of April. Klette tried to get Lt Bullen to fly the Pilsen mission, but he refused.

Then they started talking about the need for a good Deputy bombardier. Lt Bullen told Klette that he should take Lt Weinstock since he was a former instructor and one of the better bombardiers in the Squadron. So, Klette put him on the loading list for the Deputy Lead plane.

The morning following the mission, Lt Bullen was leaving Bassingbourn to return to the States. He mentioned to one of the other pilots he was going down to headquarters to say good-bye to Klette before he left. The pilots told him what had happened and warned him not to see Klette, since he had been the one who had recommended Lt Weinstock for the mission. Lt Bullen left Bassingbourn without saying good-bye. He never saw Manny Klette again.

None of the penalties was laid on. Pilsen was the last mission the 8th Air Force flew. None of the pilots had to fly another combat mission. The entire incident was hushed up officially. Nothing that happened after the target is in the Squadron or Group records. Only Lt Moyer's debriefing report indicates he did not return "as briefed." The section of the debriefing form asking whether or not the plane returned "as briefed" was left blank on the debriefing forms for the other planes. The debriefing records indicate that Klette's Lead plane dropped at 1036, the same time as the rest of the Squadron. The report states that 10 of the 19 bombs and the smoke streamer were dropped on the target.

The remaining 9 were reported to have been brought home. However, surviving crew members recalled that all 19 bombs and the smoke streamer were returned. They did not drop on the target and none was jettisoned.

The report of 2Lt Edward J. Drake, a pilot from the 401st Squadron, flying as formation coordinator for the Group in the tail gun position of the Group Lead clarifies little of what actually happened. Lt Drake correctly recorded that the 324th was "scattered in flak" at 1100, 24 minutes after it had dropped. At 1115 he could see neither the 324th Low Squadron nor the 323rd High Squadron. At 1200 Lt Drake recorded only that the 324th formation was a "little loose" and that "the Second Element is flying too far out, probably because of battle damage." At 1230 he recorded the squadron still flying "loosely", with the right wing of the Second Element "too far out and back." At 1300 the Second Element was still "too far back." At 1330 the 324th formation was "not too good", with the Second and Third Elements flying "much too far out." At 1400 all elements except the lead "are out of formation." At 1430 the Second Element is "too far out" and the Fourth Element "much too loose." He gave the lowest ranking of the three squadrons to the 324th for formation flying on this mission.

Lt Drake did not identify individual planes in his records. Apparently, he was observing random reshuffling of those planes that were still at the briefed altitude in some semblance of a combat formation. Lt Drake understandably was confused. Only eight 324th planes in the formation were

flying at the prescribed altitude. Three 324th planes came back alone or well out of the formation: No. 884 (Lead, Second Element), No. 623 (Right Wing, Lead Element) and No. 959 (Lead, Third Element). In addition, No. 000 (Left Wing, Lead Element) joined up with the 305th Group for the return flight.

However, Lead Squadron planes of the 379th Group may have also been flying with the 324th planes, adding to the confusion. Thus, ended the war for the 324th Squadron. A wild and memorable mission. Crewmen who flew on the Pilsen mission remember it as one of the most chaotic and scariest of missions they had flown. Confusion was rampant over the target. With so many squadrons making additional bombing runs (there were 52 separate squadron passes over the target), German anti-aircraft fire against late-arriving squadrons was becoming more and more accurate. A number of planes were going down or dropping out of the formation.

This was the scene that greeted the 324th Squadron as it approached the target. It is understandable that everyone was in a high state of anxiety.

All crews of the 324th acted correctly as they went over the target. The Lead bombardier could not identify the AP and rightly did not drop. The Lead plane gave the proper signal for the rest of the squadron not to drop and to start a 360 by pulling up the bomb bay doors and turning to the right. The Deputy bombardier thought he had identified the squadron AP and saw the Lead plane appearing to abort the bomb run at the same instant he and his plane were hit hard by flak. That he dropped his bombs and smoke steamer was as per SOP, which Klette admitted to him years later. Because of all the confusion and heavy flak on the bomb run, toggliers in the other planes were concentrating on watching for the smoke steamer. When a steamer appeared, they immediately toggled their bombs, as they were supposed to do.

What ensued following the bomb run is more questionable. Should Klette have ordered a 360? Should the pilots have broken formation? Was Klette justified in threatening reprisals against the pilots?

One obviously has to be circumspect in addressing these questions from the wisdom and safety of 50 plus years of hindsight.

The initial order for a 360 to make a second run over the target was appropriate. The Lead plane had not dropped and Klette could only assume the others had not dropped either. Most other squadrons in the strike force were doing the same. But, should Klette have continued the 360 after being informed that the other planes in the squadron had dropped? However, with all pilots yelling over the radio at once, it is likely that Klette did not understand that the other planes had dropped. He later said "I did not know they had dropped." There is no way of knowing, of course, if Klette would have eventually aborted the second run had the other pilots not first broken formation.

Should the pilots have broken formation? All except Lt Nichol's plane had accomplished their missions.

Approximately 21 tons of bombs already had been dropped by the 324th Squadron. Was it worth risking the lives of the 98 crewmen in the squadron to drop an additional four tons on the airfield? As it was, 26 crewmen in the other seven Groups were killed. This was a huge price to pay for potential long-term post-war political reasons. The reactions of the pilots were appropriate under the circumstances. Klette told Lt Pate years later, that if the squadron had not dropped on the Deputy bombardier, they would have gone around with him.

The response of Klette to the pilots breaking formation is understandable. A highly respected Squadron Commander, Klette had flown more bombing missions than any other pilot in the 8th Air Force. Klette displayed an intense drive to accomplish his missions.

He obviously had been under considerable stress over the past several months, perhaps accounting for his short temper. Klette also had an ego that matched his reputation. It was only natural, therefore, that he would consider the fact that the pilots had broken formation and refused to go around with him to be a reflection on his image as a commander.

What is not clear, however, is how much of the ensuing tirade was an impulsive verbal reaction simply to make a point and how much he really meant to follow through with. That he was quiet and did not seem unduly upset on the long flight back from Pilsen suggests much of the ranting against the pilots and Lt Weinstock was simply a way of venting his frustrations.

In the final analysis, however, all the confusion and resulting actions on the Pilsen mission became merely an unrecorded footnote in the history of the 91st Bomb Group. No damage had been done. All crewmen returned. None of the threats was carried out and Klette never brought up the incident again. No more missions were flown in the two remaining weeks of the war. All that mattered then was getting home. The events of the Pilsen mission soon were relegated to the recesses of the minds of the crewmen, only to be brought up decades later during late night war stories at reunions of the 91st Bomb Group. But, the story of how the war ended for the 324th Squadron needs to be preserved. The chaotic events of that day should not disappear with the participants.

Permission to use *The Forgotten Last Mission of the 91st* on the 91st Bomb Group (H) web page was granted by Lowell Getz.

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