

# THE MISSION ON CHRISTMAS EVE, 1944

Written by Mike Banta

By mid-December, Patton's army had broken loose and was driving across France. To all appearances the Germans were in full retreat and defeat appeared imminent. To everyone's surprise, just before Christmas the Germans mounted a major counter attack in the Ardennes sector of Belgium, during incredibly bad weather. The attack, under German Marshal Von Rundstedt, completely caught the Allies by surprise. Because of the Allied bombing of German oil refineries, German oil was in critically short supply. While the Germans had ample mechanized divisions of tanks and artillery, the high command of the Allies did not believe the German army capable of a major counter attack due to a shortage of oil.

Unbeknown to the Allied commanders, the Germans had hoarded a substantial supply of the scarce commodity in preparation for a major offensive which would, covered by extremely bad weather grounding the Allied tactical air support, attempt to break through the thin Allied lines, march to the coast of Europe and conquer Antwerp. This would surround all the Allied troops north of Antwerp making the surrounded men easy prey to the German army.

The weather cooperated with the enemy and effectively grounded the Allied air forces' tactical air arm. For this reason the Eighth Air Force, the strategic arm of the United States Army Air Force, was pressed into the tactical support of the front line soldiers. By the week before Christmas, the German forces had broken through the thin allied lines and had surrounded Bastogne on their way to Antwerp. In Bastogne, the vastly outnumbered American troops were valiantly holding the city and refusing to surrender, bringing to a halt the German army's advance towards Antwerp.

England was also in the grip of the great storm covering the battle front. In an attempt to provide our troops with every support possible, the Eighth Air Force was putting every available plane in the air from bases so socked-in by bad weather that under normal conditions they would be closed for take-offs or landings. Instrument flying in those days was hazardous under the best of circumstances, but incredibly more so when fielding hundreds of planes within a small area in zero-zero visibility.

These were the conditions at the 91st Bomb Group field at Bassingbourn, England, on Christmas Eve, December 24, 1944. By the necessity of helping our surrounded troops at Bastogne, the group was obligated to get its aircraft into the air for tactical support. John and I were both alerted that we would fly a checkout mission on Christmas Eve in tactical support of our beleaguered troops. This day we would both be flying in the same B-17, Ma Ideel, with Lt. Raisin as Pilot.

The fog was so thick, it was hard to see the second B-17 ahead of us on the taxi strip on the way to the runway. When we pulled onto the runway for take-off the fog was so bad that the green beacon light flashed by the control tower at the pilot to tell him to take-off was barely visible. Lt. Raisin and I were doubly careful as we went through our pre-flight check list. He straightened the aircraft as directly down the runway as was possible under the extreme conditions, made sure the tail wheel was locked, the controls were unlocked and the flight instruments were uncaged, opened the throttles to full military power and safely took off into the zero-zero weather. We climbed through the fog to an altitude of about fifteen hundred feet and broke out into a beautifully clear morning with the first light of dawn breaking in the east.

As I looked around for the two red and one green Very pistol flares, I saw several bright explosions in the fog layer followed by a rising ball of flame that looked like a small edition of the mushroom cloud we now recognize as the signature of an atomic bomb. There was no question in my mind as to what I was observing. Each flash and ball of flame was a heavy bomber and crew crashing on take-off.

When our squadron had formed, we had only eleven aircraft instead of twelve. I was to learn later that one of our aircraft, an unnamed B-17 piloted by Lt. Bowlan, had crashed. The tail gunner was badly injured but all other crew men had survived. When the group had formed in combat box formation we noticed that one other squadron was short one B-17. The crew of that aircraft had not been so lucky and all nine men had been killed in the crash on take-off. This was my third mission and the first loss of life and aircraft to occur on my tour of duty. Many brave airmen died not as a result of enemy action but through the incredibly bad conditions we were expected to endure in fielding our aircraft in defense of our brave ground troops holding their surrounded positions in spite of impossible odds.

After the take-off under impossible conditions with the loss of two aircraft, with one airman wounded in action and nine airmen killed in action, the mission was a milk run. The return to base was a different story. On our return to England, we were to discover that all bases were closed for landing because of zero-zero weather except three. The entire Eighth Air Force was forced to land all its aircraft on three fields! Each group had to await its turn in line to land at one of these three bases.

Our group landed at a base named Bury St. Edmunds. When we landed, we found B-17s lined up wingtip to wingtip by the hundreds. The luftwaffe could have decimated the Eighth Air Force by destroying three bases but fortunately their aircraft were also grounded by the fierce winter storm.

We went to the mess hall as we were famished after the raid only to find that we had to wait in line for hours as the cooks tried to feed over one hundred crews they had not expected. We asked where we would sleep and were told there was no room for all these extra airmen and that we should try to catch some sleep in our aircraft as a mission was scheduled for the next day. The night was bitterly cold with temperatures in the teens, the coldest snap to occur in England in years. Oh, how John and I wished we had worn our leather fleece lined flying clothes for now they told us not to use the B-17's electrical system to heat our electrically heated flying suits. Without the engines running, the electricity would be quickly drained.

In talking about that night later, John and I both agreed we had never in our lives been as miserable as we were that night trying to sleep in the freezing weather because the thin aluminum skin of the aircraft offered no insulation from the cold. I'm sure I didn't sleep thirty minutes all night.

At dawn a staff car came up to the aircraft and told us to get breakfast as a mission was on for Christmas day. I looked around and ice covered everything. The runway was iced over and they were spreading sand and salt on it. The telephone and electric lines looked like mile long icicles. The wings of the B-17s were completely iced over.

"How in the world are they going to de-ice all these aircraft," I asked Lt. Raisin.

"Beats me," he replied. "Let's go to breakfast."

When we got back to the aircraft after breakfast, the de-icer truck was moving from plane to plane spreading about a pint of de-icing fluid on each wing. They didn't have a sufficient supply to properly do the job. "Well," I thought, "after the first two or three B-17s crash on take-off from icing on the wings, they'll call this mission off."

Fortunately, the brass saw that what they were trying to do was impossible and the mission was scrubbed. Since the aircraft were not air-worthy till the ice had melted they brought dozens of army trucks to take us back to our respective bases. Around noon of Christmas day we returned to our barracks and John and I collapsed into our bunks and slept the rest of Christmas day. This was our Christmas in England. A Christmas John and I would never forget.

While the group was at Burry Saint Edmunds, the base at Bassingbourn, home of the 91st. Bomb Group, was virtually deserted and those few men who had remained on the base wondered what had happened to all the aircraft in the group that had taken off that morning. I was told by a good friend, Dale Darling, who was on the deserted base that Christmas Eve, that men unashamedly wept at the loneliness of being one of the few remaining on the base that night before Christmas and not knowing what had happened to all their comrades.

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