

CHAPTER 11 FROM BIRDSONG'S BOOK

Delta Rebel #2

Prepared by Steve and Nancy Perri

The 8th Air Force got a real break on the weather and the last two weeks of June were summertime flying. Went back to Bremen on Sunday, 13 June, and it was relatively mild compared to the that first raid in April. The target was the dock yards, on the west side of the city, and the bombing results were excellent. We saw few enemy fighters, must have been diverted to the diversionary thrust made by other wings up to Kiel. Did see some fighters high above us drop some small aerial bombs, but they were inaccurate. Also got one pass from the side where a ME-110, lobbed two rockets at us, but they too were way off the mark. But the flak was still a "bugaboo". Even Bob Abb said it was terrible. Accurate and plentiful, and the Rebel got some new ventilation ports, but nothing vital. This was Bob's last mission, he had flown several when I was it out-of-commission", and although I was sorry to we him leave the crew, he had been such an integral part, I was glad to see him finish up, and to be able to go back home and pursue that redhead from Boise. Ernie Miller had also gotten in his twenty-five, finishing with Clancy, and Harry Ackerman would fly with me, as we had the same number of missions to go.

It appeared the multiple raids we were throwing at Germany was beginning to confuse the fighter defense, as we got through to our target handily, but the groups that went to Kiel got mauled, and we still lost 26 bombers overall. On 15 June we launched for a target at LeMans, near Paris, but because of cloud cover in the target area, we had to return to Basingbourn with our bombs. Enemy opposition was slight, and this was the first mission to date we returned home the same as when we took off for the raid. No flak damage, no cannon or bullet holes, nor frostbite, all guns and turrets operable, and four engines turning! We had a rough one on the 22nd of June. The synthetic rubber producing plants at Huls, Germany, near the Ruhr, was the target of the main force of the 8th's heavy bombers, with the diversionary force striking Antwerp. The 91st was scheduled with the main force, and the mission was going along as briefed, except we were slow on our climb phase to target altitude, which was 24,500 feet. We crossed the Frisian Islands around 21,000, and damned if we didn't take a flak hit on our right side, damaging the number four engine! We finally had to feather it, and despite pulling full power on the other three engines, were unable to maintain our formation position in the climb. We dropped back to the left side of the formation, trying not to get in the way of the other ships. It soon became obvious that we were going to be left behind, and now was decision time. We were the tail end of the stream, and the groups in front were getting lots of action from the Jerry fighters. We had experienced singular attacks from two or three 190's at that time, so we had to make a run for it back to England, before more fighters appeared on the scene. I told the crew we were turning back, to call off any fighters, no matter how far out, that we were going to dive for the deck, and for the bombardier and navigator to direct us over that island, if they could, the one where the flak battery that had given us the business was sited. I asked the bombardier to set up a bombing run on those guns, if possible, and I would level off in time to give him a stable platform. We were indicating around 280 MPH when we approached the target, and about 14,000 feet, when we made a steady level for the bombardier to synchronize

on the run. I followed the PDI (Pilot Directional Indicator), which is linked with the bombing controls to indicate to the pilot which way, and how much to turn the plane to aim it on the correct course so the bombs would impact the aiming point. That ground battery was really firing fast at us, as the gun crew probably realized they were the "target". Only one fighter had been reported by the tail gunner, and he broke off and headed back for the "big show". He also probably figured he was well within the range of our own escort fighters which were going a little deeper on each raid. The bomb run lasted less than a minute, and at bombs away, I racked the "Reb" over in a steep turn to avoid the flak ahead, and "spoiled" the bomb assessment pictures that were being taken by the K-24 camera that was mounted in the camera compartment. Normally the procedure was to hold the plane straight and level to get the photographic coverage of the bomb explosions. That excessive speed and break-away must have thrown the Kraut gunners off their aim. Kukehesky and Perri called in direct hits on the island, said it was creamed! Randy Petersen said we had quieted their asses! There were cheers and hurrahs by the rest of the crew, and I hoped we had nailed some of those bastards who dared to shoot out our number four engine. The group went on and had an excellent bombing pattern on the rubber producing factories, and the smoke and flames could be seen long after they had left the complex. We lost five more from the 91st, and eighteen overall, on this Huls raid. We got airborne again the next day on a trip to the Villa Coublay Airport in Paris, but the mission was scrubbed because of weather. Brought the bombs back home.

On June 25th I flew my 22nd sortie to Hamburg, and it was amazing to see so many B-17's in one sky. Must have been at least three hundred. The weather again played tricks on us, with the clouds moving in over the target area. Beautiful every place else. Plenty of flak, and a few fighters. After we circled the target area, we dropped through 4th overcast and headed back, careful to avoid the oncoming Fortresses. Flew another frustrating mission on the 26th, again to that airport on the edge of Paris, Villa Coublay. Were unable to get our bombs on the target, because of weather, but this mission counted as a combat raid, in that we had penetrated enemy territory, and had been fired on. We took little damage, but some of the other groups got waylaid by the German fighters. Since the 8th Air Force had been reorganized into wings and divisions, a new type of mass formation had been implemented for better control maneuverability and increased firepower against frontal attacks. The combat wings were made up of three bombardment groups, and were to fly together as a unit. The basic formation of each group remained relatively the same, but rather than have the groups in a trail-type formation, it was decided to stack the groups, with 1000 foot intervals between each group. We had been doing a similar type of formation in our groups, with the three squadrons, one leading, and the other two flying either high or low off the group leader. The same theory was to be applied, now with the groups positioned like the squadron setup only requiring more depth. The groups would maneuver on the bomb run to make individual attacks, but would go back to the wing box position on the withdrawal route. This was a step forward in tactics, as more guns could come to bear on fighter attacks, particularly those from the front, and the bomber stream could be compressed which accommodated timing and less exposure in flak areas, Also, the wing commander could more efficiently manage his forces. However, on the other side of the coin, it was bulky and unwieldy and called for experienced airmanship by the wing and group leaders. We put this new technique in practice on 28 June, on a mission back to submarine base at St. Nazaire, France. This was my "24th", and I was on the schedule to lead the 91st, with my

squadron commander, Major Bishop, riding the right seat in the Rebel. We had been teamed with two of the new groups in our wing, and both had a couple of missions to their credit. We were taken aback somewhat, after looking at the strike order, as it had one of the new outfits leading the wing formation, instead of the 91st. Upon questioning this decision, the wing ops said each group would take turns at leading, and that was the way the "flip" turned up on this initial raid. That "flip" business stuck in my craw, as this sort of gambling had human lives for stakes. If this was a way of appeasing new group commanders, the Wing Commander was at fault, along with his "weak-kneed" staff. My feelings were to let the new groups learn a little about combat operations by following a seasoned outfit, before giving them the responsibility for the wing lead position.

We had run out of "old" bombardiers in the squadron, counting those who had been shot down, and the few who had finished their tour, so we took one of the new ones on the Rebel for this raid, Lieutenant Pat Sullivan, who seemed capable, and had participated in several raids. With Ackerman, the "old pro" navigator with him, I felt he could do the job. We had a replacement crew scheduled to fly on our right wing, and their primary responsibility was to take over on the bomb run if needed, as insurance, in case the Reb's bombardier or crew had a malfunction, or a HUAL (Head-Up- and-Locked) situation. The pilot and crew commander, Jerry Kethley, was a good one, from Oklahoma. He had flown several sorties, and showed promise to qualify as a squadron lead pilot. His bombardier, Jim Cullen, had come to us with an outstanding record, and I would have picked him to go with us, but that violated crew integrity. Sullivan's crew had been broken up because of losses. Kethley's crew, along with Charles Silvernail's were rated the best of the newcomers. The Rebel crew was the last of the originals and with just one more to go after today, the squadron had to get these new crews ready to handle the squadron and group lead positions. Everything was going "clickety-clickety" for the taxi out and takeoff, and the group formed up just like the book reads, and soon we joined forces with the other two groups that made up the wing. We positioned the 91st in the low, left slot, and it was a privilege to lead such a well disciplined, tucked-in flechette of B-17's. I hoped the other two outfits took heed and could get the picture of what a fighting formation should look like. They closed it up somewhat after we crossed the French coastline, and Ackerman said we were pretty much close to being on course, which was a good start. Our 322nd Squadron was flying high to our right, in our group, and the 324th was low. The 322nd had some fine pilots, and I thought of "Tyse" Hardin, Bob Campbell, Jim Baird, Don Bader, Bruce Barton, and others who had made their mark in this war. Bill Crumm, "Red" Cliburn, Ed Gaitley, Bob Morgan and Haley Aycock came to mind when I thought of the 324th. Some of the best combat pilots ever to wear silver wings.

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