

Maurice Sherk's Combat Diary¹

By Maurice D. Shrek

July 31 – [Raid #1 –] After 21 months in the Army, had my first taste of combat today. Raid #1 was over a synthetic oil plant outside of Munich. We saw no enemy fighters—had a protective cover of our own P-51s all the way.

Enroute to the target we passed thru 3 flak barrages. Looking back thru the flak-peppered area over the target, it was hard to believe we had just passed thru such dense fire. In the center of the barrage hung a thick, oily cloud of black smoke—all that remained of one unfortunate [[about ten words illegible—gv]] before it dropped its load. A second ship—crippled by flak—radioed that it was trying for Switzerland.

Our group carried incendiary clusters. Some planes carried pamphlets—one of which I got from a crewman on one of those planes. Actual flying time: 7 hours; from 10 AM until 5 PM. A long mission. We were awakened at 5:30. Briefed at 6:30.

On returning, we found not coffee and cake waiting for us at the equipment hut and got 2 oz. of Scotch per man at our intelligence briefing for a pick-me-up. The coffee and the cake and the Scotch are served after each and every mission. Also a package of gum and a candy bar are given each man before taking off, since we always miss lunch.

Results of the bombing were unknown to us. We bombed thru clouds and [had] a solid undercast all the way over and back.

Aug 1 -- Raid #2 – This time to an airfield at Chartres—about 50 miles from Paris. We were up at 5 AM and airborne at 11:30, finally, after several false starts. Returned at 5 PM.

What we thought would be a “milk run” turned out to be a rough one, at least for our element. Over France, our cloud bank ran out, and there we were exposed and naked to the enemy below. The only flak we met was over the target, though—but that was enough. It would be considered moderate to light as a whole, but intense and accurate as far as our plane was concerned.

We all really sweated that bomb run out. As I was busy discharging chaff at the time, I couldn't observe what was going on and had to create my own mental impression from the interphone conversation.

¹ Technical Sergeant Maurice D. Sherk, combat crewman and radio operator, 322^d Bombardment Squadron, 91st Bombardment Group (Heavy), USAAF. Typescript, 1944. T/Sgt Sherk—as the “old man” of the crew at the “advanced” age of 30 and, therefore, known to his crewmates as “Gramps”—provides a detailed first person account of his 35 missions in the European Theater of Operations in WWII, most of them on B-17G Flying Fortress, *Wee Willie*, 42-31333. *Wee Willie*—with a later crew—had the unfortunate distinction of being the last 91st BG combat loss on 9 April 1945, only a month before the end of the war in Europe. Along with the rest of the 91st BG, the 322d was based at RAF Bassingbourn, Cambridgeshire, near Royston, Hertfordshire, a location also known as AAF Station 121. T/Sgt Sherk's manuscript was in excellent, descriptive prose, and this transcription is true to the original in substance, form, and wording with the exception of correcting obvious typos, making minor punctuation changes, and separating the text into shorter paragraphs for easier reading.

First was the report from the Bombardier that the flak gunners were getting our range [and] the bursts were getting closer. Then came three consecutive “crumps” and the accompanying jolts as the flak burst just beneath the plan, followed by jumbled exclamations from the crew . . . and then, “bombs away.” With this, the Navigator shouted, “Let’s get the Hell out of here!”—immediately followed by three more quick crumps. I was reaching for my parachute by that time, and then we began to draw away from the flak. The last three bursts evidently did the most damage.

The Navigator was struck in the foot by a piece of flak that came down thru a sheaf of maps [and] passed thru the desk top and the heavy zipper on his boot. The fragment was about the size of the first joint of the little finger. Luckily, it broke no bones. Another hunk cut away half of the pilot’s control column, ripping off a bank encircling the column and bursting a fluorescent bulb just below his hands, [w]hile other fragments ripped off a plug on the Bombadiers’s heated suit and the Navigator’s hand switch on his microphone cord. Not to mention the two pieces that whizzed through the waist by the waist gunner—one of them piercing a thick wooden ammunition box on the floor next to the gunner. Fortunately, it was empty.

Aug 3 -- Raid #3 -- {An] important marshalling yard in Alsace-Lorraine—the town of Mulhouse, only 12 miles from Switzerland. Freight traffic from southern France moves thru here.

Another long trip. Thank goodness for the day on the ground yesterday, even though we did spend most of it waiting to take off on a mission that was finally scrubbed.

We crossed the continental coastline over Holland, progressed downward along the edge of Germany, and came in over the target—one close enough to be dangerous—and turned home over France, dodging the known flak areas. At one point over Holland, I could watch out of my window [the] burst of flak—level, but about 100 feet away—that followed us [for] about two minutes. Evidently, it was a battery of seven guns, for there was a pattern of seven bursts’ exploding out there about every five seconds.

Except for the long [bombing] run, this was a comparatively simple mission . . . if there is such a thing. One always goes up expecting the worst—especially now that we have learned to respect flak. We are grateful on our return for easy missions, but there is no way of knowing for sure in advance.

Aug 4 -- Mission #4 -- The longest run to date for us, and about the most spectacular. Enroute to the target, the sky seemed filled with planes. At one point, in the limited field of vision out of my radio room left window, I counted a little better than 100 bombers, exclusive of [the]fighters ranging overhead and far out on the edge of the formation, and the planes in our own formation, as well as the planes directly ahead or behind and on our right side. This was over the Kiel peninsula.

Our target was an experimental plant at Peenemunde, Germany, on the Baltic coast. A few jet-propelled planes are beginning to make their appearance, and many of today’s targets are fields suspected of producing and harboring these planes. The only flak we met was over the target, and none of it was close to us, fortunately.

Two large buildings made up the experimental plant. On one was to be dropped 1000-pounders, and, on the other, 250-pound oil bombs.² We carried oil bombs.

Enroute to the target we passed near the Baltic port of Kiel. The harbor was crowded with ships which they were desperately trying to hide under a smokescreen. On our return, we passed near Rostock. A heavy smokescreen still hung over it, but telltale black smoke there was boiling up from the center of the screen, indicating [our] bombers had been at work there and had left their mark. Off to the southwest, another smokescreen was boiling up thru the clouds, marking another town or installation the Germans were worried for. While the crew is always on the alert for fighters, they were even more on the alert for them today—and so were our own fighters who were accompanying us, circling our formation endlessly while others searched the area. Luck was with us . . . [and] none appeared. Formations further south were hit, though.

Aug 7 -- [Mission #5 --] About the easiest run to date and, perhaps, the most important. {The} first run over the target was a dry run, and the second run is believed to have missed the target. {The} target [was] a fuel dump at Sens, France, on the edge of the Fontainebleau Forest, south of Paris. No flak over the target, and none near us to or from the target. This would probably [have been] called a “milk run,” but one never knows in advance and must constantly be on the alert and under a certain amount of strain—especially on the bomb run—expecting the worst. Bomb load: 500-pound[ers.] We went in over the Cherbourg Peninsula. Those in tail, ball, and nose could see the still battle-scarred beaches [from the Normandy landings, only two months before. gv] On our return to the English coast, we came in by London. [I] went back into the waist to get a look at the barrage balloons—scores of them, almost as far as the eye could see, floating lazily below us—small and silvery. Couldn’t see London . . . too much haze.

Aug 8 -- Mission #6 -- [A] comparatively short one today: Bombed the German front lines just south³ of Caen, facing the British and Canadians. Carried 30 x 500-lb fragmentation bombs.

The British and Canadians have just broken thru on this front. Our job was to help them soften up the German front lines following a night raid by the RAF. We went in at only 14,000 feet and hit the enemy only 1000 from the British-Canadian lines. It was a long bomb run and particularly hard on the nerves.

There wasn’t much flak, but it was concentrated to the point that it was classified intense and accurate for those elements under attack . . . including ours. Our element leader broke in half and went down; no one was observed to get out. Approximately 25 bursts of flak were within striking distance of our plane, [but], luckily we only sustained around six hits. One [went] through a right wing tank, [and] another entered the waist by the ball turret. The one in the wing went completely through it, as did the one in the waist, but I found a couple of ragged chips of flak—the size of a fingernail—ripped from the hunk that passed completely through the waist. There were no casualties from our crew. The ball gunner observed a plane from another formation crash and explode.

² An oil bomb was an incendiary bomb which splashed oil on impact and then ignited

³ Southeast of Bretteville Sur Laize from 322^d Squadron *Dailies*, <http://www.91stbombgroup.com/Dailies/322nd1944.html>.

Aug 9 -- Mission #7 -- Was off to an early start today—briefing at 4 AM. Our target was to be an airport in the Munich area. We carried 500-pound general purpose bombs. The weather over the target was questionable at the time of takeoff but was expected to improve sufficiently for the target to be located by the PFF ship⁴ going out as lead. In the Stuttgart area, the clouds had built up to the 25,000-foot level we were flying [at], and the mission was finally cancelled.

Some confusion evidently developed in the turn . . . about [when] the formation became scattered . . . and for a while we were flying over Germany alone, with only a vague idea of our position. We dropped our bombs into the cloud bank below—a solid cloud bank—and headed in the general direction of home. On reaching the coast of the continent, I got a fix from the HF/DF [high frequency direction finding. gv] section in England for the Navigator to work on.

Fortunately, our wing avoided flak areas going over, and we managed to miss them on our return. Others were not so lucky. The pilot heard over the VHF [radio] that one plane was having to ditch in the North Sea; another announced that it had wounded aboard. We saw another plane heading back with a feathered prop.

Aug 11 – Mission #8 -- This time over Brest. Our wing's target was one of the coastal guns⁵ protecting the harbor. These guns have now been turned landward against our troops who are besieging the city. About 28 targets in all were hit in this area by formations in our raid. I suppose many of them were coastal guns. Our bomb load was 500-pounders.

As it developed, this was our safest mission. [We] flew down the Cornish peninsula, out from Land's End, straight across the Channel, and around the end of the Brest peninsula. The only time we were over enemy territory was the length of our bomb run. No fighter cover went along today as there was little danger from this end, but we were expecting to get hit rather heavily with flak. As it happened, the flak was light, and none came near our formation.

When it became rather certain that we weren't going to have any flak, I relaxed on the "chaff tossing" long enough to get a fleeting look at the harbor just after "bombs away." [I] could see a large ship moored behind a torpedo net, but I suppose the powers-that-be figured it couldn't escape from the harbor anyway. Our own ships have been lying in wait for ships to sneak out under the cover of darkness.

Aug 14 -- Mission #9 -- Another comparatively easy run—that is, no flak or fighters. Target: Metz airfield in Alsace-Lorraine. Results were recorded as excellent. Our bomb load: 12 x 500-lb propaganda bombs (six-foot cylindrical bombs stuffed with pamphlets). This bomb load was calculated to spread over an area of ten miles. Of course, all the other planes had a live bomb load.

⁴ PFF Ship: Specially designated and equipped "pathfinder" aircraft which used Oboe, Gee, H2S and other radio/radar-based navigational aids to identify and mark targets with precision for the remainder of the bomber force. PFF is an abbreviation for "Pathfinder Force." See, e.g., http://www.381st.org/Portals/19/old381st/stories_howland-geeh.html and other excellent work by Gee pioneer, the 91st BG (H)'s John W. Howland.

⁵ Gun position located in Pt. des Espagnoles, according to the 322^d Squadron *Dailies*

Since our pilot has been grounded for almost a week because of battle fatigue, and our navigator is recovering from his flak wound, the only officer aboard on our last two missions from our own crew was our navigator (our co-pilot was dropped before we reached here because he did not mix well with the crew). Needless to say, we breathed an even bigger sigh of relief when these two flights were over and were thankful no emergencies arose. On our last raid, the pilot was on his first mission, but we had a bit of reassurance from the presence of a battle-wise co-pilot.

We were rolled out of base at 4:15 this morning. Had briefing at 5:30 and were airborne at 8. Returned at 2:30. Five hours on oxygen.

Aug 24 – Mission #10 -- After a ten-day lay-off, partly due to bad weather and partly due to losing our pilot (he has been grounded because of some sore of eye trouble originating from combat fatigue). Our target today was an airfield⁶ outside of Leipzig that is supposedly used as a storage depot for planes and parts. We carried 500-pounders. The target was plastered but good!

This was a long run. We were called out at 3:15, were briefed at 4:15, and were in the air by 7:50; and [we] returned to the base at 4:14 PM . . . three hours and 25 minutes in the air.

All previous raids since we have been here have been exceptionally rough ones. On the last one (five days ago—while our crew was in London on our first 48-hour pass), the 401st squadron,⁷ also from our field, lost eight out of twelve planes to fighters on a fly-thru attack. This being our first run into this area, we really sweated it out . . . expecting fighters to come barreling out of the sun, or from behind the clouds, any minute. Fortunately for us, we saw only our own fighters and no flak came near our element.

Aug 25 -- Mission #11 -- Another long mission, this time to another airplane storage depot⁸ at Neubrandenburg, about 80 miles north of Berlin. This time we were nine hours [and] 45 minutes in the air. We flew over the North Sea, across Denmark, over the Baltic Sea, and came down into Germany just west of Peenemunde (our target on the 4th of August).

At the very moment we were passing Peenemunde another group was bombing it again. We had a ringside seat. I went over to my right window to watch it. The target was thoroughly blanketed, and two large fires were started. The flak the bombers had to fly through was so thick that they were hidden from sight at times, but they all came through it . . . miraculously! We could also see the flashes from the flak batteries as they fired. They were off to one side of the target, lined along the beach. The scene was so dramatic that it didn't seem real . . . more like a Hollywood version of a bombing run. But we knew it was real enough and know full well what those crews were sweating as they plodded through that barrage.

After witnessing that raid, we had to turn our attention directly to our own run which was fast catching up. So we entered on our bomb run with the Peenemunde scene fresh on our minds and were even

⁶ Primary target specifically air equipment depot at Kollends; secondary Goslar airdrome. *Ibid.* gv.

⁷ The 91st BG (H) was comprised of four bombardment squadrons (BS): the 322^d, of which T/Sgt Shrek was a member, and the 323^d, 324th, and 401st BS. All were based at RAF Bassingbourn.

⁸ At an FW-190 assembly plant located there. *Source: 322^d Squadron Dailies.*

more tense than usual (if [that is] possible) as the flak drew near. But luck was with us, and none came within striking distance. Our return home was uneventful except for an uneasy few minutes over Denmark when five enemy fighters were spotted in the distance off to one side of our formation. But, before they could maneuver in position for an attack, some of our P-51 escorts came charging up, and the enemy turned tail, disappearing into some nearby clouds. Our target was hit squarely.

Aug 26 – Mission #12 -- A large synthetic oil plant⁹ outside of Essen, Germany. Up at 3 AM for the third consecutive morning. Really felt the loss of sleep. Takeoff time was delayed then, and we got an extra hour and a half of sack time in the plane. A six and a half hour trip.

The Ruhr Valley is really a hot spot—the “Flak Alley” of Europe—which did not help nerves any. As testimony to the respect the Ruhr Valley is held in, we went in at the highest bombing altitude we have yet flown—29,000 feet, almost six miles high—and threw out more chaff than on any previous mission. There was plenty of flak, but our only damage was a hole in one of the fuel tanks. The fumes became so strong that I had to turn off my oxygen regulator which mixes oxygen with inhaled air, and breathe pure oxygen. Even after we got down to 10,000 feet, I had to keep on oxygen, because of the fumes. Luckily, we had an ample supply of oxygen. [The] results of the bombing were unknown to us because of the [altitude] and industrial haze.

Aug 31 -- Mission #13 -- The harbor of Kiel—ships and port facilities.¹⁰ Took off at noon; landed at 8:30 PM.

Kiel is considered a dense flak area, so we were fortunate in having a heavy undercast to hide us visually and plenty of chaff to blind their radar. As a result, the barrage was low, and we only had the thinner top edge to fly through. Over the target—plus a short stretch over Germany when we headed south a bit before turning out to sea again—was the only time we had to worry very much about flak or fighters, since the bulk of the trip was over the North Sea. Our lo . . . [[nearly three full lines—45-60 words--illegible—gv]] . . . Four of the crew bailed out. Three of the four were cut to ribbons by German machinegun fire from the ground. The fourth, the Navigator, made a delayed jump and escaped the machinegun fire and hid out from his would-be capturers, crossing over to allied lines later.

Sept 8 -- Mission 14 -- Target was the synthetic oil section of the huge, three-mile long and mile wide I.G. Farben chemical plant in the center of Ludwigshaven, Germany. We were called out at 4[?] AM, were in the air by 9, and returned at 1345. We carried 8 x 1000-pound bombs and went over the target at 25,000 feet.

The [outbound] trip south to Paris and west to the German border was uneventful, since there are few of the enemy left in France that are not POWs. Over the target, we ran through an intense flak barrage that changed to accurate tracking. Surprisingly, we had only two flak holes: One in the cowling of #3 engine, the other in the left wing just missing a wing tank. From the buffeting we got, I expected the ship looking like a sieve. I lost the weight off my trailing wire antenna to flak.

⁹ At Gelsenkirchen, about 6 miles northeast of Essen. *Ibid.*

¹⁰ The date was probably the 30th and target: Krupp shipbuilding works at Kiel. *Dailies* do not list a mission on the 31st.

We lost one plane in our group. It lost a wing to a burst of flak. Four [crewmembers] were observed parachuting out. {The group} also suffered two casualties from flak fragments. A pilot received a severe scalp wound from a piece of flak that passed through his helmet, and a ball turret gunner was struck in the hip. A rough mission for the short period of time we were over enemy territory.

Sept 10 -- Mission 15 -- A diesel motor plant¹¹ at Gernsbach, Germany, somewhere in the vicinity of Karlsruhe. The formation was made up principally of planes from another bomb group; only a few of our ships were used. Our bomb load was 12 x 500-pound incendiary clusters. The target was hit squarely.

Flak over the target was severe and accurate. Three planes belonging to the other group went down. One blew up in the air, the other two striking the ground. Quite a number of parachutes dotted the sky, indicating that most of the men had escaped from their planes. Six were observed to land over in the "Black Forest" which skirts the town. We were fortunate; our only battle damage was the fixed antenna of my liaison set. It was cut over the target by a fragment of flak. I had to use the trailing wire antenna on our return trip to keep in contact with Air Division's¹² ground station.

The temperature had dropped noticeably on the last few missions, a sure sign that winter is just around the corner. [I] had to use heat from my electric suit the entire trip in addition to the usual cabin heat. [I] also had to continuously flex my oxygen mask to keep it from freezing. When it came time to take off my flak suit, I found a two-inch wide ribbon of ice down the front of my flak suit formed from condensation of my breath as it was exhaled from my mask.

[I also] had trouble on this trip from a loose connection between my oxygen hose and my mask hose: It came loose twice. The first time I noticed it in plenty of time. I observed the flutter-gate in my regulator wasn't moving. The second time, though, was over the target and my back was to the regulator as I was discharging chaff. I was in a bad way before I realized my trouble . . . and even then it was several more seconds before I could find the hose end, [as] it was under my seat. It took my very last ounce of strength to reconnect the hose, and it was several more seconds before I could regain my faculties. The navigator was calling to me on interphone at the time, and, while I was able to reply, when I attempted to explain my delay in answering, my mind failed to produce the words I wanted . . . for a few more seconds.

Sept 13 -- Mission #16 -- Lutzkendorf,¹³ Germany: another synthetic oil plant, south of Karlsruhe. We flew in the high squadron of the lead group and had the rare good fortune of passing over the target before the flak started up. Some of those in back of us had a rather tough time, though.

I understand two planes went down over the target, but they weren't from our field. One of our squadrons lost a ball turret gunner who died from lack of oxygen. His hose connection came loose and

¹¹ Daimler-Benz truck and diesel factory 12 miles south of Karlsruhe. 322^d Squadron *Dailies*. *gv*.

¹² The 91st BG(H) and its four bombardment squadrons had been subordinated to the VIII Bomber Command (later 8th Air Force), 1st Bomb Division (later 1st Air Division) since 13 September 1943 through the intermediate headquarters known as the 1st Bombardment Wing (Heavy).

¹³ Today known as Krumpa or Braunbedra since its 2007 incorporation).

he evidently passed out before he realized it. When he failed to answer an oxygen check, the waist gunner went down to investigate and for some reason couldn't get the turret door up where he could open it, so the pilot dove down to the deck with a couple of P-51s for protection, in hope of reviving the gunner . . . but it was too late.

We flew over the target at 28,000 feet and carried 10 x 500-pounders. On the way over, we passed the Belgian towns of Ghent and Brussels at the comparatively low altitude of 14,000 feet. Along the coast, we could see the large areas flooded by the Germans in their retreat.

On the return, someone had either made a mistake or was overconfident for we had already let down to 14,000 feet before we crossed the Rhine River. We could see tugs towing strings of loaded barges up the river. One ball turret gunner let go a half-dozen bursts at the target.

Sept 19 -- Mission 17 -- Marshalling yard in Hamm, Germany. Target was partially obscured by clouds and was missed by the lead bombardier on our first run. When the group lead tried to maneuver the formation into a 360-degree pass over the target a second time, the formation became split up in the haze and clouds, and for about 20 minutes, we were flying over Germany alone, until a flight was sighted in the distance. On joining them, we learned we were fortunate enough to get back with our own group. While alone, we dropped our bombs in the target area as best we could, [because] on this trip we had a togglier and no bombsight.¹⁴

While lost, we were on the edge of the Ruhr Valley (flak alley), and there was danger we might get right into it, so the navigator directed me to get a "fix" for him to work from . . . but just as I was about to contact the HF/DF station, the formation was sighted.

Flak was light. We flew over the target at 25,000 and carried 10 x 500-pounders.

Sept 25 -- Mission 18 -- Bombed secondary target [using] PFF, which was the industrial area of Frankfurt, Germany. Primary target was to have been visual bombing of marshalling yards on the edge of Frankfurt. We carried 10 x 500-pounders and flew over at 25,000 feet.

We had completed our bomb run and dropped our load, and I was just congratulating myself on our good fortune that there had been no flak, when there was a loud, sharp blast that sounded as though it were right in the plane! This was followed in quick succession by three other equally sharp bursts. It was the first of the flak (we were in the lead group) to come up and was zeroed right on our element. I could be considered intense and accurate and level. The first burst was right off the leading edge of our left wing. It was remarkable no one was hit in the cockpit or nose. One of the subsequent bursts sprayed the tail, and one sizeable fragment came up through the tail, clipping the tail gunner just over the left eye and passed out through the top of his canopy. [Another] piece entered from underneath, also, passing just behind [the tail gunner] and passed out through the top of the fuselage. A third

¹⁴ By this point in the war, and to improve accuracy, most missions relied on "dropping on 'lead'" wherein the bomb release point for the formation was determined by the "lead bombardier." On "lead's" signal, all ships in the formation "toggled" their bomb load. The togglier was not necessarily a trained bombardier but, rather, another B-17 aircrew member or, in some cases, an armourer (in any event, someone highly familiar with the aircraft) who received a week or so of specialized training for the task.

good-sized fragment ripped a hole the size of a baseball through the wooden walk in the waist directly where the waist gunner normally stands and, in passing out the top of the fuselage, it tore off a four-inch length of tubing from the left [[two words illegible. gv]] mount with such force that the section of tubing almost pierced the fuselage also. Most of the rest of the damage was done to the wings. Approximately 25 holes were noted.

The tail gunner¹⁵ was certainly fortunate that he didn't lose an eye; the fragment clipped him only a fraction of an inch over his left eye, knocking his head back as it struck the bone behind his eyebrow. Three stitches had to be taken in the fleshy portion just over his eye. First aid was given him by the waist gunner.

Sept 30 -- Mission # 19 -- [The] target was to be two rail bridges across a canal running through Munster, Germany: The loss of these bridges would close one end of a vital marshalling yard in Munster.

So far as our formation was concerned, the raid was a total failure. The lead bombardier and navigator missed the target by an estimated 15 miles. We bombed at 25,000 feet through broken clouds. Fortunately, a second formation following us over the target did the job effectively.

Since we were so far off to one side of the target, we also missed the flak. Nevertheless, we all returned to our base with the very disgusted feeling one gets with the realization that all the effort and risk was spent for nothing. I imagine the ears of the navigator and bombardier were burning all the rest of that day—they were certainly cursed often enough.

Oct 7 -- Mission #20 -- What a pasting Germany took today! The greatest effort of the war to date. Going across the North Sea, the sky was dark with hundreds of planes. At one time, from the waist window, the gunner counted over 200 planes within his sight . . . and this is only one side of our plane, exclusive of those directly behind, in front, and over the plane!

On reaching the continent, the armada broke up with the various groups heading for their respective targets. Ours was to be a huge synthetic oil plant in Brux, Czechoslovakia,¹⁶ providing bombing was visual. A long run. As it turned out, the target was hidden by 9/10ths clouds, and we bonbed, instead, a marshalling yard somewhere up in Germany, south of Dresden. Our bombs were observed to hit directly on the tracks.

The bomb run was longer than anticipated, and I ran out of chaff before "bombs away," so I had the rare opportunity to look about a bit. There was no flak over the target, so I leaned out into the bomb bay in an effort to see the strike, but [the bombs] passed back out of my field of vision before they had dropped very far.

¹⁵ S/Sgt Dennis J Moore according to the 322^d Squadron *Dailies*.

¹⁶ In all likelihood, this was the *Sudetenländische Treibstoffwerke AG (STW) Maltheuren* brown coal synthesis plant in what is today the city of Most, Czech Republic. The German name for Most (Czech) was Brux; both names mean "bridge."

The bomb bay doors [had] failed to open electrically, and the engineer had to crank them down and up manually. Because of the altitude [and] despite breathing pure oxygen, he had to rest several times in the process and was almost completely exhausted by the time he got the doors closed,

Just after leaving the target, the co-pilot received the warning over VHF that jet-propelled “bandits” were in the area, and we were put on alert. A moment later when he heard the formation declare that it was under attack, we felt we would see fighters for certain. But they never came our way.

Then came the flak. [The] first flak was level at 1 o’clock; the formation turned a few degrees left to avoid it, only to have it crop up dead ahead. For 16 minutes, we were shifting left, then right, to dodge flak bursts, only to have more appear on our new course. At one time, the bursts were right in our element. I observed three bursts between ourselves and the plane on our left. The puffs of jet black smoke seemed about five feet in diameter. It was at this time that we received our five hits. One good-sized fragment lodged against a thick brace in the nose, knocking a rivet out with such force that it went through a sheaf of the navigator’s maps.

Today’s flak was very accurate, although not very intense. At one time, I was able to watch another formation under fire a short distance off from us at 10 o’clock. The first flak—a pattern of eight bursts—broke about two plane-lengths, level, behind the formation. Each successive burst gained a half plane’s LENGTH [*sic.*], and the fifth burst was right in the formation. Fortunately for them, the enemy was able to get only one more burst among them before they pulled out of range.

We put in a full day today. We were awakened at 2:30 AM and didn’t set foot back inside the barracks until 5 PM. Bomb load was 10 x 500-pounders, and bomb altitude was 25,500 feet.

Oct 9 -- Mission #21 -- Target was the ball bearing plant at Schweinfurt.

It was a grimly silent crowd of crewmen that filed out of the briefing hut this morning. We were all thinking of an earlier raid of this target that is remembered because 90 Forts were lost on that mission—most of them to fighters. It is considered quite a vital target, since most of Germany’s ball bearings are manufactured here. And even more important now that Sweden has virtually suspended exporting bearings to Germany . . . Germany’s only other important source of supply. We really expected a rough trip.

The target was obscured by a solid undercast of clouds, and bombing was done blind with PFF. Flak was barrage type, and chaff had so effectively blinded the enemy’s radar that the barrage was low and ineffective. No enemy fighters ventured near our group, at least. Returning from the target, the interphone buzzed with the enthusiasm of an elated crew congratulating each other on getting off of a hot spot so easily.

We carried 10 x 500-pound general purpose bombs and bombed from 27,500 feet. Were on oxygen for 5 hours.

Oct 15 -- Mission #22 -- Target: Cologne. Deep within the Ruhr Valley (flak alley)—the second consecutive day to be hit by all of the raiding forces of the 8th Air Force. Four marshalling yards within the two to be combed simultaneously. Bomb load was 14 x 250-pound demolitions and 4 x 500-pound

incendiary clusters. We bombed through broken clouds. A ball turret gunner who had a momentary glimpse of the town said it was literally blanketed by bomb flashes.

This was a rough mission, and hardly a plane came back undamaged. The waist gunner on another crew in our bay [in the barracks] had a foot shot away. The radio operator on the same ship was killed outright. The crew was flying in lead position, so the crew's regular operator was replaced on this trip by a lead operator. It was the lead operator's next to last trip . . . a fine fellow—had a wife and kid.

Another ship received an almost direct hit right next to the ball turret, caving in the side of the ship and leaving a gaping hole and dotting the rest of the waist with hundreds of other holes of assorted sizes. The waist gunner escaped—remarkably—with only a slight wound, but the ball turret gunner received a severe leg wound. His view plate was blown out, exposing him to a sub-zero blast which he had to ride all the way back to the base, as the turret was jammed in the operating position, and he couldn't be cranked up manually. On top of having to ride the turret in for a landing—a highly dangerous feat in itself—the gunner also suffered from frostbite as a result of his freezing ride, as well as his wound.

Another ship from our field was crippled over the target, and it is hoped it was able to make friendly territory. Someone bailed out, though, directly over the target, opening his chute in a hail of flak rather than taking a delayed [opening] jump, thereby exposing himself not only to flak, but possible anoxia from lack of oxygen at that altitude (25,000 feet).

As for ourselves, we had a few breathless moments, also. A flak hole through #1 engine necessitated feathering its prop, but at that moment the pilot answered no calls and the co-pilot noticed him hunched over. Fearing him hurt, he called for aid from the navigator (the oxygen mask conceals all facial expressions). All this we could hear over the interphone. Immediately afterwards, the plane went into a diving 18-degree turn out of the formation, leveling off only to go immediately into another! By this time, I had my parachute in hand and was preparing to shed my flak suit before making my way back into the waist in preparation for the call to bail out . . . which seemed inevitable in the face of the past few seconds. I visualized the pilot seriously injured or dead and the co-pilot struggling with shattered controls.

Not a word came over the interphone now, for no one dared to speak for fear of blocking out the bail out call. At the last second before I pulled the ripcord on my flak suit, the ship leveled off, and I hesitated a few more long seconds while the ship flew along erratically on fairly level keel. Then voices started up again on the interphone, this time in a normal tone, and I knew everything was under control again. As it developed, what had seemed to be a crisis was really the result of a misunderstanding. The pilot's interphone cord had been cut by flak at the same instant the #1 engine was hit, and he was hunched over reaching for the interphone cords in a frantic attempt to reestablish communication at this critical moment. The co-pilot, in trying to assist the pilot, lost control of the plane . . . hence, the gyrations.

Every time we cross the front lines, I hear a myriad of voices breaking in on the First Air Division frequency, usually using the phonetic alphabet. On the way to the target today, I tuned in one of the voices and heard an English voice inquiring of an observer if he had spotted the enemy tanks reported

to be in the neighborhood. This was over the British and Canadian lines in Holland, and the garble of voices I had been hearing was from walkie-talkie radios of the ground forces on the front lines.

On the return trip, the waist gunner spotted a downed Fort just outside of a small Dutch town. From our altitude, it looked undamaged—or rather seemed to have made a successful forced landing.

Our bombing altitude today was 25,000 feet. A medic is reported to have seen 14 other bodies of gunners from fields in this vicinity¹⁷ when he took the bodies of a gunner and radio operator to a morgue in Cambridge.¹⁸ All killed on today's raid.

Oct 22 -- Mission #23 -- Target: Tank factory in Brunswick, Germany, PFF bombing. Bomb load consisted of 6 x 500 pound general purpose incendiary clusters.

[I] rode in lead squadron and was over target before flak began to come up in appreciable quantities. Fighters equipped with automatic chaff dispensers went into the area ahead of us and did a good job of confusing enemy radar. We threw our own chaff, as usual, to keep up this disturbance.

This was another raid with a happy ending for us. I don't believe anyone or any plane from our base suffered injury or damage. Quite different from our last raid. Besides extensive damage to our planes on that one, we also lost two men and suffered six casualties. Understand a nearby base brought back 60 casualties.

Near the English coast, on the return, we crossed a strange cloud formation. All the way back, we had a solid, thick undercast that looked like curdled milk. Near the coast, the layer of clouds abruptly ended in a sharply defined cliff-like formation stretching off in each direction as far as the eye could see. The cloud layer must have been several hundred feet thick. Another equally solid undercast continued over England at a lower altitude. It was just as though the cloud layer over England had broken from that over the channel and dropped several hundred feet without disturbing its formation.

Oct 30 -- Mission #25 -- PFF target: Marshalling yards at Hamm. Bomb load: 18 x 250-pound general purpose. Altitude: 28,000 feet.

Chaff-carrying P-51s preceded us over the target again, and each bomber carried a double load of chaff again, also. The result was moderate, inaccurate flak . . . much to our relief.

Not all the formations fared as well as ours, though. One ship from another squadron at our field (323d) had its engineer wounded twice in one leg and two engines knocked out. Before reaching home base, a third engine failed, and the crew crash landed at a fighter base. We were really sweating this crew out as we knew them all personally—they went through OTU [operational training unit] at Sioux City with us and were the only other crew to come to this field with us. Before they were able to make

¹⁷ East Anglia and the Midlands were rife with AAF stations during this period, with several within ten miles of RAF Bassingbourn.

¹⁸ The 322^d suffered no KIA during the month of October 1944; the 91st Bomb Group lost 4 personnel MIA; 4 personnel WIA; zero KIA for 15 October. *Source:* 322^d Squadron *Dailies*, which includes statement in October entries on Group statistics. Unless the reported KIAs were on another group's aircraft that made an emergency landing at Bassingbourn (which is possible), the morgue story appears to be scuttlebutt.

a standard approach for landing at that fighter base, the fourth engine quit under the strain, and they had to come in directly before they had time to let down their wheels . . . hence the crash landing.¹⁹

Nov 2 -- Mission #26 -- Target: Synthetic oil plant at Merseberg. Carried propaganda bombs loaded with an almanac-type note book and two-page newspaper. Altitude 27,300 feet.

This mission developed into the greatest air battle of the war to date. In [the intelligence] briefing, we were warned to expect them, and as we crossed the Dutch coast, we were warned again that enemy fighters were up in the target area. As we went into the bomb run, a couple of enemy fighters were observed spotting us, and even before we were out of the flak, fighters were spotted streaming up through the undercast. For twenty minutes, we were under attack by over 50 enemy fighters, composed mainly of FW-190s, a couple of Me-109s, and a couple of jet-propelled jobs [and] without benefit of friendly fighter support . . . they were busy repelling an attack against themselves.

Of all [the] times [to be] flying “Wee Willie” with the waist guns and waist armor plate removed! Some ranking ground officer in Group had gotten the hare-brained idea of experimenting on our ship . . . exactly for what, I am not sure—must have been for more speed or distance. As a result, I could do nothing but look on for the entire attack. Saw three planes (Forts) go down from our formation in flames, and three men bailed out (all men from my bay). One ship was #3 from our element (the third time we have lost a ship from our own element. We were #2 and out on the wing and so were left without cover on either side of us—and no waist guns!

The more I think about it, the more amazed I am that we were not brought down, also. At two different times we could see lone crippled Forts straggling far behind and below us being subjected to punishing, continuous attacks from groups of enemy fighters who swarmed around them, sensing a kill. Our ball turret gunner and tail gunner are claiming two FW-190s apiece, and our top gunner put in a claim for a jet-propelled plane that he knocked out of a vertical climb. Both the ball and tail gun barrels were burned out, and the ball ran out of ammunition while still under attack. To add to our distress, we had to run through two more gauntlets of flak after leaving the target, because of navigational errors.

Our group lost six of the twelve ships it put up. Six men were from my bay. I lost over a dozen close friends on this raid, including the navigator of our original crew who had been transferred to the 323d squadron. I don’t know how many wounded men were brought back, but I do know [of] one ship that brought its tail gunner and two waist gunners back wounded. Just learned that we passed over Brunswick, Hanover, [[two words illegible. gv]] on our return due to navigational error and were subjected to antiaircraft fire from all tree towns—and each, in itself, is considered a formidable flak area!

In spite of the fighters and all the flak, “Wee Willie” came back with only two holes. The fighters were so determined that they were coming in as close as 75 feet. The crosses on their wings were plainly

¹⁹ Some confusion here. The 323^d Squadron *Dailies* report all ships “returned to base safely” that day for the week prior, although 2 Nov was bad for the 323^d when six crews failed to “RTB” (return to base). *Source: Squadron Dailies*, <http://www.91stbombgroup.com/Dailies/323rd1944.html>

visible. The ball turret gunner on at least one occasion could see even the pilot in the ship. Incidentally, one of his "kills," as it came under the tail . . . blew up! The other he had the satisfaction of knocking down was the fighter that shot down our lead ship. He caught it as it was handing [*sic.*] in its nose firing up into the belly of the lead ship. This was the third time ships have been shot down in our own element. Each time we have been in the #2 spot. The lost ships were in 1, 2, & 2, respectively.²⁰

Nov 5 -- Mission #27 -- [The] target was the marshalling yards in the center of Frankfurt. Bomb load: 6 x 1000-pounders. Altitude: 26,500 feet.

This is the first time our crew had returned to a target we had previously visited. We were all set for fighters again, but fortuna[tely we saw none although] they were reported in the target area, that is, jet [[word illegible. gv]] were reported and contrail of one in a vertical climb was observed. For the first time, the target was not completely hidden by clouds, and the ball turret gunner observed that the bomb strikes were right on the target. Although flak was intense and accurate on our last trip here, it was only moderate and inaccurate for us, and we returned home undamaged. Others were not so lucky, though.

On the lead ship of the 323rd squadron, the Mickey²¹ operator was killed and the radio operator wounded, and the ship suffered major damage. Over Holland, the sky was littered with ships when our returning formations passed a large RAF force just going in. What a sight! Too bad a camera couldn't take it all in. Seeing the sky literally darkened with bombers like this, and realizing the tonnage of destruction they carried, makes one wonder how the Germans can hold out under it.

Nov 9 -- Mission 29 -- German front lines ahead of our troops in the Metz area. A tactical mission similar to the Caen mission.²² The front line was marked for us by a line of flak sent up by our own artillery, bursting well below us . . . and also a radio beam paralleling the front lines.

Our particular target was to be the Metz fortress that has been featured in the news lately. Our ground troops had fought their way into portions of this bastion only to be forced out again. So much of it is underground that our artillery has been unable to knock it out. For this purpose, we are carrying eight semi-armor piercing 1000-pounders. But, since nothing has appeared in the papers about the fort's being hit or damaged, I am afraid we missed it.

We couldn't observe the results, as we had to bomb blind . . . using some new equipment. Much to our relief, we went in this time at 24,500 feet, instead of 14,000 as at Caen. As far as our group was concerned, the flak was light and inaccurate. But others weren't so lucky, as the news article indicates 14 bombers were lost.

Nov 16 -- Mission 29 -- Another tactical operation in support of the troops. This time we hit German gun emplacements in from of General Patton's 3rd Army, northwest of Aachen, Germany. Bomb load

²⁰ Perhaps "1, 3, and 3," since the author clearly puts *Wee Willie* in the #2 slot.

²¹ Mickey was the codeword that referred to H2S, H2X, and more loosely, the PFF. See note 3, above.

²² See the August 8th mission to Caen, above.

was 30 x 250-pound fragmentary bombs. Again we went in at 24,500 feet, using the same set-up as the last raid. Flak for our wing was light and inaccurate.

Our ball turret gunner was able to get a glimpse of the bomb strike through the broken clouds and said the whole area was blanketed with bomb flashes. It must have been pretty rough, to put it mildly, on the Germans below. On return to our base, we were glad to learn that our troops moved in on the enemy within 15 minutes after our bombardment.

We returned over France at 10,000 feet, and some of the old battlefields and bomber airfields were clearly visible. I went back into the waist near the French coast to get a better look at some of the really battered spots.

Nov 26, 44 -- Mission 30 -- Railway viaduct near Bielefeld, Germany. Bomb load: 8 x 1000-pounders. Altitude: 21,000 feet.

As no flak guns were reported at the target, we had hoped for a comparatively easy mission, but, just as we reached our IP,²³ we were intercepted by approximately 60 Me-109s. Again, we had to battle it out without benefit of fighter support; they had evidently been drawn into battle somewhere else in the near vicinity.

This time we had waist guns,²⁴ and went back to man the left one. The first I knew of the attack was when the top turret cut loose against the fighters on their first pass from the tail. I looked out my window in time to see two fighters dive past. While making my way back into the waist, the fighters made a second pass, also from the tail. Their third and last attack was a fly-thru attack on the high formation. I had no opportunity to fire as I could not fire into our own high formation, and the fighters passed behind the horizontal stabilizer as they passed out of the high group.

No ships were lost from our squadron, but four ships were lost from the other two squadrons' participating. I saw one go down. It was the same story. First, it was crippled and had to drop behind where it was immediately pounced upon by two [Me]-109s. After two passes by each of the fighters, the Fort suddenly nosed over into a vertical dive trailing a plume of smoke, which almost immediately broke into flames. Only one chute appeared. After diving about 10,000 feet, the ship broke apart, and each part was ablaze.

Nov 27 -- Mission 31 -- Marshalling yards in a small town about five miles out of Strasbourg. Bomb load: 10 x 500-pounders and 2 x 500-pound incendiary clusters. Nine-tenths of Strasbourg was already occupied by troops of our 7th Army and the French 1st, and our raid was to disrupt the enemy's attempt to reinforce this front. There was no flak over the target, but some very accurate bursts were put up by flak barges each time we crossed the Rhine River. One ship in our formation had its #4 engine hit and had to feather that prop. Immediately after bombs away, we were notified bandits were in the area, and a couple of minutes later observed fighters in a dog fight over a formation off at 11 o'clock.

²³ An IP is the "Initial Point" in a bombing run, a predefined point from which to begin the approach to target and prepare for target acquisition, the last step in the run before weapons release.

²⁴ See November 2nd mission, above. Presumably, the waist armor had also been reinstalled.

Our fighter support was able this time to drive off the enemy before he was able to close with us. The co-pilot observed one fighter knocked down.

We bombed at 28,000 feet; temperature was -44 degrees. We had another really good look at the Alps on this trip . . . the first time since our raid on Mulhouse [August 3], which is now in our hands). Really rugged country.

On yesterday's mission (or rather the day before yesterday), we had the rare opportunity to see V-2 rockets' taking off from the German-held Dutch coast, bound for England as part of the Germans' terror campaign against the English. These rockets are estimated to be 40 to 50 feet long and are thought to reach altitudes of around 50,000 feet.²⁵ We were slightly over 20,000 feet when they came up about 25 miles away. They came up through the undercast below us, climbing at about 70 degrees at a terrific rate and seemed to disappear in the sky above. We never saw them level off. We never actually saw the rockets—three in number---only their contrails.

Nov 29 -- Mission 32 -- Oil refinery at Misberg.²⁶ Bomb load: 12 x 500-pounders. Bombing altitude: 24,500 feet.

A grim crowd filed out of the briefing hut, expecting the worst. The target is right in notorious fighter country. Extra strong emphasis was placed by the briefing officers on the necessity that we be doubly alert for fighters and that our guns and turrets be in top working order.

As we started out over the North Sea, the sky was thick with bombers heading out for their respective targets. Much to our relief, the mission went off smoothly: No enemy fighters, only mild and inaccurate flak [[three to four words missing. gv]] a few scattered bursts from the coastal batteries in the German-held part of Holland [[three to four missing words. gv]] . . . into Germany, we received some comfort from the unusually large fighter escort accompanying us, but it also made us all the more aware that trouble was really expected. In fact, our target was deliberately chose[n] in the fighter belt in an attempt to lure the Luftwaffe up into another decimating battle.

We, in the bombers, were the decoy . . . not too comfortable a feeling! Jerry must have scented the trap, though, for he didn't accept the challenge, and the fighters not riding herd over us had to content themselves with strafing targets of opportunity. On our return, we could see them ranging to and fro over the landscape below us.

Dec 4 -- Mission 33 -- Marshalling yard in Kassel. PFF. Bomb load: 4 x 500-pound incendiary clusters and 5 x 500-pound general purpose bombs. Altitude: 24,500 feet. Temperature: -40 degrees.

Because of some confusion over whether to bomb the primary or the secondary target, we spent valuable time wandering about in hazardous territory. Fortunate for us, the Luftwaffe must have been preoccupied elsewhere, for we certainly must have given them ample opportunity to engage us. And most of us expected the worst and kept a sharp lookout for the enemy, which we felt certain would

²⁵ Actually off by an order of magnitude, but few on the Allied side knew at the time. Most references cite altitudes of 290,000 to 675,000 feet, depending on trajectory. As used against England, it went exoatmospheric (above 250,000 ft). gv

²⁶ Possibly the Deurag refinery at Misberg. Misberg is about seven miles east of Hannover.

appear after our excessive stalling around. We were out for nine hours on this trip—not exceptional, but, because of the stalling around, this is about the only time that I was particularly conscious of the weight of the passing hours.

Flak was light and low.

Dec 15 -- Mission 34 -- [The] objective was a former locomotive works²⁷ at Kassel [which was] now producing tanks. Bomb load: 10 x 500-pounders and two 500-pound incendiary clusters. Bombing altitude: 29,700 feet. Temperature at altitude: -47 degrees.

By contrast to our last mission to Kassel [eleven days ago], this was only a seven hour trip [with] four on oxygen. Instead of the usual procedure of returning by a route similar to the route in, we went in over the Zuider Zee—a common route in and out of the continent—and made a circuitous return back through France. Because of increased enemy fighter activity, it has been increasingly necessary to make greater diversions in our routes to confuse the enemy.

Contrails were the heaviest I have known. We had a strong fighter escort this trip, and the sky is laced with contrails everywhere I could see—the straight, thick ones of the bombers and the curving, graceful trails of the fighters. The trails were persistent and were still hanging in the air long after the planes had passed.

The strong forces of fighters was a very reassuring sight. Flak over the target was moderate and inaccurate (we bombed PFF), but one of our planes is missing. No one saw it go down or drop out of the formation, and no calls were heard from it.²⁸ This was our first mission since returning from the flak home [Sic. ?]

Dec 29 -- Mission 35 -- Target was to be a supply dump²⁹ in the Koblenz area. A tactical mission as have been most of the recent raids in an attempt to hamper the big German break-through in Belgium and Luxembourg.

The lead bombardier failed to line up on the target the first time across and, after making a 360 degree turn for a second try, was interfered with by another group coming in and pulled away a second time without dropping bombs. Rather than making a third attempt, we chose an unidentified town as a target of opportunity.

There were no enemy fighters, but flak over the front lines was accurate and intense as far as we were concerned. While not heavy, it was tracking fire, and almost every burst was right in our formation. Our plane suffered about a dozen hits that will put it in the hanger long enough to replace the horizontal stabilizer and right wing tank. Also, the automatic pilot control to the tail was severed. The flak was close enough for the bursts to be heard over the roar of our own engines, and several times flak splinters showered the waist, sounding like someone tossing handfuls of pebbles against the ship. As

²⁷ The Henschel Engineering Works located in the northern suburbs of the city. *Source: Squadron Dailies.*

²⁸ One aircraft had engine problems and landed safely near Brussels. *Ibid.* This is probably the missing plane.

²⁹ While the Squadron *Dailies* describe a similar sortie with the 360 degree turns, etc, the assigned target was apparently Wittlich communications center, about 50 miles SW of Koblenz. *Ibid.*

we jockeyed for position over the target, the flak was sporadic rather than continuous, indicating that we were being fired on by individual guns as we came into range rather than by batteries.

Operations altitude: 22,000 feet; bomb load: 18 x 250-pound GPs³⁰

I was checked out on my last mission in a spirited fashion.

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Post Script added by editor—Technical Sergeant Maurice D. Sherk successfully completed his 35-mission ETO tour and returned to the Zone of the Interior (Continental United States) as noted below:

**PERSONNEL COMPLETING OPERATIONAL TOURS
During December, 1944**

	Date Completed
Capt. Walton, Louis M.	4 Dec. 1944
1/Lt Sparkman, Donald W.	4 Dec. 1944
S/Sgt Stronach, Leland	5 Dec. 1944
S/Sgt Hofferter, Edward	5 Dec. 1944
T/Sgt Malon, Howard F.	5 Dec. 1944
S/Sgt Schockley, Andie W.	5 Dec. 1944
T/Sgt Blakely, Samuel B .	5 Dec. 1944
S/Sgt King, Charles P.	5 Dec. 1944
S/Sgt Waller, Edgar N, .	5 Dec. 1944
Capt. Gordon, Thomas H.	5 Dec. 1944
1/Lt Swisher, John E.	5 Dec. 1944
1/Lt Maged, Mitchell	5 Dec. 1944
S/Sgt Kandior, John W.	24 Dec. 1944
T/Sgt Cairns , Lee M.	24 Dec. 1944
Capt. Schlaich, Thomas W.	12 Dec. 1944
1/Lt Trent, William H.	29 Dec. 1944
1/Lt Daigle, Joseph G.	29 Dec. 1944
T/Sgt Sherk, Maurice D.	29 Dec. 1944

Source: 322^d Squadron Daily Report December 1944 monthly summary.

Transcribed and edited by Dr Greg Varhall

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³⁰ General Purpose (GP) bombs.