

A Disappointing Ending

by Irl Mitchell (777th)

In my opinion, the B-24 was a well-designed plane that did its intended job in a time when appearance was not important, but the results were.

I was a member of the 777th squadron. My plane was designated "Yellow L — Love". As a member of John Luque's crew, my flight position was the ball turret. It was the usual custom that German fighters never attacked our formation in the vicinity of the target. They relied on their ground anti-aircraft guns to do the job at that time. During this moment, I usually watched our bombs drop all the way to their objective.

It was Monday, 14 August 1944. Our assigned target was the St. Tropez area gun emplacements on the southern tip of France. Our mission was in support of the invasion of southern France. Enroute to the target we had flown over hundreds of ships. That invasion fleet would arrive the next day at south France, on Tuesday, 15 August 1944.

There were many times we were chosen as "lead" ship in our squadron; however, this time we were right wing ship on the lead plane. As we approached the target I noticed that we were maybe 300 yards to the left of the targeted gun emplacement. I called to the bombardier on the intercom and so advised. He, of course, advised me that we could not pullout of formation and that we would drop our bombs when the lead plane did so.

It was disappointing to me — to see our 500 pounders fall so short of the target and land in the sea. Disappointing because we had had so many other missions much more important to the war effort. It was our crew's 50th mission, too. What a conclusion to a fine record. It was our 50th mission - and we had killed fish!

Our pilot, I always felt, was, the G.I. Joe type. He always did everything by the book. However, on this day our 50th and last mission, we received an unbelievable surprise. As we entered our final approach for landing at Pantanella, the pilot pushed the throttles forward, ordered the landing gear retracted and advised the tower that we had to go around.

Prior to leaving that morning on the mission, someone in the crew had arranged for a second Very flare pistol and extra flares. During the buzzing and landing both

waist gunners were firing many flares out both waist windows. Flares of all colors were discharged into the sky around us and all of them landing in the wheat fields that surrounded our landing strip, setting many fires. (I always felt sorry for the Italians who farmed the wheat - of course it was there to help secure the view of the field.)

Upon landing, and while taxiing to our parking spot, firetrucks, ambulances and a host of jeeps with Operations personnel were following behind. At the hardstand they inquired if anybody was injured, dead or what was wrong? Captain Luque replied that we had just finished our 50th mission - they seemed to accept this explanation — but the next morning there was a notice on the Operations bulletin board, "TO ALL FLIGHT CREWS - IN THE FUTURE THERE WILL BE NO MORE OF THIS ACTION ALLOWED."

That evening the mess sergeant planned a special dinner for our crew. He served, not C-Rations but T-Bone Steaks.

The day started out as a disappointing ending to an otherwise successful tour of duty - but with a memorable surprise landing and a darn good dinner.

All of our crew trained together, flew our plane overseas, flew our missions together and all ten of us returned home together. That, in itself, is quite an accomplishment.