

Bloody Day Over Vienna

By George Krynovich (778th)

I flew 28 B-24 Liberator combat missions over Europe during World War II. My seventh mission is one I will always remember.

Prior to my story, I must identify some important data of the 464th Bomb Group, 55th Wing, Fifteenth Air Force. We were based at Pantanella Air Field in Southern Italy.

During a maximum effort mission, our Group could launch 48 Bombers. Each of our four Bomb Squadrons provided 12 crewed aircraft. The normal Squadron formation was a six-aircraft element. The lead aircraft had an aircraft flying off his left wing and right wing. The other three aircraft trailed directly behind the lead aircraft.

The B-24 was equipped with ten 50 caliber machine guns. Two synchronized guns were installed in the nose, upper, lower ball, and tail turrets, and one single 50 caliber gun was mounted in each of the two aft fuselage waist windows. The flight engineer operated the upper turret, and the radio operator manned one of the waist window guns. You can only imagine the firepower generated from a tight formation of 48 Liberators against a German fighter attack.

Each B-24 aircraft was manned by ten individuals. In my crew for this particular mission was, myself, pilot; Arnold Klimpel, co-pilot; George Stockinger, navigator; Ellis R. Loree, bombardier; Robert W. Hemmeger, flight engineer; Charles T. Brockman, radio operator; Olin D. Mullinax, nose turret gunner; Anion Richardson, tail turret gunner; Bill M. Henry, ball turret gunner and Hubert E. Gallagher, waist gunner.

The aircraft was powered by four Pratt and Whitney R-1 830 turbo-supercharged air cooled radial engines. The 3,600 gallon wing installed fuel tanks were self-sealing. Since the B-24 was not pressurized, the crew wore oxygen masks when flying above 10,000 feet of altitude. Our normal bombing altitude was between 20,000 and 24,000 feet.

Our aircraft identified themselves by squadron letter call signs. My 778th Bomb Squadron (B/S) aircraft was "White Victor." The 464th Bomb Group insignia was painted on the outer vertical tail assembly. Each squadron aircraft had a large,

capital letter painted on each side of the aft fuselage in the designated color for that squadron. My aircraft had a large, white "V" painted on the fuselage. The 776th Squadron color was red, the 777th was yellow, the 778th was white, and the 779th was black. My call sign, "White Victor," identified my B-24 as a 778th Squadron aircraft. For military security, we never used the aircraft serial number in any radio communications.

Now, I can begin my story regarding our bombing mission of October 17, 1944. During the early morning briefing, our Bomb Group Commander, Colonel Schroeder, announced our target as Vienna. Most of us uttered, "Aww...shit." Vienna targets were defended by 196 artillery flak weapons and 50 fighter aircraft. This would be no "Milk Run." The weather briefing added potential flight problems enroute, and cloudy conditions over the target area.

After the briefing, Col. Schroeder stated "We would get to the target, come hell or high water." From the briefing we were trucked to the Personal Equipment Supply. We were issued our parachutes; plastic, boxed escape kits; flak helmets and chest protectors. Our "mummy-type" pilot seats were made of steel which protected our back areas. The flak vests and helmets protected our chest and head areas.

Col. Schroeder's Lead Aircraft took off at 0815; 30 more of our aircraft followed at 30 second intervals. The weather started to turn bad during our enroute climb over the Adriatic. Five of our aircraft aborted the mission after losing formation contact due to cloud conditions. Formation climbing through overcast on Flight Instruments was an extremely dangerous maneuver. In brief, during this maneuver, the lead aircraft flew straight ahead. The right-wing pilot turned 10 degrees right, while the left-wing pilot turned 10 degrees left, while climbing through the overcast. Upon reaching visual flight conditions, the aircraft regrouped back to a tight formation.

The Bomb Group ran into deteriorating weather, prior to arriving at our IP (Initial Point), where the bomb run starts. This forced Col. Schroeder to descend from our briefed 23,000 foot bombing altitude to 21,000 feet. This caused us to miss our briefed IP and resulted in a much longer flak exposure over the target. At this time, our Group size was down to 23 aircraft. For clarity, at the IP the bombardier of the lead aircraft, using the Norton Bomb Sight, controls the autopilot, which steers the formation, compensating for wind drift, until "bombs away." The pilot

closely controls the airspeed and altitude. During this bomb run, our primary target was obscured by clouds. Col. Schroeder decided to circle over Vienna and reposition our Group for a second bomb run on an alternate Vienna target. This maneuver further extended our exposure to the intense flak. Immediately, after bombs away, Col. Schroeder took control of the formation as we exited the target area.

Now, my story focuses on what happened to my crew. I was checking-out a new squadron pilot, Arnie Klimpel, who was flying in the co-pilot seat. Generally, a newly assigned pilot flew his first mission with the squadron's Operation Officer and his second with a more experienced squadron pilot. After the second mission, he starts flying as pilot with his regular crew.

The intense flak started at the IP and continued for at least 17 minutes. The flak was so thick, it appeared as a huge black cloud. My nose turret gunner, Olin Mullinax's view of the intensive flak explosions had to be the most frightening experience imaginable. The accuracy of the flak batteries increased dramatically once their radar locked us in at 21,000 feet. During the bomb run, there is little that the crews can do except "hang on" and pray.

First episode. My tail gunner, Arvon Richardson, reported to me on the aircraft interphone, "Fire in the bomb bay of White Able," which was flying directly behind us. I only heard, "Fire in the bomb bay," and ordered my navigator, Lt. Stockinger, to investigate the fire. He connected his oxygen mask to a portable oxygen bottle and proceeded from the upper crew deck to the lower bomb bay catwalk area. The catwalk is a narrow keel beam structure in the Liberator, that is approximately 12 inches wide.

Lt. Stockinger's oxygen hose became disconnected, and he passed out on the catwalk. After repeated interphone calls to him, I realized he was in trouble. I ordered my flight engineer, Sgt. Hemmeger to the bomb bay area to check on the navigator's problem. Sgt. Hemmeger put on his walk-around oxygen mask and proceeded aft. He found our navigator collapsed on the catwalk. He dragged Lt. Stockinger to the upper deck and connected a new oxygen bottle to Lt. Stockinger's oxygen mask. This revived our navigator and he regained consciousness.

When Lt. Stockinger came to, he noticed that Sgt. Hemmeger was not at his upper turret baffle station. He started berating the engineer for not being in his turret. I

quickly stopped that with an interphone command to him to "back off" on his lecture. On my crew, the navigator's additional duty was to supervise the gunners.

Sometime, during the bomb run, a piece of shrapnel slammed into my lower right leg, and it went completely numb. I became concerned that all was not well when I depressed the left rudder and my right knee did not move back. I called my bombardier, Ellis Loree, from his nose position, to come up to the cockpit. When he arrived, I said "Ellis, please check my right leg." I was too afraid to look down for fear that I might see a "bloody mess." Ellis bent over, looked under my seat and noticed that my right leg was pushed back.

Ellis reached under the seat and gently pulled my leg forward and slightly out. Now he could see, and I could visualize what had happened. The shrapnel was a direct hit on my hard, plastic escape kit. I always stowed the kit in the right leg pocket of my flight suit. Luckily, the shrapnel did not penetrate my leg. Ellis massaged the leg and gradually feeling returned and I could again move the leg.

Ellis then explains to me that he had been hit in the head and that the flak had knocked his flak helmet off of his head. He also suffered no injuries.

After departing the target area, I asked our engineer to give me a report of our structural damages. After his assessment, he reported numerous flak penetrations in the aft fuselage area, which had destroyed the internal oxygen supply system. He also reported that the bomb bay area had extensive damage. Our hydraulic system, which was primarily located in that area, was severely damaged. With the loss of hydraulics, we prepared for manually cranking the trailing edge flaps down and for cranking the landing gear down.

Our most critical loss was in the hydraulic brake system. All of our hydraulic oil had been lost. The engineer, as a last resort, solicited urine from the gunners and used it to replace the lost oil in the brake accumulator emergency system. We didn't know if it would work.

Approaching Pantanella Air Field, I reported my hydraulic problems to the control tower. Their reply was abrupt - "landing permission denied, proceed to Gioia Air Field for recovery."

Enroute to Gioia, about 30 minutes' flight time, I contacted their control tower and explained my problems. They gave me emergency landing priority and prepared

for my arrival. It took time for our first preparation to extend landing flaps. Sgt. Hemmeger started the manual hand crank system, which took some 87 full cranks to extend the flaps. He used gunners Bert Gallagher and Bill Henry to assist in the difficult cranking. After the last crank, the flaps were extended.

Then I ordered them to manually crank down the landing gear. When they finished cranking down the gear, Sgt. Hemmeger queried me on the intercom if the landing gear down cockpit green light was on. My reply, "No green light." That system apparently was also damaged. I asked Sgt. Hemmeger if he could make a visual check of the gear. I found out years later, at one of our Bomb Group reunions, that they could not check the gear because the extended flaps obscured the landing gear.

Arvon Richardson and Bill Henry lowered Bert Gallagher, by his legs, out of the rear escape hatch into the slipstream so he could see if the gear was down. They pulled him back into the aircraft and he reported that "it sure looked as if the gear was down and locked."

Our final preparation was for the waist gunners to fasten a chest parachute on each of the two waist windows. If our emergency brake system did not operate, we were prepared to deploy the chutes, which would assist us in stopping after landing. After eight hours of flight time, our fuel supply was extremely low.

I received clearance to land and proceeded inbound on a long final approach. Fire trucks and an ambulance were standing by, positioned toward the end of the runway. I flew a short field landing approach, and after touchdown, gently lowered the nose to the runway. I immediately stepped on the brake pedals and heard the squeal of the rubber tires working against the steel matted runway. I gently braked "White Victor," stopping at the end of the runway.

I was the last crew member off the aircraft and I was physically beat. Before I could kiss Mother Earth, a Medic handed me a bottle of Old Grand Dad bourbon. I took one large gulp (our ration was two ounces). My gulp was much closer to four. Next, I lit up a cigarette and breathed a sigh of relief that we had made it.

The Gioia support staff reported counting over 200 shrapnel penetrations in the waist area alone. "White Victor" remained in Gioia maintenance until March 1945, when it was returned to the 778th Bomb Squadron.

My crew spent one night in Gioia, the next day a C-47 transport flew us back to Pantanella.

Now, I heard the following - "White Victor's" crew chief was M/Sgt. Telesphore Libuda. When his aircraft did not return, he was devastated. He had become very close to my crew. He was one happy Sgt. when the word was announced that we were safe and had landed at Gioia.

My regular co-pilot, Bill Fears, was denied access to our officers tent, by the military police. They said he couldn't enter because Lt. Krynovich's crew was missing in action. He replied, "But I live here. I am Lt. Krynovich's co-pilot." They finally admitted him. He also celebrated when he heard we were safe in Gioia.

Our 464th historical records document our October 17th losses as follows. Four aircraft shot down in the Vienna target area. One crashed near Pantanella while preparing their severely damaged aircraft for an emergency landing. Two B-24's, severely damaged, landed at Gioia. My aircraft, "White Victor," was one of the two. One damaged aircraft landed at a Bari, Italy airfield. The documents, page 106 state, "To those that were there, October 17, 1944 would be remembered as that 'Bloody Day Over Vienna'."

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