

Brown's Crew and the Redtails

by George Gilliard Barnett (777th)

This B-24 Liberator crew arrived at the 464th Bomb Group which was located by an Italian country village called Pantanella. Pantanella was located in the middle of the Italian "boot" between Naples and the Adriatic Seaport of Bari.

There was plenty of mud, even in that early winter month of November. We were assigned a tent on the hillside above the twin steel matted runways in the valley. It must have been the leakiest tent on the base. Anymore leaks in this tent and it would have been uninhabitable. All flying crews lived in tents. A few had improved their tents with a framework of 2 x 4 timbers.

Many of the non-flying personnel had provided themselves with other shelter. Walls were made of "Tufa". Tufa is soft sandstone quarried locally and sawed into concrete block size pieces. Some of these tufa shelters had corrugated steel roofs, some had a tent roof. They all had a door and glass windows. The entire living area (including the mess hall and other "group" buildings) was a "slummy" looking village. The only thing that gave it a semblance of order was that the tents and tufa huts were in aligned rows.

Mud was everywhere. Winter is the rainy season in southern Italy. We hated getting our shoes wet and muddy. In a few days, when our flying gear was issued, we wore our rubber and leather high top, fleece lined, flying boots over our shoes and the problem of wet shoes disappeared. We were told we would be issued galoshes as soon as all the infantrymen in Italy were supplied with them. We got them about 6 months later - in summer.

This crew flew its first mission on 12 December, 1944. The mission went without incident, no flak, it was a "milk run". We thought, heck, there's nothing to this combat flying, we'll do 35 of these and be home soon.

Our second mission was on 19 December, over Blechhammer, Germany, to destroy an oil refinery. Hell broke loose over the target. It was a shock, after our first mission.

The co-pilot tried his best to shrink up into a little ball. Seven of the 28 B-24's in our group were shot down - some violently. Our plane had over 100 small jagged

holes in it, which we counted when we returned to base. Now, we knew that combat flying was going to be serious.

Our third mission on 26 December and our fourth mission on 28 December were also serious combat flying. We saw more B-24's shot down.

The "Intelligence Officers" briefing us before flights "foo-pooied" German anti-aircraft capabilities. They said their AA guns were manned by boys and old men unfit for combat duty. That's when we learned first-hand not to depend too heavily on intelligence reports. The German guns and their gunners were good. If they could see us, they could hit us, at any altitude.

In the entire month of December, we flew only four missions. That's because Italy has lots of bad weather in winter. We did not fly in extremely bad weather. If a target is covered by clouds, there's not much use flying.

We rarely hit a target even when we could see it and aim on it. Dropping bombs through clouds by radar was a waste of bombs. But, the Army had plenty of them. It probably served a purpose in harassing the German population and keeping them on edge. We might hit something as big as a city by radar, but never a specific target.

We encountered only three fighter escort groups during our twenty-five missions over Germany and German held territories - Austria, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. We did not know what these fighter groups numbers were. We identified them, each of the three, in our own way.

The Lightnings

There was a group of P-38 Lightnings. We called them "The Lightnings". We did not like their escort. They always stayed so far out, away from us, that we had trouble telling if they were friend or foe.

The Checkertails

There was a group of P-51 Mustangs with their tails painted black and white checkerboard. We called them "The Checkertails". We didn't like their escort either, but we liked them better than the Lightnings. The Checkertails were just the opposite of the Lightnings. They hovered over us — much too close. We sometimes thought they were trying to join our formation. We didn't like that.

The Redtails

There was a group of P-51 Mustangs that provided escort for us that we liked. We felt more comfortable and secure when we had this group with us. We knew we had a lucky day when Vic DeWolf, our alert tail gunner, would announce on the intercom "Fighters coming in fast at 6 o'clock level". Then a few seconds later he would announce, "It's alright - they're the Redtails!". The Redtails were identifiable long before the U.S. Star could be detected. This group had the spinner and tail of each airplane painted bright red. Maybe we should have called them the "Red Barons", but we called them "The Redtails". As they rapidly overtook our group, they throttled back to our 160 MPH and took up positions on both sides and above our formation of 28 slow, lumbering bombers. They were always in position where we thought fighter escorts should be - not too far out, not too close - right out there where we liked to see them; where we thought was a good intercept position. Boy, we felt good when the Redtails were with us. We wondered why those other escort groups didn't take some lessons from the Redtails.

On 20 January, 1945, our fifth mission was to bomb the railroad yards at Linz, Austria. Linz is an industrial city about 50 miles upstream (west) of Vienna on the Danube River.

This would be a good time to destroy some myth...the Norden Bomb Sight was "bally-hooed" by the Army Air Corps as the device that would give us pin-point bombing accuracy. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Of course, it was far superior to whatever was used before the Norden.

In practice bombing, a bold white target, with bullseye, 100 feet across, was painted on the ground. We practiced at 10,000 feet altitude - didn't even need cold weather clothing nor oxygen. Larry Fleischer, our Bombardier, was good. He could always drop our non-exploding practice bombs well within the target circle, and many times right on the bullseye.

The Norden Sight will do a perfect job under "practice conditions". So, under "combat conditions" it should also do a perfect job — not so. Most bombing is done at the highest possible altitude, to get far away from those anti-aircraft guns, usually at 25,000 to 26,000 feet. Would have gone higher, except that a loaded B-24 had an absolute ceiling of 27,000 feet.

We sure envied those crews in B-17's "Flying Fortress" who flew 5,000 feet higher than we could.

At bombing altitude, it is 40 to 50 degrees below zero. Everybody was shaking with cold. We were encumbered with layer upon layer of cold weather gear - we looked like teddy bears.

Before we arrived at the point of bomb release, we had to run a gauntlet of intense, accurate, anti-aircraft shells exploding so close, the 68,000 pound B-24 was lifted, tilted, pushed sideways, and buffeted around like it was a toy. Shrapnel rattling through the aluminum skin sounded like hand fulls of rocks being thrown against a sheet metal shed and everybody was scared out of their wits! (We were glad the Army issued brown shorts!)

Now, under these conditions, the Norden Bomb Sight was not the great device it was intended to be. We were lucky to hit something as big as a railroad yard. The Army Air Corps destroyed installations by saturation bombing (it was called carpet bombing in Vietnam) from thousands of airplanes, not by pin-point accuracy.

Linz, Austria is an important rail center, with heavy industrial installations, so, it was surrounded with heavy guns manned by little kids and little old men. We dropped our bombs (40-100 pounders) and immediately Murl took us into a steep diving turn to gain speed and get out of the range of those guns as quickly as possible. He pushed the throttles forward to max power to regain our group, reforming several miles ahead. We were the last plane over the target, so our crew was in a good position to see planes shot down and count the parachutes coming out of them, as they went down. Our group lost eight airplanes (80 men) over Linz.

The top Turret Gunner, George Fleissner, called to the Co-Pilot, George Barnett, on the intercom, "George, what's the oil pressure on #4 engine?" "My God, it's at 40 pounds and falling rapidly." (Normal oil pressure is 60 pounds.) The Co-pilot reached overhead, pushed the button to feather #4 propeller - hoping we still had enough oil pressure to feather.

At first, nothing happened, then the engine slowly decreased RPM, and finally the propeller blades stopped in line with the air stream. The Co-pilot asked, "George, how did you know something was wrong with our oil pressure?" "Oil is running out of #4 like a river."

The Pilot, Murl Brown, immediately became aware that #4 was feathered. Wanted to know what's going on - he was informed. The pilot pushed the remaining three throttles full forward to get max power. We couldn't maintain our normal flying speed of 160 MPH and hold altitude. Our airspeed had dropped to 150 and our formation, still far ahead, was slowly pulling away from us.

George, in the Top Turret, was on the intercom again, "What's the oil pressure on #3 engine?" The Co-pilot responds, "It's down to 50 and falling." "How did you know, George?" "Oil is running over the wing at #3!" The Pilot gives the order to feather #3 before the pressure drops to 40 pounds.

The propeller pitch, including feathering, is operated by engine lubricating oil pressure. It will not change the propeller pitch at less than 40 pounds. Each engine has an oil reservoir of 50 gallons. In about two minutes #3 is feathered just before oil pressure reaches 40 pounds.

Now, we have two engines out - both on the same side. The pilot and Co-Pilot both have to bear pressure on the left rudder pedal to keep the airplane from turning right. We cannot maintain altitude and we cannot maintain minimum flying speed of 140 MPH without sacrificing altitude. Murl is forced to lose precious altitude at 200 feet per minute. We are flying "downhill" to keep the speed up to 140.

It has been only minutes since we had taken a hit over Linz and already we're alone in the sky, our formation was out of sight! But, we were lucky, we were still flying! The gunners reminded each other to keep a sharp lookout. We were deep in enemy territory and wounded. A fighter plane can shoot down a bomber, not in formation, almost at will.

Now, Murl has time to check his instrument panel and he sees something wrong. A light on the panel indicates the bomb bay doors are still open! He's on the intercom, "Larry, did you close the bomb bay doors?" "Yes," Larry replied. "But, they're still open." "Larry, take a look in the bomb bay and see if the doors are closed."

The crew cannot move around in a B-24 at altitude above 13,000 feet because oxygen is required. Each crew member is attached to his station by a short piece of flexible hose, supplying oxygen to his face mask. So, Larry Fleischer took a portable oxygen bottle (about the size of a two-liter soda bottle) and attached it to

his mask - now he could move. Larry crawled through the tunnel from the nose to the center of the airplane. He discovered a situation far worse than the bomb bay doors being open.

Three 100 pound bombs did not release over the target! Their front shackles had released, but not the rear shackles! All three bombs were armed and swinging around, hanging by their rear shackles, in the 140 MPH tornado swirling into the big open space in the belly of the airplane. Any contact with the nose of either bomb could cause a 300-pound explosion of high explosive called RDX.

Larry crawled back through the tunnel to his station in the nose to get to the intercom to report the situation to the pilot. The dancing bombs were a bigger problem than the open doors. We were in danger of being blown to pieces by our own bombs!

Murl ordered Larry to get back there and free the bombs, so they would drop out of the airplane. Larry refilled his oxygen bottle at his nose station and crawled back to the big open bomb bay. To get to the bombs, it was necessary to walk a narrow "catwalk" (about 10 or 12 inches wide) down the center of the bomb bay. Bombs hung on a framework on both sides of the center catwalk. Walking the catwalk with doors closed would not have been difficult. But, with doors open, there was a 50 degree below zero, 140 mile an hour tornado in the bomb bay.

The bomb structural supports on either side of the narrow catwalk were so close, Larry could not squeeze through with his bulky cold weather gear and his chest parachute attached to his chute harness. So, he removed the parachute and placed it in the tunnel. Larry started his precarious trip, without a parachute, through the tornado over a 12-inch-wide catwalk. The distance to the gyrating bombs was only 20 feet, but under these conditions, it became a journey.

The bombs were on the same side, one above the other. Larry tried to release the rear shackle on the lower bomb, without any tools, he could not make it release. If he could have relieved the weight of the bomb on the shackle, he probably could have gotten it to release. But, he didn't even have his arms to work with. One arm was wrapped around the portable oxygen bottle, the other arm was wrapped around the bomb support structure to keep from being blown off the catwalk. He had only his hands, with extremely limited range, to work with. He was working under almost impossible conditions.

Larry looked down, only once, at the snow covered Austrian Alps, 25,000 feet below. He never looked down again.

His first trip to the bombs took so much oxygen from the portable bottle, that he had to return to the nose to refill the bottle. On his return, Larry's foot became lodged between two of the structural members supporting the catwalk. As he pulled to release his foot, his fleece lined flying boot was pulled off and fell out of the airplane. Now he had only a bare army shoe as protection from the intense cold. Larry reported the serious situation to the pilot and crew over the intercom.

There was a brief discussion between the pilot and crew about the possibility of "bailing out" and becoming POW's. The pilot ordered Larry to go back and try again. He went back into the 50 below zero tornado. That trip was also a failure and he had to return for oxygen. When he got back to his station, he discovered that his eye lids were frozen in an open position. He could not blink or close his eyes. The pilot ordered him to try again.

Larry went back out into the tornado for the fourth time. He did it on this trip! He got the top bomb shackle released and, as it fell, it struck the bombs below and caused their release. So, three bombs fell at the same time. Larry hoped they fell into an isolated area and caused no damage to some poor Austrian farmer.

Now, Larry took time to look at the bomb bay door problem. It didn't take long - the track that the doors roll on to open and close, was severely damaged, twisted and broken by a near miss. He returned to his nose station and reported the good news about the bombs and the bad news about the bomb bay doors.

So, with engines out and a wide-open belly, we were struggling along at 140 MPH losing 200 feet of altitude every minute! Our formation had long ago pulled out of sight. We were alone and wounded over German territory and hours away from Italy. The major concern now was, how far we could get before we ran out of altitude.

Secondary concern was, we would be easy prey for a German fighter! The pilot and Stan Kay, the Navigator, discussed a flight to Switzerland. Stan studied his charts for a few minutes - couldn't make Switzerland - too many high mountains - we wouldn't clear them. Stan gave the pilot a course that would take us to the Yugoslavian coast, so that when we bailed out, we would more than likely fall into friendly hands.