

**A day in the flying life of the B-24
Home for Christmas, as experienced by
the bombardier.**

The Mission

By Bruce D. Callander

B-24 Liberators from Fifteenth Air Force plow through flak "so thick you could walk on it" over their target (the oil refineries of Ploesti, Romania). Fifteenth Air Force crews had to survive fifty such missions before rotating out of the theater.

‘WAKE up, lieutenant. You’re flying. Don’t go back to sleep.” The CQ then goes to wake another crew. We dress silently and stumble out toward the mess tent. It is 4:00 a.m., July 19, 1944, in southern Italy. It will be a long day.

Breakfast is largely fabricated. The juice tastes of the can it came from. Eggs and milk are reconstituted from powders. The toast is covered with unmeltable butter, and the coffee is part chicory. The pancakes look genuine, but I pass them up. At altitude, they would set like cement.

It’s still dark as we move on to the briefing tent and take seats on empty ammo boxes. Somebody yells “Ten-hut!”

Col. A. L. Schroeder enters and says, “Be seated, gentlemen.” He became commanding officer of the 464th Bomb Group three weeks ago, after Col. Marshall Bonner went down over Vienna.

The curtains part to reveal the big wall map, and everybody groans. The colored string indicating the bombing route stretches from the heel of the Italian boot to a red arrow in southern Germany. It’s no

Anatomy of a Mission

Date: July 19, 1944.

Target: Aircraft engine factory, Munich Allach, Germany.

Aircraft: B-24H, No. 42-52437, named *Home for Christmas*, built by Ford Motor Co. at Willow Run, Mich., under contract to Consolidated Aircraft.

Crew: Pilot, Roy G. Anderson; copilot, Ernest G. Astroff; navigator, David A. Kellogg; bombardier, Bruce D. Callander; engineer/top turret gunner, Alvin G. Ness; radio operator/nose gunner, James H. Hearon, Jr.; assistant engineer/rear turret gunner, J. D. Nowell; waist gunners, John H. Damron and Lawrence F. Gardner; ball turret gunner, Listel Kimble.

Units: 778th Bomb Squadron, 464th Bomb Group, 55th Bomb Wing, Fifteenth Air Force, Mediterranean Allied Air Forces.

Base: Pantanella, near Bari on southeast coast of Italy.

Group History: Formed July 1, 1943. Trained in Idaho in late 1943. Flew southern route to North Africa, arriving in Tunis in March 1944. Transferred to Italy March 1944. First mission flown April 30, 1944, against marshaling yards at Castel Maggiore.



milk run, but there is one consolation. Because Fifteenth Air Force requires fifty missions before a crew is rotated out, and Eighth Air Force only twenty-five, we sometimes get double credit for the tough ones. This looks like a double.

Colonel Schroeder says the target, an aircraft engine factory near Munich, is vital to the German war effort. That's always a comfort. Other briefers take over. Flak will be light to moderate. Fighters are likely, but we'll have cover. Over the target, the weather is clear. If hit, we can go to Switzerland, but we should remember that means internment for the duration.

We synchronize our hack watches, the chaplain asks God to guard and guide us, and we break up. Pilots collect their "flimsies"—detailed orders printed on onion-skin paper that can be eaten, if necessary. Navigators receive their charts. I join the other bombardiers to get my target photos and to be reminded that wing headquarters wants a tight bombing pattern.

As we leave, we draw our escape kits. They contain silk maps, paper money, and compasses small enough to swallow, should we be captured. We toss our flight bags into a GI truck and pile in.

Home for Christmas

In the Italian valley below, ground crews are loading bombs and rev-

ving up engines. The truck rumbles down the gravel road and rattles across the steel landing mats to our plane. We stow our gear, check our stations, and make sure the ground crews have delivered our chest-pack parachutes, K rations, and first-aid kits. They used to leave medical kits on board between missions, but someone was stealing the morphine out of them, so the crews began locking them up.

The pilots do their walkaround and then join us for a smoke at the edge of the hardstand. The pilot, Roy Anderson, has been aircraft commander since the crew was formed, but our original copilot has



The crew poses with Home for Christmas (above). Standing (left to right) are navigator David A. Kellogg, pilot Roy G. Anderson, and bombardier Bruce D. Callander. In front are gunners Listel Kimble, Alvin G. Ness, John H. Damron, J. D. Nowell, Lawrence F. Gardner, and James H. Hearon, Jr. Not pictured is copilot Ernest G. Astroff. Top, another Fifteenth Air Force B-24 shows the "unexpected grace" that the Liberator, ungainly on the ground, achieves while airborne.

been given his own crew. Ernest Astroff will fly in that position today.

Our B-24H, No. 42-52437, stands nearby. We have named her *Home for Christmas*, after the sentimental song recently popularized by Frank Sinatra. For good luck, we hung a tree ornament over the flight deck, but somebody swiped it. We didn't dare tell the gunners it was gone until we had flown a mission safely without it.

It's time to start engines. Al Ness, our flight engineer, switches on the little putt-putt motor that supplies ground power. One by one, the props turn, the engines spew blue smoke, and the plane roars to life. The bomb bay doors grind shut, and we pull out. Two dozen bombers fall into single file like elephants heading for the water hole.

During the roll, the pilots run their checks. We pull onto the runway, Anderson shoves the throttles full forward, and we gather speed. Ahead, one plane is clearing the ground. Behind, another is moving into takeoff position.

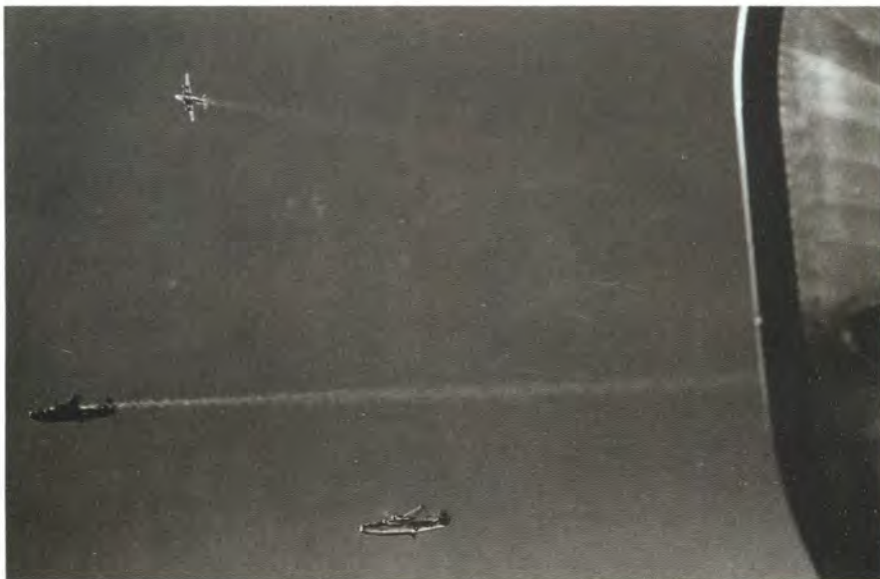
Once it becomes airborne, the B-24 takes on an unexpected grace. Its fat body seems longer. The narrow wings reach out like fingers. Built for long range and heavy hauling, it is now in its element.

We climb and begin the slow process of forming up, first by elements, then by flights, squadrons, groups, and wings. The morning sky fills with white contrails. Nine months earlier, the new Fifteenth Air Force mounted its first mission with only 112 planes. Now we launch as many as 1,000 at a time.

Boredom and Terror

The long flight is under way. In the movies, it would be an action-filled adventure. In reality, it will be what has been described as an eight-hour exercise in physical endurance and utter boredom broken by a few moments of sheer terror.

Over the Adriatic, the gunners test-fire their weapons and the plane quivers. At 10,000 feet, we buckle sticky rubber oxygen masks to our fleecelined helmets. I call each crew member on the intercom to make sure his system is working. I will check again each half-hour. This became one of the bombardier's regular duties after a turret gunner on one crew passed out and



It wasn't always so easy as the movies made it seem. Here, two Fifteenth Air Force B-24s have been hit by heavy flak over their target. One has peeled out of formation prior to crashing, while another struggles to maintain its position in the flight despite a smoking engine. Below, author Callander makes it look easy.

died because his oxygen hose became disconnected.

The temperature drops as we climb. It will fall to -50° Fahrenheit over the mountains. The B-24 has little insulation and numerous gaps and unpatched flak holes. A tiny heater on the flight deck keeps the pilots' feet from freezing, but it does little more than that.

Our main protection from the cold comes from layers of clothing. We start with long johns, thick socks, and heavy sweaters. Over that come fleece-lined flying suits with bulky jackets, thick boots, and pants that zip together like a toddler's snowsuit. A parachute harness and a Mae West vest increase the bulk to the point where we are barely able to move. Later we will add flak vests and steel helmets.

The waist gunners, standing beside open windows, suffer most from the cold. They were issued blue flannel "bunny suits" with heating wires embedded in them. One of the waist gunners, Larry Gardner, says his suit provides some relief from the cold. The other, John Damron, quit wearing his after one of the wires shorted out and burned his leg.

We skirt Venice and climb as we approach the Alps. At 25,000 feet, the sky is ice blue. Below, in the snow-capped mountains, tiny villages perch atop the lower peaks like figures on a wedding cake. They

look like pictures from my sixth grade geography book.

There's little time to admire the view. Dark specks appear at the fringes of the formation, and we speculate whether they are our fighters or theirs. The formation tightens up. Nuzzling up to another four-engine bomber is nerve-wracking work, but we have rehearsed it often. On practice runs, we have flown so close that the waist gunners on one plane could touch the wing lights of another.

The fighters keep their distance. If they are from the Luftwaffe, they'll probably wait until we come off the target and then look for cripples. Our gunners save their ammunition.

Suddenly, gunner Listel Kimble thinks he sees something and fires a burst from his ball turret. It's a false alarm.

Into the Nose Compartment

Once we are over and past the mountains, the formation wheels east. I leave the flight deck and crawl through the tunnel around the nose wheel into the nose compartment. Dave Kellogg has stowed his navigator's table and sits by the nose wheel door. He has his flak suit under him, his steel helmet in his lap, and one hand on the door's release lever. When he is at work, Kellogg is the coolest man I know. During the bomb run, however, his work

is over, he has nothing to do, and that makes him nervous.

I put on my own flak suit, kneel behind the bombsight, and flick switches. Lights on a panel to my left show the bomb bay is open and identify which racks hold bombs. Gyros whine inside the bombsight. The Army, having trained me on the Norden bombsight, naturally gave me a Sperry sight for combat. Actually, I like it better. I reach behind the sight, turn a knob, and watch a bubble level until it centers.

As I take my hand away, there is a sharp rap and bits of Plexiglas spray my face. I reach back for the leveling knob and it's gone. The flak has started.

Over the intercom, waist gunner Larry Gardner asks, "How's it look, Jim?"

Our radio operator, Jim Hearon, rides the nose turret and has the best view of the target. "Wow!" he says, "It's so thick you could walk on it."

It's his standing joke, but this time he's right. All around us, puffs of smoke are appearing and dis-



sipating. New ones are forming like bursting popcorn, only black. We wade through it. Evasive action wouldn't help.

I ask, "Why are they shooting at us, Jim? Is it something we've done?"

Hearon giggles. Anderson tells us to knock it off.

"You've got it," he tells me. He means that he has put the plane on autopilot, and the bombsight—

operated by the bombardier—now controls it.

The formation has loosened up to give the individual ships room to maneuver. The lead bombardier already has made most of the needed course corrections. The rest of us concentrate mainly on “killing the rate,” synchronizing the movement of a telescope inside the bombsight with the plane’s ground speed to establish the release point for the bombs.

I turn some knobs to bring the cross hairs onto our piece of the target. They drift off. I slow the movement, return the hairs to the target, and watch. They hold until flak rocks the plane and they move again. I make finer adjustments, wishing I had more time.

Then, inside the sight, there is a faint click. The plane lurches gently. The lights are out on my panel, but I ask Ness to check if all bombs are gone. On one mission, we discovered after I closed the bomb bay that four were left. One dropped through a door, and I had to pry the others loose with a screwdriver.

This time, Ness says, the racks are empty. I close the doors and say, “Bombs away!” It’s hardly necessary, but that’s what they say in the movies.

Ready to Jump

As I crawl back to the flight deck, flak spatters the plane like pebbles hitting a tin roof. Close by, another bomber takes a direct hit, hangs there for a moment, and then falls. We watch for parachutes. Farther on, another plane flies apart. Everything seems to happen in slow motion. Some protective mechanism inside us says, “Never mind. It isn’t real.”

We are almost clear of the flak when, suddenly, our plane jerks around as though some giant has grabbed a wing. It rights itself but shivers violently. The pilots fight the controls. The waist gunners can’t stand up. From the rear, tail turret gunner J. D. Nowell says he’s being shaken to pieces. Anderson tells him to come out of the turret and be ready to jump. Damron cranks up the ball turret and helps Kimble climb out.

From the top turret, Ness can see jagged metal sticking up between the left engines. It appears that an



This B-24 made it back to base after the group’s first encounter with rocket-armed fighters. One rocket left this gaping hole; another killed both waist gunners. The surviving crew members were sent home after only one mission. The lack of paint on this “silver-sided” plane types it as a replacement aircraft.

88-mm shell has passed through the left wing. It was not armed to explode on impact, but it left a hole big enough to disrupt the airflow over the wing. The left tail fin is caught in a miniature cyclone and flutters like an aspen leaf.

The pilots try to raise and then lower the nose. The vibration continues. They bank to the left. Nothing. A slight bank to the right seems to help. When the plane is put in a twenty-degree bank, the shaking is reduced to a quiver. We breathe again.

We’re not out of the woods yet, however. It’s still almost four hours to base. The shell may have broken a wing spar. Even if the wing stays on, it will be tough to hold formation. The Luftwaffe pilots can hardly fail to notice a plane flying in a twenty-degree bank.

Anderson lays out our options. We can bail out, head for Switzerland, or try to reach the base. Nobody wants to jump, and we’re so close to finishing our missions that we don’t want to risk internment. We vote to go home.

German fighters come in for a closer look, but a few bursts from our guns convince them we’re still in business. With pure muscle power, the pilots hold the bank and stay in formation over the mountains and through the slow descent.

Back over the Adriatic, we are low enough to come off the oxygen.

That impediment removed, we break open our K rations, individual containers the size of Cracker Jack boxes. Each holds two small cans, one containing congealed meat spread and the other filled with rubbery cheese shaped like an orange hockey puck. There are some impregnable crackers. The box also yields three cigarettes with such names as “Wings” and “Fleetwoods” and two sheets of waxy toilet paper, of little use on a plane that has no toilet.

Back to Pantanella

Under the circumstances, however, the rations seem almost appetizing. We relax and chatter over the intercom. Ness notices that there are specks of dried blood on my face, evidently from cuts I got when the Plexiglas exploded over the target. He says that if I can get them bleeding again, they’ll probably give me a Purple Heart. Ness draws his trench knife and offers to open them up a little. There is little reverence for rank on a bomber crew.

The formation descends. Various groups peel off for their respective bases. We head toward Pantanella, breaking up into progressively smaller elements as we go along.

Near base, Anderson asks again if anybody wants to jump. Even if the wheel comes down, he says, there may not be any tire on it.

Again we elect to stay on board. It seems preferable to breaking a leg on some farmer's stone wall, as some members of other crews have done recently.

Crash trucks stand by as we make our approach. The gear drops, and the wheel seems intact. Anderson holds his bank until just before touchdown, levels off, and brings her in smoothly.

Back at the hardstand, we pile out to inspect the hole. About eight inches across, it has just nicked the spar and missed the landing gear, fuel lines, and control cables. When I see that, my stomach goes queasy.

The trucks take us back up the hill. We collect our Red Cross



doughnuts and postmission shots—two fingers of bourbon in our canteen cups. Usually, I trade my liquor ration with somebody for a Coke. This time I take it.

We return to the group tent for debriefing. Much flak? Many fighters? Kills? Target damage? Any of ours lost? Any chutes?

Dead tired, still numb from the cold, and starting to feel the bourbon, we're already beginning to confuse this mission with the last and the one before. Anyway, the strike photos will tell them all they really want to know.



After a mission, the crews inspect the aircraft and count flak holes. The ground chief (center, with his hand on his face) wonders how to patch it up for the next mission. This B-24 is not Home for Christmas, but another from the same squadron. Below, pilot Anderson "rests his eyes" beside the Adriatic.

The debriefing over, most crew members head for their tents. Kellogg and I linger to ask the intelligence officer how to put the pilots in for medals. He says we should write up what happened in triplicate and have the rest of the crew sign the papers, which we do.

A week later, he tells us that Group doesn't think that the pilots did anything that exceptional and won't send in the paperwork for action.

Bona Fide Heroes

We fly twelve more bombing missions, including three against the oil field targets at Ploesti in Nazi-occupied Romania. By mid-August, in just over three months of combat time, we have fifty missions to our credit and are eligible for rotation.

There is one hitch. Higher authority has decided it wants all officers promoted before they leave the theater. Anderson has made first lieutenant, but Kellogg and I haven't. We go to 55th Bomb Wing headquarters in Bari, Italy, to ask when our orders will come through. We're told to wait.

Meanwhile, some staff officer at Wing tells the 464th that it lags all groups in the awards department. Except for air medals issued routinely after every ten missions, none of us has been decorated. Group pulls out all the recommendations it has disapproved, including the one for our pilots, and bucks the package to Wing. A few days later, the wing commanding officer shows up and awards the Distinguished Flying Cross not just to the pilot, Anderson, and copilot Astroff, but to the whole crew. Kellogg and I are also promoted.

Now that we are bona fide heroes, somebody thinks we and our plane are good candidates for a Stateside tour to sell war bonds. We like the idea, mainly because it means flying back in our own aircraft rather than spending two weeks on a troopship. While the Army Air Forces brass is weighing the bond tour idea, however, Emmett Drake's crew loses its plane and asks to borrow ours. We agree. The next day, we're all down on the flight line when the group's aircraft return from a mission. *Home for Christmas* doesn't show.

A few days later, Drake returns. He and his crew were shot up and had to land in Yugoslavia. The partisans helped the crew get out but kept our plane. Without it, we go to Naples to board the troopship for home. ■

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