

## COMBAT MISSION

February 13, 1945

I awake suddenly, as I always do on mornings when I'm scheduled to fly. I'm not aware of having heard anything. The tent is pitch black, with a slightly lighter triangle at the end where the flap is pulled back. My sleeping bag feels cozy and warm, and the cot is soft as a featherbed, but sleep is gone and I'm wide awake.

A shadow darkens the entrance, and the Officer of the Day calls very softly, "Woot?" I answer, "I'm awake", and I hear the crunch of gravel as the O.D. goes on to the next tent to awaken another man scheduled for this morning's mission.

I unzip the sleeping bag and roll to a sitting position on the side of the cot. Now that it's winter we've taken down the mosquito bars, and getting up is less like fighting your way out of a fishnet.

Somebody has turned on the phonograph up at the Officer's Mess. They're playing The Whiffenpoof Song, which seems pretty appropriate here in the pre-dawn blackness - "Darned from here to eternity, God have mercy on such as we". I feel a shiver run up my spine.

I pull on my OD's, GI shoes, and fleece lined jacket, then ~~walk up to the mess hut. After the darkness outside the mess seems~~ uncomfortably bright. They have pancakes, bacon, and coffee for us today. I'm not usually hungry before a mission, but today breakfast tastes awfully good.

The eighteen officers scheduled to fly this morning's mission are here. The rest of the squadron will eat later, after daybreak. There's very little conversation at breakfast, I guess it's just too early.

I go to the latrine and wait in line, as usual. There's always a line before a mission.

While walking back down to my tent I notice that the sky on the eastern horizon is slightly less black now. Trigger (Tom Phelps, my tent-mate) is still asleep, so I try to move quietly. I get into my flying suit, put my jacket back on over it, pull on my boots, and gather up my notebook, pencil, gloves and earphones. I kneel and shoot up a short prayer, then go out and over to the Operations tent to check out an ~~extra bit. There's the captain~~ all over, a ~~little bit of the~~ ~~captain's~~ ~~will~~ ~~be~~ ~~there~~

flag, benzedrine, and concentrated emergency rations, all in a packet about 5" by 7" and an inch thick. I stow the kit in my right side shin pocket. My cigarettes and lighter are in the left shin pocket, so I'm ready to go! I climb aboard one of the three trucks parked in line outside Operations.

Espy climbs aboard carrying a bulging musette bag. I don't know what he carries in it - probably food. Somebody says, "Hey, Airspeed, you plannin' to RON?" (A.A.F. for 'remain overnight'). Everybody laughs except Espy, who looks sour.

The trucks start, and we lurch down the unpaved road about a mile to the Briefing Hut at Group Headquarters. There are no trucks from other squadrons. Whatever today's mission is, apparently it's the 486th's show.

Inside the Quonsett hut bomb fin crates are lined up as seats facing a raised platform at the end. At the rear of the platform is a curtain. It covers a large map which will show our route and target by means of red twine pinned to the map. Briefing starts, as always, with a time hack. "In thirty seconds it will be zero six two four hours . . . ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, HACK!" Now all watches are together to the second. Next comes the readoff of times: "Start engines 0708, taxi 0710, takeoff 0714, reach I.P. 0922, time over target 0926." I scribble these in my notepad as they are read. I'd already headed the page with information from the Operations bulletin board last night after the mission was posted: 6Z leading, 6W in #2 on his right wing, 6L on his left wing in #3. I'm flying 6A in #4, leading the second VEE, with 6Y at #5 on my right wing and 6C on my left in #6 position.

~~No rendezvous time is announced, so there'll be no fighter~~  
escort. Next come the codes of the day: Mission: "Glassknob", Wounded: "Eagle", Dead: "Flower", Tower: "Gable". As always, the Briefing Officer cautions us to observe strict radio silence until we cross the Italian coast coming home. The emergency signal is a red flare. He says we should be back on the ground by noon.

Now the Briefing Officer draws back the curtain hiding the map, and there's the sound of a great sigh. It's reflex action, I suppose, this mass intake of breath when the target is uncovered. The target is far up in the Italian Alps, well beyond Lake Garda, south of Brenner.

The Major explains the purpose of today's mission. Our six B-25's are each loaded with six 1,000 pound semi-armor piercing bombs. We're to drop them into the mountainside just above a rail cut. This will cause an avalanche which will bury the rail line under tons of rock, and keep the line cut for a very long time. This is the main supply line from the Brenner Pass. Lately the

Krauts have rebuilt the bridges we've knocked down within days, sometimes overnight. The Major says today's raid will make things a little more difficult for them. He's so happy at this prospect that he can hardly contain himself. We're not all that happy. We haven't seen enemy fighters lately, but a lone flight of 6 B-25's with no fighter cover will be awfully tempting. Plus we know from unpleasant experience that there are a helluva lot of 88's along that river.

Another worry is that the B-25 is designed to carry a maximum bomb load of 4,000 pounds. Today we're carrying 6,000 pounds. Armor-piercing bombs are skinnier and six can be carried, barely, in the bomb bay. So we're doing it. We'll be a ton over gross weight at takeoff.

The mission commander is a Lieutenant Colonel from Group Headquarters. He'll be flying 6Z, the lead airplane, with the regular pilot in the right seat. When I checked the squadron bulletin board last night I wondered why no co-pilot was posted for 6Z. This explains it. Number four (that's me) is to take the lead if anything happens to number one.

Known flak positions are pointed out on the map. Our flight path is routed away from all of them except those in the target area. We'll cross the Italian coast at LaSpezia, follow a meandering course to Lake Garda, then turn north and follow the river up to the target. We'll cruise at 9,200 feet, lower than the peaks on each side, and make the bomb run at 9,000 feet, indicated air speed 200 mph. The Mission Commander is to radio a coded mission report when we reach Lake Garda on the way back.

With a "Good luck!" from the Major the briefing is over and ~~the pilots, bombardiers, and radiomen gather separately for short briefings for those groups. Co-pilots leave to pre-flight the aircraft.~~ At the pilots' briefing the five of us (the Colonel from Group doesn't join us) are given a weather analysis, suggested power settings for climb and cruise, are told to maintain a listening watch on Channel B, reminded to observe radio silence, conserve fuel, and to be sure to turn on IFF (a radar identification device). We'll each be carrying six 1,000 pound bombs, and a full load of fuel and ammunition. We'll need every inch of runway to get off since there's no surface wind this morning. We're told to put down 30 degrees of flap for takeoff instead of the prescribed 15 degrees. I hope we won't need more runway than we've got!

We go out to the trucks and are driven another half mile to the airstrip, down the taxiway to the equipment Quonsett. It's pretty light outside now. We jump over the tailgate and go inside the hut to the bins. I take out my Mae West, check both CO2 cylinders and valves, then strap it on. Next I check the seals and

ripcord on my chute, then shrug it on over the Mae West.

My airplane, 6A, "Sahara Sue II" is parked on the hardstand nearest the equipment hut so I walk over without waiting for the truck which serves as a line taxi. I do a walkaround check of the ship with my co-pilot, Red Allison. Red has already completed the preflight checklist. The crew is all here, and the six of us sit on the ground and smoke, waiting until it's time to get aboard. Every few minutes someone gets up and goes over to the weeds beyond the hardstand to relieve himself. I marvel that so much water can be passed by so few. But it's always that way before a mission - it goes with the job..

Finally, after checking my watch I say, "Let's turn the props over", and we all get up and take turns putting a shoulder to a propeller blade and pushing it as far as we can until the man behind catches the next blade and keeps the rotation going. We count aloud to six, meaning we've rotated the propeller twice, and the engine three times (gearing is 16:9). This drains any oil which has run down into the bottom cylinders which might otherwise crack a cylinder head when the engine is started. We repeat on the other prop and now it's time to go!

My tension has been mounting steadily since I first got up this morning, but I know it will leave as soon as I get the engines started. It always has, and this is my forty-sixth mission. But right now my stomach feels like I've swallowed a cannonball.

I snap my flak vest on over my chute and climb aboard. I hear both hatches slam shut behind me as I settle into my seat, fasten my seat belt, and plug in my throat mike and earphones. Red and I run through the checklist. At 0708 I hit the energizer and primer switches - throttles cracked, prop control full forward, mixture full rich - I shout out the window, "Clear left", and hit the starter switch. The big prop turns over and over, then catches with a roar, throwing out a great cloud of blue smoke. I follow the same sequence with the right engine, which starts quickly, and the B-25 trembles as if anxious to get moving.

6L, "Rinky Doo", is #3 today, so I watch for her to come down the taxi-strip so that I can fall in behind. Here she comes! I glance at my watch, it's 0711. I let off the brakes and taxi out to fall in behind 6L. Figler, 6Y's pilot, has slowed to allow me to turn into the line ahead of him.

We stop near the end of the runway to check the mags and run up the engines. I'm dimly aware that the tension I've felt all morning is gone. The lead airplane, 6Z "A.W.O.L.", is on the runway and rolling. It's exactly 0714. Now 6W starts to roll and 6L moves to the end of the runway and holds. "Rinky Doo" starts rolling and I taxi out onto the end of the runway. Booster pumps "ON", 30

degrees of flap, I advance the throttles slowly to 44 inches, release the brakes and we start our run. The control van flashes by on my left, we're halfway down the strip. I ease the control column back and get the nosewheel off. At takeoff power the engines sound as if they're tearing themselves out of the nacelles. Good old 6A flies herself off the ground with a hundred feet to spare. I jerk my right thumb "up" and the gear starts up. Red had his hand on the handle, waiting for the signal. I reduce the power, then Red reduces the RPM's while I start milking up the flaps. We're over the Mediterranean at 75 feet, straining to climb with the weight of armor plate, bombs, ammunition, fuel, and men.

Ahead of me the lead plane has started a shallow climbing turn to the right. The number two and three ships start turning, too, leading 6Z in the turn so as to slide into position on his wings as he comes around. I bank to the right, keeping my nose aimed just ahead of number three. I'll be flying formation in reference to number one, but to watch him instead of two and three during the join-up would be inviting a mid-air collision. I get closer to number three in the turn, since I'm turning inside him, and get just behind and below before he comes into position on 6Z's left wing. I slide into the number four spot, tucked in close behind and below number one.

Shapes to my left and right, at the edge of my peripheral vision, let me know that 6C and 6Y are in position on my wings. The formation is tight - I can count the rivets in 6Z's belly.

It's physically painful to fly number four position. Your head is tilted back and you're looking up through the top window behind the windshield. My neck muscles begin to protest after a while. Our squadron has lost more airplanes in number four than any other formation position. This fact doesn't bother me particularly. ~~Although I'm not optimistic about my chances of completing this~~ tour, I've never believed that any particular position is worse than another. The Krauts aren't that accurate.

I nod to Red to take over. His left hand closes over my right on the throttles and I release them and the control column, and drop my feet from the rudders to flat on the floor. Allison is good. The airplane doesn't waver during the transition and he keeps us socked right in there. I shake my head to uncramp my neck, light a cigarette, and make a crew check on the interphone: tailgunner, radioman, top turret, and bombardier. Each reports everything okay. I check the engine instruments, then the flight instruments. We're climbing through 8,000 feet at 0729.

I jerk violently at a series of explosions much like a truck engine with no muffler. It's only the top turret testing his guns and the smell of cordite seeps into the cockpit. I hope Red didn't notice my startled jump - sounding and appearing calm is the prime

rule of this game.

We level off at 9,200 feet. I reach over Red's left hand and pull the prop levers back to 2,100 RPM, making minor adjustments until the engines sound synchronized. I check the fuel gauges and flip two switches to transfer fuel from the auxiliary tanks, out in the ends of the wings, to the large main tanks inboard. I like to transfer the reserve fuel just as soon as we've burned enough out of the mains to accept it all. Some of the fellows won't transfer fuel until they've left the target and are on the way home. They believe, correctly, that a full tank is less apt to blow up than a tank full of fumes. But I believe that a hit in the fuel transfer pumps or lines is just as likely as one in the reserve tanks, and that extra fuel out there won't get you home if you can't transfer it. Furthermore, the tanks are vented, and if you make the transfer as early as possible the fumes should be gone before you get shot at. This question is the subject of one of those running arguments, night after night, back in the tent. Nobody ever convinces anybody on the other side. I'll never understand how the Army overlooked this question. There's a regulation on absolutely everything else.

Allison's neck is bound to be bothering him by now. I grasp the wheel lightly, put my feet back on the rudder pedals, put my right hand over his left, and take the throttles as he slides his hand away.

Looking fixedly at the lead plane a few feet away I can't see the horizon and am never quite sure of our attitude, whether we're turning, climbing, or straight and level. In formations this tight you don't want to risk letting your eyes stray from the airplane you're "flying on".

After Red and I have exchanged the controls several more times, Pray, the bombardier, calls on the interphone, "Five minutes from I.P." (The I.P., or Initial Point, is where the final turn toward the target is made, and is the beginning of the Bomb Run. At the I.P. you roll out of the turn on a heading to the target. The bombardier then has to find and recognize the target visually, then get it centered and tracking in the crosshairs of his Norden Bombsight. Today he'll have 240 seconds to do this. During the final 30 seconds of the run we'll be flying straight and level at a constant speed. This half-minute is the most dangerous time. More than half the planes lost during my tour have been hit during this fraction of a minute before the bombs are released and you can take evasive action.)

I nudge Red with my elbow and he takes over. I bob and turn my head to ease my neck muscles a last time, reach behind my seat for my steel flak helmet, and put it on. I check the engine instruments and the fuel gauges, glance outside at the incredible beauty of these magnificent mountains, and fight off a tremor brought on by

the cold - or is it fear? I take the controls from Red and from the corner of my eye see him don his flak helmet and lower his seat to "full down". His job is to watch the instruments during the bomb run, and he says he can concentrate on them better if he doesn't see out side too well.

The underside of 6Z's wings flash with reflected sunlight - we're turning on the I.P. Those wings ahead and above are shaded again, and I know we're headed toward the target. 6Z's bomb bay doors open and I can see the long bombs inside. A puff of jet black smoke flashes by the window, then another, and another. Flak! There's a loud "CHUNG" with another simultaneous sound like a fistful of stones flung against corrugated iron. That means we're hit. Everything feels okay, the engines sound fine. If the instruments showed any change, Red would have already told me. I'm aware that my anxiety is completely gone, replaced by an exhilaration beyond anything ever experienced outside of combat. I have a sense of being wholly, completely alive. All my senses are acute. Time seems to slow down.

I can see flak bursting dead ahead, then hear the "CHUNK" of another hit. We're still making small turns, climbs and dives, and haven't yet settled down for that last straight and level run. Damn, the Krauts are accurate today! They're putting their 88's in our hip pocket and we're still twisting and turning!

My mind is racing with many thoughts: the sound of the engines, our position in the formation, the intensity and accuracy of the flak. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me." Those words always pop into my mind, unasked, on the bomb run.

Now we are flying straight and level. I hold 6A very tight just behind and under 6Z's tail stinger. Flak is bursting just ahead of 6Z; it's right on our altitude but they're leading us a little too much. Suddenly 6Z's six big bombs break free and, wobbling slightly, fall straight down in front of our nose. The seat thrusts upward as our own 6,000 pound load is released and the airplane responds with a swooshing lift.

"Okay, Colonel, let's get the hell out of here," I think, and tense up on the controls anticipating a violent turning dive to get out of the flak. 6Z's bomb bay doors close. Nothing happens. The Colonel maintains our creeping airspeed, then starts a gentle 15 degree turn. (I learn later from his crew that he's watching the mountainside and wants to see, personally, the avalanche which is to cover the rail line with tons of rock. It's the tail gunner's job to do that and report to him by interphone.

There's a very loud "BLAM!", more black smoke flashes by. Red tugs my sleeve and I steal a glance away from 6Z to him. He's shaken. "Did you see it?" he shouts at me. I shake my head, not

understanding, and tilt my head back again to hold position. It's not hard to do, we're still doing 200mph in our gentle turn. Something draws my eyes over to Knighton's ship, 6W, in #2 on 6Z's right wing. He's above me at about one o'clock. His left fin and rudder, flat olive drab with the big white "6W", slowly turns a glossy black, changing color as I watch. I'm flabbergasted, never having seen anything like this. Now his left propeller slows and stops, feathered, and I realize that the shiny black color came from the oil pouring out of his left engine and being blown back onto the stabilizer and rudder. 6W skids to the right, smoking and losing altitude. Knighton must be literally standing on his right rudder pedal to keep his good engine from turning him into the formation. He slides down, then out of sight, leaving a trail of smoke.

We've completed 270 degrees of turn and roll out level, plodding along at 215 mph. At last we're out of range of the 88 batteries and are headed south for home.

Red leans over and slides the earphone off my right ear, gets up close and tells me that Figler got a direct hit back when I heard the "BLAM!", and has gone down. Most of Red's original crew were now assigned to Figler while he gets combat experience flying copilot with me. He watched from a few yards away when they "bought the farm". I glance at Red again. He looks 20 years older than he did a couple of hours ago.

Two ships down out of six! Twelve men gone! I think, "Thank God it wasn't me," then feel a flood of remorse at the selfish thought.

Suddenly I'm enraged at that brass hat colonel from Group HQ leading the flight. ~~Both airplanes were lost after "Bombs Away" when we should have been in a screaming dive off the target. How stupid! How unnecessary! I think how easy it would be to lift the nose and put a burst of 50 caliber into the cockpit of 6Z. The thought is insane, and is gone as quickly as it came. But that s.o.b. will probably get a medal for this mission!~~

I tap Red's arm and he takes over. I look out to the left at 6C, catch the copilot's eye and point up to 6Z's right wing, then hold up two fingers. He nods and turns his head to shout something to the pilot. 6C begins to drop down, then crosses underneath me and climbs up into #2 position. Now we're a diamond formation where, a few minutes ago we were two VEE's.

I light a cigarette, then get on the interphone and make a crew check, starting with the tail gunner. With nobody on our wings now he's all alone back there and I know his head is swiveling constantly, looking for fighters. Everybody reports everything okay. Our only damage seems to be lots of holes in

6A's skin. She's pretty well patched up already. A few more won't even be noticed. No one adds any comment to his brief report. The usual banter is missing.

I tune the Command Set to Armed Forces Radio at Caserta so that the fellows can listen to some music on the way home. It doesn't sound very good to me. While fiddling with the Command Set I miss the mission report on VHF. Red hears it, leans over and shouts, "Mike Fox Nan George."

The mission was a failure. There was no avalanche; the rail line is still open.

END

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