

“Mediums Were Also Out”

by Lt. Col. J.K. Havener, USAF (Ret)

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“How’s the ankle this morning, Lieutenant?” The GI medic was all smiles as he brought me a cup of coffee and the morning London Daily Express. I told him it was still throbbing, but as long as I kept it elevated it wasn’t so bad. I was in the small base hospital of the 344th Bomb Group (M) at Stansted Mountfichet, Essex, England, recuperating from a flak wound received the day before. Sipping the coffee, I leafed through the Express looking for some news of our mission. All I could find was an article on the third page:

FORTS AND LIBS ON BIG STRIKE

21 June 1944 - Over 1,000 Flying Fortresses and Liberators of the U.S. eighth Air Force struck telling blows on Hitler’s Germany yesterday. Factories and strategic targets deep within the Reich were pounded with tons of high explosives and incendiaries in the continuing air battle. Walls of flak were encountered and the Luftwaffe put up a tremendous defensive effort with all types of fighter aircraft.

The Eighth Fighter Command reported fourteen enemy fighters knocked down to only three lost in the more than four hundred of our planes escorting the bombers. Twenty-eight of the bombers failed to return to their home bases after the raids but the gallant airmen of the Eighth are already preparing for another strike tomorrow.

Mediums of the Ninth Air Force were also out.

“Mediums were also out!” I exclaimed to a navigator in the next bed. “Why in hell does the Eighth get all the recognition? We’re in this war too!” Shifting his weight off his bandaged hip he replied, “Hell’s fire, Johnny, don’t you know? They’ve got Clark Gable and Jimmy Stewart on their team!”

Not satisfied with his answer, I threw the paper in the waste can and went over in my mind what happened yesterday. It was my 34th mission and the target was a buzz bomb site in the Pas de Calais area of northern France. There was no flak until we leveled off for the bomb run, and then it came up in accurate bursts. We were leading our squadron (497th), and I was flying co-pilot for Wilson.

Just after the bomb-bay doors opened, we caught a burst right under us. Humes salvoed the bombs and we

went out of control in a diving turn to the left. We had no right rudder control, and learned later that the cable had been severed. Then the oil pressure in the left engine dropped to zero and the prop governor went out, so I



Battle damaged B-26 following an emergency landing. Flak damage caused failure of left main landing gear.

flipped it into fixed pitch and kept the props synchronized manually.

Wilson regained control but continued rapid descent to evade fighters and to maintain airspeed, as we didn't know how much longer the left engine would run without oil. We took a vote and everyone elected to stay with the ship rather than bail out over France. One convincing factor was the flak hole in our navigator Preston's parachute pack. Wilson asked him for a heading to Manston, the big RAF emergency landing field on the east coast of

England, and by that time we were down to 3,000 ft. and maintaining our altitude.

As we approached the French coast, the left engine gasped its last and froze up, so I feathered the prop and finally had time to put a compress on my right leg where a piece of flak had gone through, just above the ankle. We crossed the Channel at 2,000 ft. and even though there was a 26 mph, 90° crosswind, Wilson brought her in smoothly at Manston by using the rudder trim tab for lateral control.

Four of the ships of our flight of six had been blasted out of formation. Healy had his throttle controls knocked out and couldn't reduce power until his engineer spliced the cables. Burgess had his hydraulic system shot out

and was momentarily out of control but managed to crank his gear down by hand and land safely. Hughes lost an engine and limped across the Channel until the other one went out, and they all bailed out over the English coast with no loss of life.

Mulling this all over in my mind, I vowed that I'd write something to inform the public that the Ninth Air Force was in this war also!

Six months of procrastination went by and we were then based at station A-59, Corneilles-en-Vexin near Pontoise, France. It was two days before Christmas and by that time I'd flown 22 more missions, 7 as first pilot, 3 more as co-pilot checking out replacement crews, and the balance as co-pilot on our lead crew. I had survived the loss of an engine on takeoff with a full bomb load as well as another single-engine battle-damage crash landing and was still irritated at the biased air battle accounts in the news.

I was not on the loading list that day, and when I found out that evening that the day's missions to bomb bridges along the Moselle River had resulted in 47 Marauders lost and 120 more battle damaged because of concentrated fighter attacks, I decided to record my next mission for posterity. This is the account.

It is 23 December 1944 and, as we plod through the almost knee-deep snow back to our hut after evening mess, the air is crisp and snappy. Some of the men walk in silence, for it reminds them of home and snow they haven't seen in over a year or more. For others it is the first snow they have ever walked in. Once inside the hut, and with music from the AEF station in London on the radio, I snap out of my daydream and enter into the bull session that has started over a plate of C rations in the mess hall.

A couple of the boys who'd been on today's disastrous mission decide to have a "short one" and in an hour's time half of a bottle of scotch is gone. The discussion has turned to a minor technicality: Should you crash-land on the runway or on the grass? Then a major problem is raised: Should you get married on home leave before coming back to combat again? Someone remarks, "Aw, come on. Have another drink. We won't fly tomorrow. The weather is moving in again." I look up from writing a letter to my wife and reply, "Yeah,



Marauders forming up over English Channel for strike.

famous last words!" I'm on the loading list for tomorrow and want a clear head and a steady hand, so I go back to my letter and try to pick up the thought that has been broken off in the middle of a sentence. I apologize to my wife for such a dull letter, "but there is nothing much to write about."

One by one the fellows from the other huts, who have dropped in to shoot the breeze, leave and finally everyone decides to turn in. Most of us are flying tomorrow, and because the best radio station on signs off at 2300, we might as well hit the sack just in case an early one is called. I'm not especially tired so I lie awake for a time wondering how soon I can finish my tour and breathe a silent prayer that I've been able to make it through fifty-odd trips so far. Eventually sleep comes and everything is forgotten.

What seems like ten minutes later I hear the door open and I roll over, covering up my head, hoping it isn't the duty officer already, but I know it is. He comes in saying something about being able to grab some breakfast before the truck leaves for briefing and flicks on the light. This automatically turns on our radio, and it's the early morning news. By the time the announcer has covered the vents on the Russian front, I'm wide-awake and out of the sack. Shivering, I try to pull on a flying suit and stir up the fire at the same time. I light a cigarette for Healy and stick it between his lips, as that's the quickest way to get him up - also the safest way. He's had some rough missions and is a bit touchy about being awakened suddenly. If shaken awake he rears up and goes for his .45, but so far he has come to in the nick of time. No use tempting fate, though, especially now.

Yesterday we were restricted to the base and carried our sidearm wherever we went. The krauts have been dropping infiltrators by parachute and all the air bases are taking extra precautions. We even have a man positioned in the top turret of each parked airplane around the clock.

The hot cakes and bacon at the mess hall are too tasty to be washed down with coffee, but I can't miss the truck so I skip the wheat cereal and manage to pour a little grapefruit juice just in time to catch the truck on its way to the briefing tent. The truck is full so I sit on a navigator's lap and he has sharp knees. We careen around

corners on the perimeter strip bordering the airfield and come to a lurching stop in front of the tent. I jump out and almost fold up as the fellow I snowballed yesterday dives off the tailgate onto my back. The crowd moves toward the tent in silence, wondering what the target will be, while down the hill ahead come the intelligence officers and box leaders from the pre-briefing at Group Headquarters. I reflect that the mission planners have been on the job in the operations room of the headquarters chateau for a full two hours before we were awakened, so we don't have it so rough.

Our squadron has the reputation for being the first to arrive at briefings and, as they file into the tent, I walk past the empty benches to have a look at the huge lighted map in the front. An S-2 sergeant has plotted the course with long ribbons and thumbtacks. A buddy remarks, "Shouldn't be too bad," and I nod in agreement, thinking that they all could be rough with so many unknowns not showing on the map, like the unexpected fighter attacks yesterday.

The other squadrons arrive now so I grab a seat and hold up my hand for a flimsy that a corporal is handing out. The briefing officer comes in and calls for silence while he gives a time hack. After all watches are synchronized, I hand the flimsy to my co-pilot to fill in the times en route, code call letters of the formation, start-up time, takeoff time, etc. He can't find his pencil and while I unzip pockets to find mine, the briefing officer begins.

"Gentlemen, our target for today is the railway bridge over the Moselle northwest of Trier at Kons Karthaus, Germany. We attacked this bridge on 5 December and had good results, knocking out one of three spans. Now that the enemy has thrown up a temporary span over the gap, we must knock it out completely and prevent a retreat so that the fighter-bomber boys can have a crack at convoys and troop columns. This action is in direct support of the 90th and 95th infantry divisions who are driving in this direction."

As he points it out on the map, I lean over and tell my co-pilot that I was in that first division before I transferred to the Air Force and am glad I'm not with them now. He looks as though he doesn't much care, so I turn my attention back to the briefing and hear about the bomb load, construction of the bridge, and that this will



Maintenance being performed on B-26 Mauraders at forward base in France. Ground crews endured all types of weather to keep the bombers flying.

Photo credit: Capt. Joseph J. Merhar, Jr. collection/AFHRA.

be a pathfinder mission. At this last bit of choice information a goangoesup from the group. They don't especially relish stooging around in the soup following a pathfinder on a long drawn-out bomb run, but we can't bomb through the clouds without this specially instrumented ship leading us, so we resign ourselves to the fact that at least it will be another one chalked up toward that trip home.

The lights go out and the slide projector shows the flak map overlay on the big chart. The route is plotted to avoid as much enemy ground fire as possible but, on this target, it can't all be by-passed so the positions of the known batteries are given. Gasps are heard from some of the newer men as the number of guns at the target is given as 42, with scattered positions amounting to some 18-odd additional guns along the route from the IP (initial point) to the start of the bomb run. A smirk creeps across my face at their despair, for I can remember back to the time when we'd hit targets with three times that many guns and were over enemy territory for two hours instead of thirty minutes. Back then we still had to cross the Channel in order to get back to base.

The weather in northern France is much the same as it was back in England - mostly bad, and it's running true to form today. Nine-tenths cloud cover at the target shows up on the projected weather situation. The base is presently closed in with low stuff, and clouds on the way out may call for a climb-through on instruments. We stay in formation from the time of takeoff until the return to base so a climb-through is a delicate maneuver with a formation of 36 airplanes. It never fails to produce sweaty palms and a noticeable pucker farther on down the anatomy.

Target pictures are shown and then a diagram of our field to cover taxiing instructions while marshaling all the aircraft prior to takeoff. Finally, the briefing ends with

the security officer giving the code word "challenge" and reply to be used if forced down. The men surge out the small doorway and head for their respective trucks again. It's still an hour until we start engines so we assume they will have time to scrub the mission altogether or at least delay it until the base clears up enough for takeoff. I hope it's just a delay, because I really want to get this one behind me.

Our radio, engineer, and armorer gunners have gone to a separate briefing and are waiting for us at the plane with our flak suits and parachutes. They are busy checking guns, cleaning the Plexiglas surfaces, and loading their equipment. I ask the crew chief how the ship performed on the pre-flight check, and he informs me that the left engine has a slight magneto drop but everything is O.K. He hands me the flight form and, after checking it over and signing it, I turn it over to the co-pilot to fill in the names of the crew. We're carrying two 2,000-lb demolition bombs today.

My regular radio-gunner is grounded with the flu and the boy who is flying in his place is going on his first mission. He is excited and noticeably apprehensive, so I offer him a cigarette but he doesn't smoke. Next I try a stick of gum which he accepts, so the ice is broken. As we both chew away, I tell him how our crew flies and that the other boys will help him out at any time. Forcing a laugh, I tell him about my first one being a milk run, but that doesn't go over so I finally put him at ease by asking about his family. He beams and shows me a picture of his four-month-old daughter and a lock of her hair tied in a ribbon for good luck. My hand absentmindedly goes up to my breast pocket to make sure my own good luck charm is there.

The duty officer rolls up in his jeep to inquire if everything is O.K., and before he pulls away, two flares are shot from the control tower signifying a delay so he calls back over his shoulder that he'll let us know what's up. Before I can catch my bombardier to wash his face in snow, the duty officer is back and it's a one-hour delay. Because the mission will now carry over the noon hour, we can eat an early lunch at 1045, so we head toward the mess hall which is just a ten-minute walk from our hardstand.

The meal is unusually palatable, for a change, and we

take time to enjoy it. Roast beef with mashed potatoes and brown gravy, escalloped corn, and peach halves for dessert. As I flip a piece of gristle off my empty plate into a refuse barrel, I bet a bottle of champagne with my buddy that I'll beat him into formation and then make a side bet as to which of us will see the Statue of Liberty first. We both have the same number of missions in and are sweating to see who gets in his 65 first. Because we're both regular co-pilots on lead crews, we only get the opportunity to fly in that capacity every fourth mission, so the time drags. We continually haunt the Operations Officer to let us fly first pilot missions or as check-out pilots with replacement crews. Today we're both flying first pilot with our regular crew and using a co-pilot from a replacement crew.

Back to the ship now and it's almost time to start engines, so I crawl up into the Marauder, patting her nose on the way as she's brought me back from some pretty rugged flights. The engines kick over right away and, after they are warmed up, I check them for power. The crew chief stands below watching me questioningly and when I finally give him the O.K. sign, he smiles. He doesn't want to break his record of over 80 missions on his ship without it turning back because of mechanical failure. I make a mental note that he's due a bottle of scotch from my next NAAFI ration as a partial reward for excellent maintenance.

Time is short so we finish checking instruments and controls as we taxi out and fall in behind the other ships in the flight. A last minute check of everything and, fifteen seconds after the ship ahead of us starts his takeoff roll, I jam the throttles forward and we zoom down the runway and into the air. I jockey to avoid prop wash and trim her up partially before breaking into a turn to join the flight.

The tension of taking off is relieved now, and I settle down and concentrate on getting into formation as quickly as possible. As we slide up onto the flight leader's wing, I spot the other wing man just coming up, so I've won a bottle of champagne. Granted his ship is a little slower than mine, but he took off first so a bet's a bet. After two more tight turns, to join the rest of the second box, the entire formation proceeds on course. The bombardier crawls up into the nose and I turn the

controls over to the co-pilot for a while.

The first turning point has been reached, and after the engineer has transferred some fuel from the reserve tanks into the mains he helps me and then the co-pilot get into our flak suits then goes back to his tail turret. The bombardier calls the crew and tells them it's time to test-fire their guns so, one by one, they call in and report the guns in working order. After being silent for some time, I call the crew and tell them to be on the lookout for enemy fighters and to give a call as soon as they spot our fighter escort. The bombardier gives a call warning that we are crossing the front lines so on go the flak helmets and I take over again while the co-pilot lights up a cigarette.

We now have rendezvoused with the pathfinder ship and the escort P-47s are zigzagging above us. As we reach the IP, flak puffs burst off to the left and then in front of us, so the leader starts evasive action. The bursts never get close but keep coming up, and I pray they'll stop before the bomb run begins because it will be a long level one and the ground batteries will have plenty of time to plot our course.

A flare from the lead ship signifies the start of the bomb run and I add power as the bomb-bay doors come open. The P-47s have peeled off to the side, to get out of the flak, and sit out there watching the whole show. I mutter something about those lucky "Jug" boys and the bombardier says, "Say again?" I realize that my mike button was depressed, but before I can tell him to skip it, the tail gunner calls in, "Flak



Marauders returning home following strike. Note D-Day stripes on aircraft.

Photo credit: Capt. Joseph J. Merhar, Jr. collection/AFHRA.

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at six o'clock our level and coming up." Bombs away comes just as it begins bursting in the formation and the whole box racks up in a steep turn to dive off the target. At that instant a ship is out of control and with one engine on fire flashes across our nose and the top turret gunner calls out, "It's our number two man!"

He half rolls and begins to dive. The chutes start popping out and the gunner counts them as they blossom into rosettes of white. "One - come on, get out of there! Two-three-three to go now, let's go! - Four. He's in the clouds now, Skipper, and I can't see him anymore!" Ironically I think maybe I'll never collect my champagne and then kick myself mentally for even thinking of the bet at such a time. I call our crew to see if they are O.K. and everyone checks in with the exception of the radio-gunner. This worries me until I call again and he answers. "Yes, sir, what's wrong?" Evidently he was shaken by his first sight of flak so I tell him that everything is O.K. and to sit tight.

The ship lurches and bounces as bursts of flak flash and kerwump below and to our left, and the fragments hitting the fuselage sound like hail against a window pane. After a few more minutes of violent evasive action, our box is finally out of the flak. A check with the crew reveals everyone is O.K., and there is no serious damage to the ship that can be noticed at the time.

Finally, the bombardier informs everyone that the group is now out of enemy territory so I turn the ship over to the co-pilot and pull off my flak suit and helmet after helping him off with his. The inter phone is buzzing now and each crew member wants to tell what he saw.

"Did you see that ship go down?"

"Yeah, it was our number two man."

"How many chutes did you see?"

"I only saw two and then he went under us."

"I saw four get out and open then he went into the clouds."

"This is the tail gunner. Was he on fire?"

"It looked like a direct hit in the engine to me and it started smoking badly but I couldn't see much flame."

"It was burning when it crossed our nose."

"Who was flying that ship, sir?"

"Lieutenant Blach."

"My God! Jim Bowden was in there. He lives in my tent."

"I went through flying school with the co-pilot."

"Wonder if they all got out?"

Silence. I snap them out of it with, "Did anyone see any bogies?"

"This is the top turret gunner. I saw a vapor trail high over the target but it was headed east."

"Must have been a jet-propelled job, Smitty."

"Could be."

"Okay, men, save your information for interrogation and Skowski can come up front and transfer the rest of the gas. Check for any broken lines or flak damage when you come through, John."

"Roger."

He reports there is no visible damage and, while transferring fuel, he turns on the radio compass at the radio operator's console. When I switch over to it on my control box, a big band is playing "Stardust." It's the AEF station in London with the "On The Record" program. The voice of Cpl. George Monahan, announcing the next selection, breaks off my reverie of the girl at a table for two with candlelight and wine that I always associate with that song. Now it's Spike Jones murdering "Holiday for Strings" and, as I take over to let the bombardier crawl out of the nose, the co-pilot is beating out the rhythm on his control wheel. He's not listening - just trying to warm his fingers. There are no defrosters, so the fresh air vents must be left open to keep the windshield from frosting up.

Punching the VHF radio to command channel, I listen to the formation leader calling A-59 to inform them of our approach for landing. The boys in the rear come up into the radio compartment as the formation nears the field, and I think that riding back there or in the nose takes guts and I wouldn't trade with them for anything. The weather is good back at the base, which is a relief to all. It's hairy coming back to find your field almost closed in if you're low on gas because the usual half hour required to land a formation under those conditions might mean a choice of sticking with the formation or declaring an emergency and trying to get in quickly.

As our element peels off to land, I hoist my seat up a notch and set things up for the curing approach. Slowing down a bit, so as not to catch the prop wash of the ship preceding us. I call for wheels down and finally the flaps, as I roll the elevator trim wheel furiously. I nose down to the alternate side of the runway and throttle back. My teeth grit at a rather sloppy approach and a last blast of throttle is needed to keep the airspeed up to 120. When I flare out, she floats a bit so I pump her down and finally she settles in with a slight bump. I shake my head in disgust and the co-pilot laughs. I swear I'm going to go up and shoot landings the rest of the day just to grease one in, but I never do. The runway is slippery, so I hold the nose high to slow her down as much as possible and then, as the nose wheel comes down, apply the brakes on the sanded portion at the end of the runway.

Back at the hardstand, after the ship is parked and engines cut, I tell the crew chief she ran smoothly and had plenty of power. The radio mechanic wants to know how reception was, and I toss an "O.K." over my shoulder as I join the gunners counting flak holes in the ship. Just a few close-to-vital spots and none too big, although we counted a total of 36, Sheridan says, "Hope the damage-repair boys haven't run out of Prince Albert cans to patch her up." Suddenly, hydraulic fluid pours from a line in the left wheel well and no one can understand why it hadn't leaked before. Oh well, we're back and lucky again, and that makes hole number 37.

Piling chutes and gear on Jeeps, the crews head for interrogation and when we arrive, some of the recent replacement crews already are describing the mission to the intelligence officer. He peers over his glasses trying to get in a routine question as they gesture and babble excitedly. He's ready for my report and I tell him the flak was moderate in intensity but accurate. Cries of astonishment arise from the newer men who have been calling it anything from intense to unbearable. He grins and finishes up my report, remarking that four bags of mail came in this afternoon. This prompts all the lagers into leaving immediately with me among the first.

I have a couple of letters from home and read them hurriedly before washing up for supper. The usual post-interrogation critique begins at the mess hall and experiences are reviewed:

"I couldn't stay with him on that turn."

"How much power were you pulling on the climb out?"

"The 496th squadron lost two ships at the target."

"Yeah, and Mac came all the way back on one engine."

"Anyone in your crew get hurt?"

"Nope, lucky this time."

"My right engine ate gas all the way?"

"Have the carburetor checked."

"Guess that air raid alert last night was for real."

"How so?"

"The MP's caught two SS infiltrators in a barn off the field."

"S-2 said they had enough explosives cached there to blow up half the airplanes on the field."

"No kidding?"

We hang around the mess hall for a while but, because the alert and restriction is still on, we finally separate and go to our respective semi-underground huts. Our squadron is lucky being billeted in huts in revetments formerly occupied by Luftwaffe anti-aircraft gun crews. Ironic, but these were the only buildings left intact after a FW-190 fighter outfit abandoned the field.

Later that night we're all in the sack listening to the late-night BBC news. The announcer is going into great detail describing what the Eighth Air Force did today- walls of flak, 2,000 bombers participating, target identifications, damage inflicted, number of planes lost, fighter escort battle with the Luftwaffe, tons of bombs dropped, breaking the back of the Wermacht in the West, etc. Finally he ends up with, "Some 300 Marauders, Havocs, and Invaders of the Ninth Air Force, based in France and Belgium, attacked rail and highway bridges along the Western Front.

I heave a sigh of disgust and pull the blanket up over my head to shut it out, for tomorrow is Christmas Day and I go up again.