

*Bomber  
Legends*

# “Shot down over Brenner Pass”



by Donald Tuttle

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December 27, 1944, 1100 hours. We were flying lead for the group, trying once again to destroy the German's supply and escape route in the Brenner Pass, northern Italy.

We were flying what I considered low, 21,000 ft., had turned on the IP and started the bomb run. The flak was heavy, intense and accurate. I was in the tail turret of LADY IN THE DARK and with all the anti-aircraft shells coming up so close, I was beginning to really get scared!

I wanted to get my mind off the flak which was climbing up everywhere in the formation, so I turned my turret to the right to see how Dalrymple's crew in FEARLESS FOSDICK was doing. They were flying #2 position with RAG-A-DAS flying #5 position behind and below them.

I just got turned around so I could see them real good when they took a direct hit and exploded in a ball of fire. I lost some real good buddies in an instant!

I watched MacGrath fly RAD-A-DAS up through that inferno of flaming gasoline and debris and come up out of it with his Liberator completely afire from one end to the other! Now I was really scared!

We all unloaded our bombs and got the hell out of there!

December 28, the following day, we get up and go down to the briefing room to see what the target for the day will be.

All the fear from the previous day came rushing back to me as I looked at the map and saw that red string headed right back up again to the BRENNER PASS!

Now I had only been twenty years old for a month and when I saw what they had planned for us I figured that a month was just about as long as I'd be twenty years old!

Evidently, we hadn't hit the tunnel in the Brenner Pass but, had started an avalanche that blocked one end of it. The brass was not satisfied, so they were sending us up again. Now, I'd had enough of the Brenner Pass the day before to last me a lifetime. It was very obvious that you could get killed up there!

It seemed like most of us had a premonition that day but no one came right out and said it. As we were lighting up for a smoke before climbing aboard, Frank Visciglia, our engineer, was offered the third light on one match. "Nothing doing", he said "that's unlucky!" One of the other gunners scooped up a handful of dirt and said, "I'm taking this up with me so I'll feel like I'm close to earth!" Our co-pilot "Chet" Sorenson said, "If I ring the bail-out bell in a series of short rings it means prepare to bail out! If you hear a long continuous ring, it means bail out immediately!" He had never said that on the other missions. That just increased my fear!

The green flare went up meaning the mission was on. Our pilot Capt. Bob Willding was flying lead for the group again. We

took off, formed up and headed again for that damned Brenner Pass!

I must admit at this time, I was hoping all the way to the target that something, a mechanical failure, a miracle, anything would happen so we could abort that mission. No luck! Everything went fine and it seemed that in no time we were over enemy territory.

It seems there was some mix up in the heading to the target as some of the Liberators from other groups up ahead were making 360 (degree) turns. The flak was coming up already as we turned on the I.P and we were flying at around 21,000 feet and the Germans had no trouble plastering our formations with anti-aircraft fire. The shells were bursting just as bad, if not worse, than the day before when Dalrymple's plane exploded!

I was cursing and praying at the same time when we started the bomb run. All of a sudden I heard and felt a big explosion. We had been hit and the plane nosed over into a dive with Bob Willding and Chet Sorenson fighting the controls to get the old LADY IN THE DARK leveled off, while anti-aircraft shells exploded around us.

I was in the tail turret and as the plane started down I was looking straight up into the sky at flak that was bursting above us, when all of a sudden the Liberator that was flying behind and below us roared over my turret so close that I thought my guns would touch the bottom of his plane! He really wracked that Liberator up over us to avoid a collision. He was so close that I could see every rivet in the bottom of that Liberator.

I wasn't scared anymore, I was terrified!

As we were going down, I think I set a record for

getting out of a tail turret with a flak suit on. I found my chute which was on the floor behind the turret. I always left it there because I couldn't get in the turret with it on.

I heard the "prepare to bail out" signal and yanked the hatch open in the bottom of the waist section just in time to see three men bailing out and

passing underneath towards the rear of the plane. I had no way of knowing who they were! It could have been the pilot and co-pilot and someone else. The ship was still plummeting to earth and I figured that some others had already bailed out before I even opened the hatch. I had heard the short buzzes on the bail out bell, seen three men bail out (maybe more) and I was ready to go - believe me!

I started to jump out but, I couldn't - someone behind me had grabbed my harness and was holding me back from bailing out! I tried again but he wouldn't let me go! I told him (one of the waist gunners, I don't remember who) that they were bailing out up front. He just looked me in the eye with his oxygen mask on and kept shaking his head "no!" I tried to get away from him but I was small (baby of the crew) and just couldn't do it.

I begged him, cursed him and he wouldn't let me go! Just kept shaking his head "no!" The plane was still going down and I prepared myself to die!

All of a sudden the plane started to level off. I just couldn't believe it! Bob and Chet had somehow managed to bring her back into level flight, with two good engines and one in bad shape but running. They tried to find a way back towards friendly territory through the Alps mountains which is a feat in itself!

We had two navigators and they were the ones, along with the bombardier, who bailed out over the target. Now we had to find our own way back!

Now that I was sure we'd be flying level for awhile I took my parachute back off and made my way through the bomb bay, which was still loaded with bombs. The bombs were gouged and scarred by flak, the catwalk was a mangled wreck. Everything was drenched with gasoline. When I got up front, there was Frank Visciglia the engineer, stuffing a jacket into a big hole in the main tank to try and keep the gas in the tank to increase our chances of getting back. I'll never forget it! He was completely soaked in gasoline and crying. Nevertheless, he managed to slow down the flow of gasoline.

They salvaged the bombs and I told them how things were in the back. Chet said that the bailout bell was shot out and if we started to go down "bailout!" The pilot said to throw out everything that we could get loose to lighten the ship.



We were really in bad shape! LADY IN THE DARK was a flying wreck! One engine gone, flak holes everywhere, hydraulics shot out, gasoline leaking and dripping all over everything and everyone! One spark and we would have exploded in an inferno!

I made my way back over the mangled catwalk through the now empty bomb bay which was filled with gasoline fumes. I was glad that the bombs were gone but, the gas fumes were just as dangerous as a bomb!

We had lost a lot of altitude in that dive and all of a sudden we were getting plastered with flak again. We were sitting ducks at that altitude. (Around 9,000 ft.)

Bob Willding, the pilot, had Robert Best, the nose gunner, sit in his turret and guide us past some of the towns below, one of which was Ferrara, which was notorious for its heavy and accurate flak.

When I got back to the waist section, I informed the gunners back there how the situation was up front. We threw out the waist guns, all the ammunition, all the flak suits, our 45's, the rations and everything else we could rip loose!

Suddenly, I remembered that Mike Radovich was still in the ball turret which was down in the lowered position. Ed Stringham, a waist gunner and I tried to bring the turret back up hydraulically but the hydraulics were shot out and we had to crank him up manually. He was drenched in gasoline and just about unconscious from the fumes. He was small, but solidly built and very heavy for his size. We got him hitched up to pure oxygen and he started coming around. To think now that we had almost forgotten him.

I remember him and I kneeling down by the waist window trying to make ourselves into as small a target as possible as we went through more anti-aircraft fire from a town below us. We had no more flak suits now as they had all been thrown out to lighten the ship,

All of a sudden, Mike noticed that he didn't have a chute! We found one somewhere, but it didn't have the snap hooks on it. It was an odd ball chute with rings on it like his harness and we couldn't hitch it on any possible way.

Let me tell you he was pretty frightened. He felt a little (damn little) relieved when I decided we would hitch our harnesses together and bail out with just my

chute. We were the smallest guys in the crew and figured it would work. I kept after Mike trying to get him to remember exactly where he'd left his parachute. Finally after some agonizing moments, he said he'd left it on top of the rear part of the bomb bay.



When the plane had got hit and started plunging downward, the chute had slid forward out of sight on top of the bomb bay. I climbed up there and sure enough, there it was! What a relief! The whole top of the bomb bay was riddled with flak holes but, somehow his chute was spared!

*(Above & Below)  
449th Bomb Group  
Liberators being  
fueled and loaded  
before a mission*

We got past a few more towns that shot flak up at us but it was out of our range. Someone up front spotted some ME-109's. I didn't see them myself, but evidently they decided not to engage us. We would have made a perfect



target for them. We had no flak suits, no ammunition and leaking gasoline. One tracer would be all it would take to blow us to kingdom come!

Old LADY IN THE DARK was still struggling towards friendly territory. We were losing altitude and gasoline. Right now our biggest worry was how far the gasoline in the tanks would take us. Someone spotted an airfield down below and we were going to try and land on it, friendly or not! The wheels would not come down hydraulically or manually and we couldn't make a belly

landing because the sparks would set off the gasoline and turn us in a flaming torch! We'd have to keep going till we ran out of gas and then bailout!

Suddenly, the engines quit and we started going down. All the gas was gone and it was time to bail out! Now, I had never bailed out or used a parachute before but Ed Stringham had. He had bailed out over Yugoslavia on a previous mission with another crew.

I said "Ed, you know what to do so you go first and

we'll watch you." He bailed out and in a split second he was out of sight so I really didn't see him do anything that would benefit me. Mike Radovich was next and I thought he'd never drop out of that hatch. Finally when I could see the ground again, I shoved him out and dove out right behind him. I

could almost reach out and touch the right rudder as it went by me. All of a sudden there was no noise. Everything was deathly quiet!

I was clear of the ship so I pulled the d-ring.

Nothing happened!

I pulled it again and still nothing happened. I had to get that chute opened as the ground was coming up pretty fast!

I pulled up the flap in front of the chute and dug the little cable out that released the chute. The pilot chute popped out, filled with air and dragged the main chute out. I watched it as it snaked skyward and finally blossomed. What a relief!

I looked down to see where I was going to land and my feet were dragging through the tops of trees. I had gone forward in the direction the plane was headed while I was falling and I was on top of a small mountain. The other guys who had bailed out ahead of me were still in the air drifting towards friendly territory. They passed right over me.

My feet kind of snagged in the trees and I landed on my right shoulder and almost was knocked senseless! The wind was blowing quite hard up there and I pulled the shroud lines to spill the air out of my chute. Before I could completely collapse the chute I would be dragged

over rocks and into boulders and it hurt so much that I'd let go of the shroud lines and the chute would fill up and drag me some more. Finally the wind let up just as the chute dropped over the edge of a cliff and collapsed. It was a good thing that the ball gunner and I didn't go down on my chute!

I remember sitting about four feet from that drop-off, dazed, bruised and glad to be alive! All of a sudden I couldn't believe my eyes! There was a good old P-51 fighter plane about thirty feet out from me and a little lower. First time I'd ever been on the ground looking down at a plane that was flying!

He waved at me and I waved back to let him know I was O.K. He came back several times after that, to check on me, I guess. I guess the fighters had seen our ship go down and were out looking for survivors.

I was just sitting there wondering where all the other guys were and how they had made out when I heard someone walking behind me. I turned and there was an Italian soldier in full uniform with a holstered pistol on his belt. I had thrown my .45 away and had nothing to protect myself. I was too bruised and sore to fight with him and besides I was too small. He was a big man and I just figured I was a "goner." My luck had run out for sure!

Suddenly, he asked me for cigarettes. I couldn't believe it! I always carried a lot of cigarettes with me so I gave him a pack of Chesterfields that had only two or three missing. He said "Grazie" and some other words in Italian which I didn't understand and then walked away down a path from the farmhouse. I never saw him again.

A few minutes later I heard someone speaking Italian and asking me if I was English. I turned around and there was a young girl about fifteen or sixteen years old. She was kind of hanging back but when I said "Americano" she came over and helped me get on my feet. I unbuckled my parachute harness and gathered up the chute. She took me further up the mountain to an old farmhouse where there were two women, an old man and several children. The first thing they did was give me a glass of wine. I gulped it down and they gave me another and I downed that one too. I was beginning to feel a little warm inside and since I never drank I



refused any more.

They were very good to me. They gave me some kind of soup. They seemed very poor. They scraped the mud off me, washed my face and attended to my scrapes and scratches. They were very nice to me and treated me like I was part of the family. It was like they couldn't do enough for me.

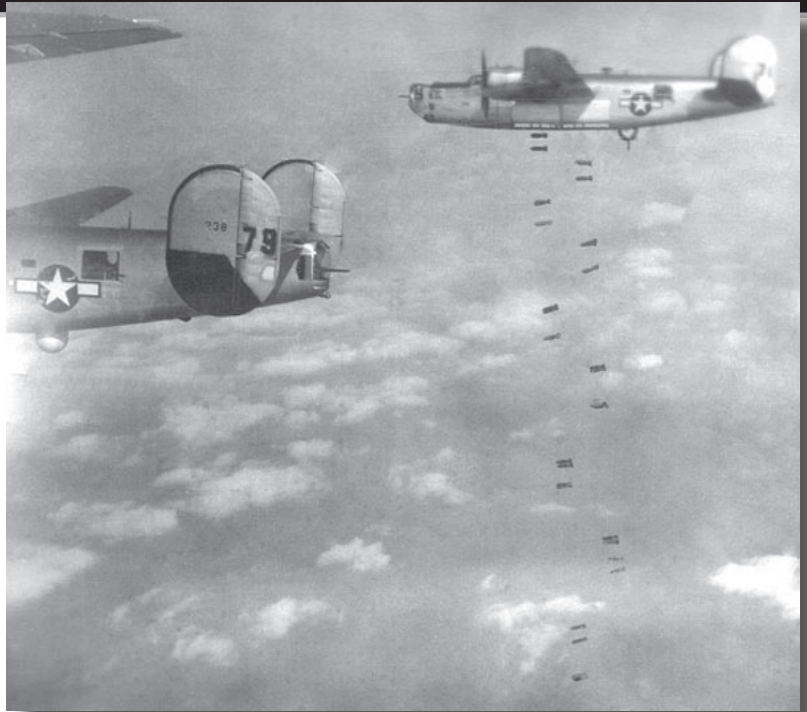
At the time I didn't know exactly where I was but I was north of the British 8th Army lines. No mans land I guess. The P-51 came by flying low several times that afternoon.

They had some haystacks there to feed their goats and they showed me a large one that had a hole in it where the dog slept. They apparently wanted to hide me in case some Germans came around. I crawled into the hole strapped up in my "chute" and slept there that night. I awoke very cold the next morning to the sound of the P-51 flying overhead. I went back to the farmhouse, where they fed me again. I gave them about half of my parachute, the chocolate in my escape kit and I gave my sheepskin pants to the old man who thanked me endlessly.

I thanked them all and headed down the mountain to see if I could find my way back across the lines. I came to a small cluster of homes and I saw a half dozen men running behind a building. They were all armed but far enough away so I couldn't tell if they were Germans or not. They hadn't seen me so I got down behind a big boulder and waited for quite awhile.

Finally I figured they were gone and started down the mountain again. I hadn't gone more than 100 yards down the trail when they all came out from behind a different building. They recognized me as one of the downed fliers and saluted me.

They took me back to their outfit which was at least a mile south of where they found me. They fed me in their officers mess which was better than where their enlisted men ate. Later they took me in a British truck (Lorry) east to the American Fifth Army lines. I spent the afternoon and night with those infantrymen who treated me royally. They all wanted to know what it was like to go deep into enemy territory on bombing missions. They asked a lot of questions about anti-aircraft fire, fighters and types of targets. They kept me awake half the night.



The next morning I had mess with them and they took me by jeep to an airfield quite a ways away from them. Soon a C-47 landed and took me back to my airfield in southern Italy.

When I got back I learned that the rest of my crewmembers had got out of the plane. Bud Rusch, the radio operator, and Bob Willding had forced themselves through the partially opened bomb bay doors. Frank Visciglia, the engineer, and closest buddy practically rode the plane down before he jumped. He always told me he was deathly afraid of parachuting and wouldn't be able to do it if he got shot down. As it was he apparently pulled his ripcord before he got out of the plane. His "chute" opened but caught on the tailskid of the plane. There was no time or way to get free. He rode the bomber down knowing full well that he would die on impact. It really tore me up to lose him as a close buddy. The three men who first bailed out were taken POW.

We were sent to the Isle of Capri to "rest up" and try to forget what we'd been through. I had to fly ten more missions to complete my fifty. Somehow I managed to live through them and was sent back to the good old USA.

*Special Narrative Report... on following page*

## 449th SPECIAL NARRATIVE REPORT

### No. 189 MISSION: Brenner R/R Line Loop

DATE: 28 December 1944

#### I. CHRONOLOGY

28 B-24's took off at 0821 hours to attack loop in Brenner R/R line (4658N-1125E) There were 2 early returns. 13 dropped on the target 31.5 tons of 1,000 lb RDX bombs at 1140 hours from 23,300 to 24,000 feet. 13 others jettisoned their bombs as described in next paragraph. 25 returned to base at 1453 hours. One lost (crashed at friendly field), none missing, none at friendly fields.

#### II. ROUTE AND ASSAULT

Departed San Vito on course at 8,000 feet at 0900 hours as the first group in the Wing line. Proceeded to control point at 4532N-1243E to Farra (4607N-1221E) toward I.P. Because of a faulty interphone, an incorrect heading was taken shortly after Farra. When the mistake was discovered at 46323N-1131E, a 180 degree turn to the left to avoid flak at Bolzano and to reach the I.P. A-1 and A-2 boxes executed this turn but were not followed by B-1 and B-2 boxes who elected to proceed directly to the I.P. A-1 and A-2 completed their turn, came in east of the I.P., and attacked on a heading of 353 degrees true. Bombing was done visually and by individual boxes. Rallied right and proceeded to Lappago (4657N-1148E) to Farra (4607N-1221E) and then reciprocal of route out to base.

At the time that A-1 and A-2 boxes made the 180 degree turn to the left, B-1 box decided to turn right to the I.P. and was followed by B-2 box. B-1 and B-2 boxes received flak at the I.P. and on the bomb run. The lead plane of B-1 box was badly hit by flak before Vipiteno, pulled off sharply and down to the left, jettisoning his bombs at 4650N-1126E, B-1-5 and B-1-6 also jettisoned at the same time. The box scattered and turned left following the leader. A wide turn was made to the left and at 4620N-1040E, B-1-1 gave up the lead to B-1-2 who had a wounded navigator and bombardier and so, in turn, relinquished the lead to B-1-3. B-1-3 took over the lead and reformed the widely scattered box at 4600N-1035E. Executed a 180 degree turn to the right at 4540N-1020E, proceeded to 4620N-1100E, and planned to attack the Brenner R/R line on a heading of 80 degrees true. However, the lead bombardier could not synchronize on the R/R Line and the bombs of the three remaining planes were jettisoned at 4632N-1120E at 1206 hours. From this point, returned to course and returned to base on reciprocal course of route out.

B-2 box had followed B-1 box to the I.P. and on the bomb run

when B-1 box scattered, B-2 pulled to the right to avoid the B-1 box. Continued to the target on an axis of 340 degrees true but could not synchronize on the target and rallied left to make another attack on the target on a heading of 220 degrees true. Could not synchronize on the target on this attack and so continued on through and turned south to return to course. The lead plane was hit by flak, causing its bombs to be salvoed and the rest of the box salvoed on the lead plane at 4648N-1150E at 1201 hours. B-2-2 took over the lead of this box and returned to course at 4625N-1145E and from this point proceeded to base on reciprocal course of route out.

There were a few scattered low clouds along the Italian Coast below flight line on route out with visibility about 20 miles. Over the Po Valley there was 1/10 high clouds at flight level (23,000 feet). The weather was clear at the target with visibility over 30 miles. On return, there were few low clouds over the eastern portion of the Adriatic and the Italian Coast with only high clouds over the base on return.

No escort was provided or sighted.

No radio jamming was reported.

#### III. RESULTS

A-1 box dropped on the mountain side and valley short of the target with approximately 25 bursts plotted from 2,000 to 4,000 feet short of the aiming point. From A-2 box approximately 15 bursts are plotted 500 to 1,000 feet short of the target with two bursts falling on the tunnel approximately 1,000 feet from the mouth of the tunnel. The bombs of B-1 and B-2 boxes were jettisoned as explained above.

#### IV. ENEMY RESISTANCE

A. Fighters: No enemy aircraft were sighted.

B. Flak: Flak at the target was M/IA-H and of 4 to 5 minutes duration

[Losses: One (Hit on bomb run, limped back to friendly field and crashed with crew bailing out just before. 3 parachuted when plane was hit and one killed in crash when parachute caught in plane.) Damage: 23 (2 serious, 21 minor). Casualties: From flak - 2 (1 serious, 1 minor); Other - 1 killed in crash.]

Credit: 449th Bomb Group Association