

The Perfect Pass

by Jo Haden

*(Daughter of Lt. Robert O. Haden,
Navigator, 381st BS, 485th BG, 15th AF)*



After the raid on Regensburg, February 16, 1945, another drama took place through the Brenner Pass. The following is an account as told to Jo Haden Galbraith, daughter of Lt. Robert (Bob) O. Haden, Navigator from the 831 st squadron who passed away in 1995. He was on Glenn Hess's crew and they were on the raid to Regensburg. The target was the Obertraubling Messerschmitt assembly plant. It was the largest plant of its kind in Europe and turned out 200-300 ME-109 fighter aircraft each month.

The crew was on a mission to bomb the Messerschmitt Plant at Regensburg, Germany. As they began the bomb run through heavy flak the number one engine took a direct hit, blowing the prop into the sky and causing the plane to buck like a wild bronco. It was immediately thrown into a severe left bank as the pilot, Lt. Hess, struggled to regain control. Unnerved, and now flying with only three engines, they courageously pressed on toward the target. The bomb bay doors were opened, and within seconds the number two engine was hit, blowing off the turbo charger. Fortunately it did not explode, but the impact caused the plane to bank hard to the right out of control. To make matters worse it threw them into the prop-wash of another bomber, causing the plane to flip upside down. The order was given to bail out, but the centrifugal force caused by the fierce spinning kept the men pinned to the airplane floor and walls frantically trying to pull themselves out of the hatches and waist windows. Caught in a death trap and unable to budge, the crew began their final prayers when the plane (aided no doubt by a little Divine intervention) miraculously righted itself enabling the pilot to pull out of the spin and regain control. Now at 10,000 feet and with a limited amount of fuel the crew was forced to make some quick decisions. They had two choices: fly to Switzerland, which was doable, or take their chances and try to make it to the allied border in northern Italy. If they landed in Switzerland, a neutral country, they knew they would be interned there for the rest of the war. This did not sit well with the men, as there was no telling how long that might be, possibly years. They were also concerned that they might be classified as M.I.A. (missing in action), causing undue stress on their families. Unable to maintain an altitude higher than 10,000 feet with only two engines, the navigator, Lt. Haden, searched for a route to Italy that would cut through the 15,000 ft. Alpine Mountains. He found it in Brenner Pass, a valley which connects Innsbruck, Austria with Bolzano, Italy.

Brenner Pass is technically at the border between Italy and Austria. The crews always considered it to include the entire valley that snakes through the Alps Mountains with Verona at the South end and Innsbruck at the North end. In places the valley is just wide enough for

a river, a road and a railroad. It was a main connection between the Axis. The valley is well over 100 miles long and every foot was heavily defended by 558 large antiaircraft gun installations. Under the best conditions in peacetime a journey through the Alps at that altitude would be considered treacherous. For a crippled bomber low on fuel and being shot at from all sides, it was darn near suicide. To further complicate matters much of northern Italy was still occupied by the Germans, which meant even if they made it through the Alpine Pass in one piece, they would still have a considerable flight over enemy territory.

Fuel was a major concern. Before take off the tanks were topped off at 2750 gallons and the planes were loaded to the hilt with bombs. On the way to the target the group tried to gain as much altitude as possible, consequently burning about 3/4 of the fuel by the time they reached their mark. This meant there might be as little as 600 gallons of fuel left after the run. However, if they made it over the Alps it would be downhill the rest of the way.

Haden calculated that if the Gods were with them (and if they didn't hit a mountain or get blown out of the sky) they would have just enough fuel to eke across the Allied border into Rimini, a coastal town on the Adriatic with an army base and runway. With no time to ponder the idea a vote was taken, and trusting their navigator, the captain and crew opted to take their chances and go for it.

Needless to say it was a harrowing flight through the snow-covered Alps, (pilot Glenn Hess likened it to guiding an elephant through the eye of a needle under fire) but somehow against all odds, their badly crippled plane managed to make it through the Pass, cross the allied border on fumes, and hobble to a stop at the tail end of the Rimini runway. Hess checked the fuel gauge - it was empty.

Stunned and badly shaken by their ordeal, the men crawled out to inspect the plane. Hess recalled: "The plane was so badly shot-up that you couldn't lay your hand anywhere on it without touching a flak hole. We hadn't been out of the plane more than two minutes when this General came flying down the runway raising all kinds of Hell about us landing on his airstrip. It was a fighter strip and the General was screaming at me to get my f--- plane off his runway!" I stood there and took his insults for awhile until finally exasperated I stopped him by saying 'Sir, would you like to inspect my plane?' We looked at each other for a moment and then I just walked away. Once he got a good look at it we heard him yell, 'Hell this thing ain't worth movin'!' He then ordered a bulldozer to shove it over the nearest embankment, and that's where it stayed."

(Material Submitted By Sammy Schneider, 485th BG)