

## Gotha Mission – 24 Feb 44

By

Hal Turell, Navigator, 703<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Squadron

"On February 24, 1944, we were briefed to attack the Goether Wagon Werks, an aircraft factory located in Gotha, Germany, that produced the Messerschmitt Me-110 two-engine fighter. This was to be mission number 13 for the crew. We had been scheduled for this same target two days prior but it had been scrubbed due to weather. It was a deep penetration of enemy territory and we all had very bad premonitions about this mission. The attrition rate on experienced crews had been quite heavy. Our chances then of surviving to complete a tour were one in three. In order gain some extra crews, the 8th Air Force had extended the mission tour from 25 to 30 and moreover told us to fly with a nine man crew. This meant leaving one gunner behind. Ray Davis who manned the ball turret underneath the ship was selected not to fly that day.

I climbed aboard by going over the nose wheel into the forward compartment. The familiar smell of hydraulic and gasoline filled the compartment. After securing my briefcase and laying out my charts, I preflighted the navigators compartment. The drift meter was ok, as was the instrument panel. The only readings I could get on the ground were the altimeter and temperature. I checked the intervolameter on the bomb controls and saw that the lights were working. Some one had started the putt-putt, the auxiliary generator so we had electric power. I could here the chattering of the little gasoline motor and feel the vibrations through the thin sheet metal of the airplane's skin. After checking to see that the windows and astral dome were clean, I thumb tacked my chart to the plywood board that served as the navigators desk. I left my other instruments in the case as take off usually sent them scattering. I then joined the crew outside the airplane for pulling through the props, a smoke and chit chat.

Because all of us were quite apprehensive about this mission, we so loaded the ship with extra ammunition that it barely could take off. After all, one thousand rounds of ammunition could be fired by each gun in two minutes. Our plane that day was Dixie Dudrop. Someone else had named her but we had flown her several times before. She was a good bird. Finally it was time for start engines so we all took our places on board. As the nose turret was kept empty during take off and landings, I positioned myself against the radio room bulkhead on the flight deck behind the pilots. We watched as each engine whined in protest and then finally caught with a burst of smoke and loud coughs. After all four were running and the pilots had completed their checks, there was a wait. Then the green flare was fired from the tower and each ungainly beast waddled off the hardstands onto the taxi way. The B-24 is graceful, beautiful and deadly looking in the air. On the ground It looks like a slab sided prehistoric monster wading through swamps.

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The metal shrieks protest as we rumble along and the hydraulic motors whine in chorus with it. Overall there is the growling of the engines and the steady chatter of the putt-putt. Tires squeal as engines rev up to put us into a turn and we take our place in the line of huge gray beasts in the gloom of the morning haze. In front and behind are row after row of these Liberators, waiting, poised like race horses at the starting gate. The throaty rumble of the engines, the propellers turning and the noses bobbing up and down as the pilots applied their brakes to keep from over running the plane in front. Each time the hydraulic pumps add their high pitched protests to the cacophony of noise. Nose to tail they wait in a tight line, the end of the queue lost in the mist.

The take off flare arches into the sky and before it touches the ground, the first Liberator is hurtling down the runway. Thirty seconds later, before the first plane has cleared the runway the next plane in line pushes their throttles forward and roars toward the sky.

Europe was clear, cold and covered with snow, ideal for a daylight raid. The Germans knew that too and were ready for us. Thirty crews climbed into their B-24 Liberators, four engine bombers and took off. All were airborne in 15 minutes. We climbed to an altitude of 12,000 feet where the group was circling over a radio beacon. As each plane arrived at altitude it joined the circle until the group was in formation. We then flew towards the coast to join the Combat Wing.

The wings also formed up by flying in huge circles allowing stragglers to catch up and then headed out over the North Sea. By this point, five planes had turned back because of various malfunctions. The remaining twenty five pressed on. We were fifteen minutes ahead of schedule at this point. This was to cost us dearly in the hours ahead. We missed our rendezvous with our fighter cover. Crossing the North Sea, the sky was icy blue with not a single cloud in sight. We left no vapor trails as the air was much too cold. The silver formations sparkled like a ballroom's mirror globe as they promenaded their stately ballet through the European sky. The music of Ravels "Pavanne For A Dead Princess," glided through my mind. I thought, "here comes the death parade." The sea was wild from the recent winter storms and almost white with foam. I had a vision of the sea receding as it did for Moses and the bottom exposed. What a wilderness of sunken ships and planes might lie on this narrow floor. These waters, the battle arena of so many wars, some remembered and more forgotten. Broken ships and broken bones, would carpet all the sea bed. From red bearded Vikings, the Spanish Armada, the Battle of Jutland, the remnants were now covered by a forest of Lancaster's, Heinkel's, Fortress's, Wellington's and Liberator's. Fresh bones from the New World come to an alien shore.

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Sergeant Billie McClellan, so far from his Oklahoma farm, was flying in the ball turret that day. We had to leave Ray Davis behind as result of the new nine man crew rule. As the formation crossed the North Sea he could see enemy fighters picking off some B17s that had aborted their formation and turned back to England. Mac saw eight of these Flying Fortress's go down into the icy waters. No parachutes could save them from the freezing depths. A man would live just two minutes at those temperatures. Mac tried to shoot at the Nazis going after the stragglers, twisting the turret through 365 degrees. He then heard a pounding on the turret. It was Sergeant Roland Woods, waist gunner trying to get his attention. To open the ball turret, the guns have to be first pointed to the rear and then straight down. Mac opened the turret and asked Woody what the hell he wanted and couldn't Woody see that he was busy shooting!

Sergeant Woods did not say anything, he just pointed to what he was trying to hold. Then, Mac saw that the main oxygen tube, that supplied the ball turrets' air tanks, had broken off. Woody had folded it double but could not hold it and the tube was snaking around, bleeding the ship's oxygen supply. The male filler plug was broken. Because Sergeant Raymond Davis had been left behind, Billie was not used to this turret and he did not spot the problem before takeoff. They could not just hold the hose doubled as it was to be a long mission. We were just starting and were short one gunner. So the Ball turret could not be used for the remainder of the mission. This left us no defense to attacks from below. There was no question of abandoning the mission, as the enemy was all around. Group leader kept calling for the high fighter cover to come down. They did. They were Germans!

The Germans used a variety of attacks. First, they came in waves of fighters, line abreast, then they would form a queue and come roaring in one after the other. Other fighters stood off at a distance and fired rockets into the formation. Dive bombers came through with a large ball hanging on the end of a cable about 100 feet long. We heard the tail gunner, Sergeant Bill Adair, say some enemy fighters, after their frontal pass, were blowing up after they were a mile or so past the group. It looked as though three or four hundred fighters were working over our Combat Wing with special emphasis on our group. Mac was overjoyed to see two German fighters collide on two occasions, they were so thick.

Our lead plane was hit and did a slow roll towards us. At the same time, about five Germans came right at us as we were now outside the formation. Our pilot, Lieutenant Ralph Stimmel, was able to side slip our plane when the frontal pass came. This threw their aim off considerably. One of our lead ships caught a direct hit. It exploded, sending airplane and body parts through the formation doing considerable damage to other ships. One ME-109 came

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head on into one of our group and blew off the Liberators' nose. As the ship went spinning down, the 109 pulled up into a steep climb. The top turret gunner of the following B-24 put a long burst into him. The 109 fell off on its back and went down through the formation, crashing into another Liberator in the low element and took off it's whole tail section. This ship headed up into the bomb bay of another Lib and the two planes collided. One of them went sailing through the formation scattering it. Breaking a formation is the German fighter pilots dream. The 445<sup>th</sup> fortunately had their most experienced crews out that day and the formation quickly recovered. Each ship taking its place, as though it was a drill every time an incident like that occurred.

On the bomb run, another fighter came within 100 yards of the lead plane and released a parachute bomb that the B-24 ran head on into. The explosion tore the entire top section of the plane off back to the wing. It then caught fire and slid tail first to the ground. The deputy lead took over and continued the bomb run. Then the plane on our right wing got hit and went into a loop heading right for us. Ralph had some frantic jockeying to clear him and get back in formation. The attacks continued through the approach, bomb run and for another hour and one half after bombs away. We lost 7 planes before the bombing and six more afterwards, 13 out of 25. We did reach and accurately bomb the target and shot down 23 German fighters. Ironically the fighter attacks had driven us down to 15,000 feet which substantially helped our bombing accuracy. We were fortunate that the group had a large complement of experienced crews flying that day. Because of that, we reached the target and many survived.

The action was fast, furious and enveloped in the fog of battle. At one point someone in a parachute came floating through our formation. He was close enough that I could see that he was unconscious. He seemed to be an American and was lightly dressed in green fatigues, which was surprising. I still wonder if he was alive and did he survive. Another crewman bailed out and opened his chute too soon. It was caught by the tail of one of the low element and his parachute shredded. One more enemy fighter came in close and shot off the tail of another Lib. As the fighter turned, the Lib's gunners got him and he bailed out. At the same time two men from the stricken plane parachuted out and the three descended together with much arm waving and gestures. We wondered if the discussion was continued on the ground.

On the way in, our right hand nose gun jammed. After some time the bombardier, Lieutenant Hugh Francis, who was flying in the nose turret, asked me to check his ammunition supply. I saw to my horror that the last round was about to enter the ammunition chute. Once the end of the ammunition belt is inside the feeder chute, it can not be reloaded in the air. I told Francis not to shoot. I then pulled a round from the right ammo box, lifted the

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remaining cartridges out turned and placed it in the left hand box. I then inserted the extracted round. Opening the turret door, I pounded Hugh on the back and said start shooting now. This is a feat that cannot be done. No one can manually pull a .50 caliber round out of a metal belt by hand, much less reinsert it. I tried to duplicate this feat on the ground without the adrenaline and could not move it. I called out the fighters coming in and the gunners told me later it was quite useful as they knew which side they would come. Although Bill Adair did say it was nerve racking when I said, "here they come!"

At one point our wingman had his top turret shot off with so much damage that we wondered what kept him up. We could see the copilot wiping the blood away with one hand while he flew the ship with the other. We lost him later. As he slid off to oblivion, I said to Ralph we better get out of here or we will all be dead. Ralph still had his sense of humor and dryly said, "Where would you suggest we go?" I scanned the horizon and there were no other formations to be seen. Of the 12 surviving planes, only 8 returned to the base. The others had so much battle damage they had to land at alternative bases. One of the many ironies of war was that the position we flew that day was high outside. The two most dangerous and exposed airplanes in a formation are high outside and low outside, commonly called "coffin corner." Both planes flying this most dreaded position survived! On the way back, two P-38's each with an engine out joined us for mutual protection. When we got to the Channel they waved us farewell. As we neared the English coast I turned on my radio mapping box to home in on the base. I found it was not operating. I could not receive a signal. Trying to find the cause of the problem I searched around. When I checked the aerial, I discovered it had been shot off. It was outside the ship not more than a foot from my head.

Ours was the only crew of our squadron to return to our Tibenham base. The ship we were flying was incredibly shot up, yet we suffered no wounds. At the debriefing everyone was appalled and wanted to know what happened. There were a number of reporters there as well. We were still in shock and in disbelief that we had lived. Our squadron commander, Jimmy Stewart (yes, the actor), listened intently to us. We were the first crew into the debriefing room. He asked us details and then tears came to his eyes and he left the room for a little while.

At the debriefing our copilot, Lieutenant Milton Souza, was true to form and exaggerated. He said the guy in the chute that floated through our formation had to lift his legs up to avoid our props! The crew has a consensus to this day that only Milton could have exaggerated Gotha. There was a young American Red Cross girl there with candy for us. As the story of that day penetrated to her, she put her hand to her mouth and ran away. We cleaned out the candy. The bombing was the most accurate we ever did and destroyed the target. We

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also flew with a ten man crew after that. The 445<sup>th</sup> was awarded The Presidential Unit Citation for this action.

In his book "Marching Orders", author Bruce Lee tells of an interception and decryption of a message sent by the Japanese ambassador in Berlin to Tokyo. He had been talking to a Colonel Hermann who was in charge of the German night fighter defense of Berlin. He told him, "Day and night the enemy is bombing us, giving us no rest from our strenuous efforts. Unless we Germans can move our factories underground, I do not see how we can hold out." Ambassador Oshimas then went on to point out to Tokyo that Hermann was speaking under great stress. "The rate of German plane losses coupled with damage to factories, makes the future look black to him. On other hand, despite the fact that the airplane factory at Gotha suffered heavy damage, I understand that it was back in operation again after only six weeks."

As Albert Speer noted in his postwar memoirs, we attacked the airframe plant which was easily repaired. Had we attacked the engine plant, it would have been devastating. He added, "fortunately the Allied Air Staff is as dumb as the Luftwaffe's."