

"HITTING THE DECK" AT KARLSRUHE, GERMANY

By Frank W. Federici

The mission to Karlsruhe was flown on September 8, 1944 without losing any aircraft. Was it a "milk run"? No. Did our crew and five wing ships drop to 500 feet after dropping our bombs at Karlsruhe? Yes. "Hitting the deck" obviously was not a part of our mission briefing, therefore we were committing a bad no-no that could put our lead crew officers in deep doo-doo.

I chose to submit this story to the *Journal* for two reasons:

(1) The remaining six ships in our squadron were between a rock and a hard place (short on fuel and oxygen).

(2) As a lead navigator I agreed to hit the deck knowing intimately how much more difficult it would be for a high altitude navigator to navigate at low altitude (500 feet) where it is quite difficult to obtain navigational checkpoints.

So I will begin this story while a couple of navigator buddies, Pete Bradley and Fielder Newton, "navigate" with me.

At main briefing our crew became concerned when bad weather was a possibility in the target area according to our "Metro Moe." We took off anyway from our base at Tibenham, England where the 445th Bomb Group was based. Our crew would lead the 700th Squadron on this mission on which the crew was as follows: James A. Williams (pilot), Vincent Mazza (copilot), John C. Christianson (nose turret navigator), Frank W. Federici (navigator), Leo J. Lewis (bombardier), Herbert A. Krieg (engineer), Carl E. Bally (radio operator), Edward Goodgion (waist gunner), Kenneth J. Brass (waist gunner), and Charles W. Bickett (tail gunner). We circled over England until we were in squadron formation and then group formation and left England for Germany, while flying a briefed route which was evasive to the target area. Before the bomb run we encountered cloud formations that forced us up to 27,700 feet. I vividly remember this altitude because it was the highest we ever had to attain on a mission. All of you know that when a B-24 has to fly above 25,000 feet, it is not possible for the pilots to fly a tight formation because the controls become "mushy" (I was told). Therefore, we flew a loose formation on the bomb run, which made us easy prey for German fighters. Since our bomb bay doors would not open, our bombardier had to communicate to the other ships in our squadron to salvo their bombs when they saw flares from our ship. We learned after the mission that our bombing results were good! However, note that our bombs are still in the bomb bay!

This was normally an eight to eight-and a-half hour mission, but prior to reaching the bomb run, our formation of bombers had to alter course numerous times because of bad cloud formations. We felt that we had been touring Germany. These changes in course were not a part of our briefed courses! The weather was really bad. According to records that I have for the 445th Bomb Group, we sent up thirty aircraft for this mission but only twenty attacked the target (ten ships never made it to the target!) None of these ten ships were shot down, but were forced back by bad weather or insufficient oxygen and fuel.

Shortly after our bombs were dropped and we had turned off the target, we received complaints of shortages of fuel and oxygen. Since we were leading this

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mission, the officers on our crew had a short conference on interphone which resulted in a decision to HIT THE DECK. So we descended to five hundred feet! We leveled off with five other B-24s behind us in formation over the battle front lines, Maginot (French) and Siegfried (German) near Nancy, France.

What was interesting at this time and also made our crew apprehensive was the presence of our bombs still on board (500# G.P.'s). While German "small arms" fire (rifles and machine guns) were shooting at us from the ground, I could see the flash from their weapons and wondered when we would blow up! Also at this time our instruments were heavily frosted and our wings were laden with ice. We were not "out of the woods" yet! I scraped the ice from my instruments and was sure that Vince Mazza (copilot) was doing the same in the cockpit.

We continued to encounter heavy cloud formations, so our pilot Jim Williams and I agreed to fly zigzag courses to avoid flying through clouds and prevent additional icing on our wings. This repeated altering of course imposed a heavy workload on the navigator (me) because new sets of calculations for each new heading had to be made and the heading given to the pilot. I could have used one hundred and twenty seconds in a minute instead of sixty! We did this so frequently that it was not feasible for the wing navigators to "follow the lead." I knew they had to rely on my accuracy as we headed for our home base. I had no choice but to accept this responsibility.

Since all of the aircraft in our formation were short of fuel, a decision had to be made wherein I would have to plot a course directly to our home base to assure that we would have enough fuel to reach it. Oxygen was not a problem any more, because we would be flying below 10,000 feet. Thus, our pilot Jim Williams and I discussed and agreed to fly a course directly to our base. This meant that we would *not* fly the briefed and longer courses back to base. It is normally mandatory to fly the briefed courses because a smaller formation like our six aircraft could be jumped by German fighters and shot down. We chose to take that risk instead of running out of fuel. (We were between a rock and a hard place.) I plotted a course directly to Paris, and we climbed on course to a higher altitude so that I could use easier forms of navigation. We climbed up to clear skies and reached Paris at about 9,000 feet while getting rid of the icing on our wings.

We continued from Paris on a direct course to our base. All aircraft arrived with engines running! We went through the usual interrogation by our intelligence officer, and then it is customary to go straight to the mess hall for a meal. (We had not eaten for at least 9 1/2 hours.) I was completely exhausted and, although I was known as a "chow hound," I decided that sleep was more important and started to walk in the snow toward our Quonset hut. As I walked toward the hut, I was tempted numerous times to lie in the snow and go to sleep. However, I continued to walk to the hut, when suddenly I was confronted by another navigator who caught up to me and said, "Thanks a lot, Frank." He was one of the navigators in an aircraft flying in our six-ship formation back to base. I have considered his "thank you" as the greatest compliment received during my seventy-nine years! He was thanking me for saving his life. I don't remember his name. If there are any of you 445th "fly boys" who were with us on this six-ship mission, I

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would be pleased to hear from you. I live at 17471 Riverwalk Way East, Noblesville, Indiana 46062.

Shortly after reaching the hut, an announcement came over the loudspeaker requesting that the five officers on Jim Williams' crew report to base headquarters. So, Jim Williams (pilot), Vince Mazza (copilot), Leo Lewis (bombardier), Frank Federici (navigator), and John Christianson (nose turret navigator) reported to headquarters, wherein we were interrogated separately as to why we deviated from the briefed courses. Although we all told the truth, and the fuel supply was subsequently checked on each aircraft to establish that there was less than ten minutes of fuel left in the tanks, we received reprimands. Six aircraft and sixty men's lives were saved. It was the toughest navigation I have ever performed!

One somewhat amusing incident occurred on this Karlsruhe mission, when we leveled off at five hundred feet over the Siegfried line. Our bombardier, Leo Lewis, who had nothing to do since the bomb run, stood up and was low altitude sightseeing through the right side blister window. Leo said, "Look at the lighthouse at three o'clock." He was in my way when I was very busy, so I put the palm of my hand on the top of his helmet and pushed him down while saying, "That is a flak tower, not a lighthouse!" Since we were in our early 20's, we were always ready to have fun.

I have told this story to only one other person, Ray Kroker, a low altitude navigator friend of mine who is qualified to completely understand and visualize the immense amount of navigation involved. I was just doing my job, but this mission stands out in my memory through the years because of the complete exhaustion that occurred and the fact that we were reprimanded as a "reward." Oh, well, you win some and you lose some. Tell me, Pete Bradley and Fielder Newton, were you guys using the E6B computer with me as you read this story?

Although the Karlsruhe mission was significant to me, my most memorable mission occurred the following November 26, 1944 when Jim Williams, our pilot, was killed over Misburg, Germany by cannon fire from a ME- 109 German fighter plane. A Misburg mission story was written by our copilot, Lt. Col. Vincent Mazza (retired) and me in 1997 for the *2ADA Journal*.