

A Trip to Germany

By

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WITH THE FIFTEENTH AAF IN ITALY – Before the war, a trip to Germany involved hazards no more dangerous than hard seats in the train coaches and officious inspection men at the border and perhaps an odious stench from the other end of the car.

Today, however, the hazards include anti-aircraft guns, aggressive enemy fighter pilots and other unpleasant dangers. This, then, is the story of a modern trip to Germany via a B-24 Liberator bomber.

Very early on the morning of August 7, 1944, 1st Lt. John C. Grant, a B-24 bomber pilot from Durham, N.C., grunted as he turned over to blink in the glare of a flashlight pointed in his face. It was the operations clerk. “Lt. Grant, you’re flying ‘Yellow P for Peter’ on the mission today. Briefing’s at 5 o’clock, breakfast from 4:00 to 4:30.”

Stumbling and grumbling his way out of bed, Grant made his way to the mess hall where he found his bombardier, 1st Lt. Edward Mockert of Elizabeth, N.J. Mockert stared into a steaming cup of coffee. Beside him, 1st Lt. Wallace S. Fields, late of Lufkin, Texas, finished his pancakes as co-pilot 1st Lt. Alvery A. Woodworth sucked moodily on his pipe.

“Well, where do you think it is today?” asked Grant.

“Probably Germany,” replied Mockert, looking up. “When they get us up this early, it usually is. Personally, I’m getting tired of going up there – those mugs shoot at you as if they wanted to hit you!”

Later, in the big stone barn that was used as a briefing room, their suspicions were confirmed: the target was the synthetic oil plant at Blechhammer, Germany. Dismissed, the men headed for their plane.

It didn't take long to get the show on the road. Soon the whole crew was in "Yellow P for Peter" with the engines idling, waiting for take off. The signal was flashed and the big Liberator lumbered clumsily down the taxi-way, following other big bombers down the line. The plane directly in front of them turned onto the runway and was away. Grant counted to himself: "28, 29, 30 . . . hang on, here we go!" The bomber swung onto the strip and as the engines roared it began to move – 80, 100, 115, 130 miles an hour – and suddenly the plane was up and into the blue. Tucking its landing gear up under its wings, the plane was transformed from a clumsy, noisy piece of machinery into a sleek, silver bird.

The crew began taking their positions for the long ride ahead. T/Sgt. John D. Carroll, Silver Springs, Md., sat down at the radio table while T/Sgt. Keith H. Carson, the engineer from Albion, Neb., shut off the auxiliary power unit and checked the performance of the plane's intricate equipment. The other enlisted men made their way to their gun stations. To the turret in the nose went S/Sgt. William A. Schmidt of Philadelphia, Pa. To the tail turret crawled S/Sgt. Dorman K. Phall, McAlester, Okla. To the waist guns went S/Sgt. Joseph V. Martino, Chicago, Ill., and S/Sgt. Maurice M. Komanski, Mooresville, Ind. After his inspection tour, Sgt. Carson then lowered himself into the ball turret.

As the plane droned on up the coast of Italy and neared the northern shore of the Adriatic – beyond which lies Germany – all of the ten .50 calibre machine guns swept the sky in all directions of the clock looking for the Hun.

Soon the Italian border passed by under them and tension increased, but no enemy fighters appeared. Lt. Mockert began setting up his bomb sight, and now all his expensive training as a bombardier began paying off as he began to use the rate, deflection and other knobs on his delicate instrument.

The ship was now being flown by the bombardier through his bombsight as the target appeared – a cluster of buildings four miles below – the home of the gasoline and all that kept the Axis planes, tanks and other transportation facilities moving.

The giant bomber swung slightly to the right and then to the left as Mockert made mild corrections in his sight – then “Bombs Away!” came through the interphone system and Lt. Grant took back control of the ship.

Throughout the entire bomb run, “Yellow P for Peter” was breasting a cloud of black puffs of flak thrown desperately into the air by the German anti-aircraft gunners far below. Then at the very instant when Grant took back the controls, there was a terrific explosion and the big Liberator lurched crazily downward – out of control. Grant and Woodworth struggled with the controls and although barely able to keep their seats, they finally brought the big ship out on an even keel.

Looking hastily around to see what damage had been done, Sgt. Carson reported that the main spar of the left wing had been severed and that the number three engine had been shot out.

A decision had to be made and made fast – for if the wing collapsed, the plane would plummet to earth and there would be no chance for anyone to escape. Just as Grant reached to press the parachute warning bell, Sgt. Schmidt screamed over the interphone from his nose turret, “Four Focke-Wulfs coming in at 11:30 o’clock!”

This settled the problem, for while it would be risky to remain in the plane, it is almost suicide to bail out with enemy fighters in the vicinity who have no hesitation in spewing machine gun bullets and canon shells into your helpless body as you swing under the parachute silk. Every gun in the ship swung into action and as the planes passed various positions the guns began banging until the whole ship vibrated violently from the firing.

The speed of the attacking enemy fighters is almost incredible – they have been known to knock down several bombers out of a formation in less than that many seconds, so that when a bomber-gunner sees an enemy fighter he has to draw a bead and fire almost instinctively.

In they came with all guns and cannons firing and swept one by one under the Liberator – swish, swish, swish, swish -- but the last one didn’t swish fast enough,

for Schmidt caught him fairly in his sights and with a terrific flash the fighter exploded and pieces of wreckage swept past the bomber windows. This was enough for the others and they fled out of sight.

Their attack hadn't been in vain, however, for now the number one propeller was spinning wildly – out of control. One of the cannon shells hit the nose wheel tucked up in the plane and started a raging fire at the pilot's feet. Lt. Mockert, who by now was standing on the flight deck, grabbed a fire extinguisher and put it out.

Although the plane was badly damaged, the skillful cooperation of all the crewmen kept it under control, so they decided to stick it out and attempt to make it back to the base. And they did.