Mission to Munich

By Lloyd Sunderland

We had been to Munich on the 11th, 12th and 13th of July, 1944, and then went again on the 16th. I had fallen onto my bunk upon returning on the 13th with flying clothes and even my flying boots still on, and I slept until noon the next day. My copilot, Donald Roberts, had been so exhausted on the 13th that he slept for two solid hours on the way home from Munich. My flight engineer was very upset about it because he had to check the copilot's oxygen blinker every few minutes to see that he was breathing all the way home. Troy Shelley, the flight engineer, reminded me of that issue again this year in Savannah.

We didn't really expect to fly on the 16th but got the early morning call anyway. One of my crewmembers had gone out to his favorite pub the night before to shoot darts with his English friends and have a few mild & bitters (or half & halfs) so he wasn't very anxious to roll out at 2:30 AM. All went well on the mission until we were climbing through about 10,000 feet in the clouds and I got this frantic call -- "pilot, go down, go down"! Naturally I made a quick dive and asked what was wrong, only to hear, "oh, it's OK now". Mild & bitters can be quite gassy in the rarefied air at 10,000 feet. There was enough muttering going on so that I knew someone was very uncomfortable, and it was even unpleasant for someone else as well.

So we went on our way to Munich and soon found that we had a fuel problem with our number two engine. The fuel-return line from the carburetor overflow to the gas tank was broken so there was excessive fuel consumption for that engine. We (the navigator, Arthur Sherman) calculated that we could make it to the target and back if we'd feather that engine after bombs away and fly back on three. To make matters worse, the sky was so full of contrails we had to climb to 30,200 feet for the bomb run. Then, to make things really bad, the prop governor on number three engine got hit and started spewing oil, so it had to be feathered immediately. That changed the plan to feather number two. The navigator's new calculations indicated that we could barely make the English coast with the number two gas-guzzler operating if we would leave the formation and make a slow descent all the way home.

At the same time Jack MacGregor called the Wing Commander to say he had lost an engine and was also running low on fuel. I advised that I was leaving the formation and invited Jack to join me for mutual protection. He replied, figuratively. "no way, Jose". The Alps and Switzerland were in full view only about 100 miles to the South, and my bombardier voted vociferously to go there, but there was another strong vote to go home from that guy who was ashamed of his condition. I called for fighter cover and had P-38s close overhead in a matter of seconds - two on our left and two on our right. They likely had me spotted before I ever called for help. The P-38s are beautiful anytime, but they are especially beautiful when flying cover over a lone B-17. The Lightnings stayed with us until we were well out of the danger of enemy fighters.

It was a long slow flight back toward England sweating out the gas consumption. The navigator kept calculating time and distance while the engineer kept checking quantity and transferring fuel to keep the three engines turning. As we neared the English Channel, MacGregor called "Mayday" and reported that he was ditching. He had stayed with the formation until his fuel gave out. The channel was calm that day, and his plane stayed afloat for an hour or so. Jack was awarded the Air Medal for a good ditching. His plane was named "HAPPY BOTTOM" and had been christened by Edward G Robinson only a short time earlier during a celebrity visit to Ridgewell.

Our calculations continued to indicate that maybe we could make it to England. Finally our long slow descent brought us in low over the white cliffs of Dover, and then we saw the next most beautiful sight one might see -- a 10,000 foot long, 500 foot wide concrete strip. We, along with other distressed planes, were cleared "straight in" to this British emergency field. As we

landed and started to roll, my number two engine cut out; and, as I turned off of the runway to taxi, number four engine cut out. We had to tow the plane back to the parking ramp.

Within a few minutes half a dozen more planes landed in various stages of damage or distress. One came in with parachutes popped out of both waist windows to slow the landing roll. Another landed with gear up and ground off the ball turret on that concrete runway. The sparks were really flying from that turret, and the noise sounded awful. That uncomfortable crewman was so ashamed that he stayed behind as we went to notify Ridgewell of our landing and then get some food. He was more interested in finding a shower and clean clothes for the trip home. We were picked up promptly by a 381st crew in our hot little stripped down B-17E, (Little Rockette, Peggy D, Ser. #41-9043), and flown back to Ridgewell.

This picture of OUR BOARDING HOUSE is from an original 381st official photo given Sunderland upon departure from Ridgewell in December, 1944.

B-17G Serial #42-38103, Assigned to 457th BG 1/26/44, Transferred to 381st BG 3/11/44 with markings L/VE/B. Crash landed and salvaged at Ridgewell on 9/4/44 due to bomb damage received at Oberphfaffenhofen, Germany, after completing 44 missions.

Thanks to David Osborne for providing the following data on the 154th mission of the 381st Bomb Group on July 16, 1944:

Sunderland was flying A/C # 42-38103, OUR BOARDING HOUSE. Other 532nd Squadron pilots on that mission were Warren Davis, Alan Webb, Jack MacGregor, Charles Reseigh, Robert Devenish, Norwood Durbin, David Morgan and Ernest Guy.

Additional information concerning OUR BOARDING HOUSE was obtained from the excellent book by Roger Freeman and David Osborne, The B-17 Flying Fortress Story: Design-History-Production.

Lloyd E. Sunderland, 12/17/98