

# Plauen Mission, March 19, 1945

By Ewing Stuart Watson, 533rd CO

March 19th, 1945

After dinner on the evening before the March 19th, 1945 mission to Plauen Germany was flown, my squadron Bombardier, Monk Lungren, came by my quarters and said, "there is a pretty good film at our base theater tonight, how about going with me to see it?" I said ok, and we went.

A few minutes after the main feature began, Colonel Hall came in, sat down beside me, and said, "it looks like we fly a mission tomorrow." "do you think you have had enough experience to lead the 8th Air force?" I knew a Command Pilot leading the 8th had to have experience as well as a Field Grade rank or higher. At that time I was a Captain, but to answer his question I said "sure." About that time one of the headquarters Sergeants came in and had a whispered conversation with Hall. After that Colonel

Hall turned to me and said, "We do fly tomorrow. Our Group has the 8th AAF lead and you are the Command pilot, perhaps you should go get some sleep." I did.

It was a clear, pretty morning over England when we took off. We formed Groups over England and spaced the Groups into the bomber stream over France. There was an undercast below us in France. As we headed for Germany the undercast built up under us and by the time we crossed into Germany we were at 20,000' but so was the undercast. We continued to climb slowly, but we were flying in light cirrus and now we were pulling contrails, visibility seemed to vary from one to two miles horizontally, flying conditions were marginal.

Although I had tried many times to contact our scouting force I was unable to get a response and did not know what weather conditions to expect over our targets. As we approached our primary target's I.P. I received the Scouting Force's first transmission which told me that our 1st, 2nd and tertiary targets had 100% cloud cover. He also said that the scouts had climbed from 20,000' to 30,000' in our target areas and they were on instruments throughout their climb (our bomber column was flying at 27,000'). I called the 2nd and 3rd Division commanders and gave them this info.

After looking at my maps and consulting with my navigator I decided that, since our primary target could only be bombed if visual, our tertiary target would be the best target for us to hit (considering where we were at that moment).

I called the two Division Commanders again and told them that the bomber column should fly on its pre sent heading to our Primary Target's I.P. and at that point (I gave them the coordinates) each group was to make a slow 180 deg. turn toward the North West. When the turn was completed each group should be 7 to 8 miles North of the previous bomber column and should be flying almost due West (I gave them the heading) and we would maintain the new heading until we had bombed Plauen. Each Division Commander was asked to give this same message to each of his group commanders and to remind each CO that after the projected North West turn was made his group would be flying West and for a time would be flying parallel to groups which were still flying East; impress upon each group commander the importance of staying in his proper place in the bomber stream and thus avoiding collisions with other groups. Each Division CO called back and confirmed that each Group CO heard, understood and acknowledged my instructions.

About halfway from my group's 180 deg. turn, and its arrival at Plauen, out of the murk came a box of B17s at our altitude, heading Eastward. We met "head on", it was a wild melee for a few moments, one of the "wrong-way" group's ball turret gunners fired at us, he did not hit our ship nor did we suffer any collisions.

After we bombed I asked our scouts to go all the way to the deck if necessary, on their way home, to see if there was a break in the clouds or some area having better visibility. They soon reported there was an area of good visibility between 12,000' and 15,000'. We made a slow descent and there was a break in the cloud decks as the scouts had reported.

As we flew through Northern France heading home at 12,000' to 14,000', our scouts called again saying that the interval in which we were flying "pinched out" completely about ten miles from the channel. The scouts had been down to the deck (or as close as they dared) and it was instrument weather all the way, same way over the channel. I asked them to give us a weather reading over England as soon as possible.

Within a short time I got a call from the scouts who were over England and reporting a 500' to 600' ceiling. I called the Division Commanders and repeated the info which the scouts had given me. I told the Division Commander and my own 1st Division Commanders that when my group got to within about 15 miles from the channel I was going to spread my squadrons out abreast and the squadrons were to spread their members further out individually. We would then let down slowly over the channel at a suggested 165 mph indicated and head for our base. I suggested the Division Commanders might like to recommend their Group Commanders do likewise.

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P.S. Some of you fellows who email the 381st list evidently spent much time writing diaries while in England. I did not keep a journal so the preceding story is written from my memory of 55 years ago of what was happening up there in the lead pilots mind as the mission was flown. I can tell you for sure that I have never felt more under stress than I did while leading that mission and struggling to make right decisions about problems which arose; many of which lacked clear cut solutions.

P.S.#2

Un authorized comments by me, last son Paul. My Mom reported my dad has been on pins and needles for the last 3 days as he has re-lived every minute of this mission and even refused to look at the daily mail, a major activity of retired folks, as he wrote this.

My dad turned in a report on the guy who shot at them from the bottom turret, every one was so busy no one got the group info from the tail. He later heard they finally caught the guy and he had shot at other American planes on different missions, he always wondered what finally happened to the guy.

My dad commented on the fact that there were no collisions was testament to the extraordinary professionalism and skill of all the other pilots.

Regards,

Paul Watson