

The Last Day of Big Week

By John W. Howland

Feb. 25, 1944

Up at 0500 again. I could say we all sung the blues, but it wouldn't mean much. Anyone would do it at that time of the morning. However, this morning was different. After five consecutive days of ops we were so weary; we didn't have much to say to each other. Briefed for the Willy Messerschmitt fighter plane factory located on the west side of the Autobahn just south of the town of Augsburg.

Augsburg is located about 60 miles NE of Lake Constance, Switzerland. The flight plan called for a total distance of 1380 statute miles, which is the longest mission ever flown out of Ridgewell.

The fighter support looked good as far in as Mannheim; but from there on in, we were only briefed for P-38s over the target. It looked like we might have a rough 90-minute period. I was really uneasy about the trip. Like everyone, we figured it was going to be a tough one.

We weren't carrying bombs in our plane. We were the 'paper boys'. Our bomb bay was full of propaganda leaflets called the "Sternenbanner". They were all tied together in neat bundles with an aneroid release mechanism that was supposed to scatter the bundle when they hit a lower altitude near the target.

While taxiing out to takeoff position, we had a blowout. I felt good about that. But I didn't realize that everyone in the whole Eighth Air Force was apparently interested in seeing that those leaflets got to the target. I think



everyone on that field who knew what a wrench looked like converged on our plane. They jacked it up, put on a new wheel and tire, and had it changed within an hour. We were able to climb to altitude, and catch the Group before they left Group assembly point over the field.

We flew #3 position of the 2nd element, of the low Squadron, of the low Group, commonly called Purple Heart Corner. I had a Gee Box again today. I couldn't get very good fixes because of enemy jamming. Although we had a solid undercast during assembly, the weather cleared over the coast of France.

It was clear all the way to the target. Fighter support was excellent, even though we ran a little ahead of schedule. We had no opposition going in to the target. We made a 180-degree turn to the right, headed west, and picked up the target we had been briefed for. The bombardier in the lead ship zeroed in on the hangar and shop area. Flak was pretty heavy. The entire formation toggled their bombs when they saw bombs drop from the lead ship. Frank watched for the release and toggled our load away when he saw the smoke bombs.

He took great delight in singing out over the intercom; "PAPERS AWAY". However, there was a problem. The lead ship dropped early. Not intentionally. Flak struck a smoke bomb and set it off. The crew salvaged the bomb load to save the plane and their lives. Everyone else in the Wing dropped their loads as well. Outside of our propaganda leaflets, the bomb load for the 381st Bomb Group was 100 LB M-47 oil and rubber incendiary bombs. More than 700 oil and rubber incendiary bombs fell about two hundred yards short of the target. They landed in a wooded area on the East Side of the road across from Willy Messerschmitt's factory.

Frank, unaware of the circumstances, was burned up at the performance of the lead bombardier. He also resented carrying a load of propaganda leaflets instead of bombs. As Frank put it, "We are nothing more than the highest paid, best equipped paper boys in the world." Perhaps he is right. However, there is the possibility the papers will do as much good as bombs. They were written in German. I presume they gave true statistics and late bits of news. Hopefully, this could be enough to give German morale quite a jolt.

Shortly after 'Papers Away' we saw some P-51 fighters we weren't briefed for. They were mixing it up with the Jerries. We saw quite a few enemy fighters. However, we flew a tight formation and they left us alone, working on a Wing behind us. I saw one B-17 go down, crash and burn. A few Me-109s kept buzzing around us, and the tail gunner claimed they were both shot down (by other gunners in the formation). At least one of the Me-109s had identification markings like the American fighter planes wore. The radio operator claimed he missed a 600-yard shot because he thought it was a friendly plane.

One Me-410 was fooling around out in front of us about 1000 yards away. Evidently, a top turret or a nose gunner in the



formation reached out and got him, for he started down with his right engine on fire. That was the last enemy fighter we saw. We did see a big pillar of smoke over Stuttgart. Picked up an escort of P-47s, which kept the skies clear for us all the way home. The last action was a small amount of flak over the coast that didn't amount to much.

We landed at 1755 after more than 8 hours in the air. There was a lot of joking and banter before takeoff about meeting one another in

Switzerland. However, all but one of our planes returned. After interrogation, we went to bed. I do hope tomorrow will be an easy day, for a change.

Tyson Crew pictured following the Feb. 24th Schweinfurt mission.

Front (L to R): F. Palenik, B; J. Howland, Nav.; W. Doherty, CP; J. Tyson, P.

Rear (L to R): C. Churchils, LWG; R. Smith, replacement WG; A. Farmer, TG Sgt. Schilling, replacement BTG; R. Jensen, ETTG, H. White, ROG.

Note: Twelve years later, while working for the Gulf Oil Corporation in South America, I met a young man who came from Augsburg, Germany. I told him the story about our failure to hit the Willy Messerschmitt plant due to the shortfall of the 100 lb incendiary bombs. He turned very serious and said, "Ya, I remember that raid very well. I was a boy of sixteen. Although you may think your attack was unsuccessful, there is one thing you don't know. When the air raid alarm sounded at the Willy Messerschmitt plant, everybody left the buildings and went to the air raid shelter. Their shelter was the cluster of trees just across the road from the plant. Hundreds of people from Augsburg were killed and severely burned. It was our worst air raid of the entire war."

John W. Howland

PFF Navigator

324th Sq 91st Bomb Group

535th Sq 381st Bomb Group