

True Account: Robert T. Tims

KASSEL: THE STORY OF A MISSION OVER GERMANY

I awakened, a flashlight shining in my eyes and someone shaking me. “Wake up, sir! You’re flying today. Briefing at three o’clock – it’s 0215 now. Fresh eggs for breakfast!”

I mumbled a thanks. I knew it was Sgt. Kelly from the squadron; he was always kind enough to palliate the dread of rising in the cold and facing a mission by cheering us with the news of fresh eggs. He had turned to the opposite bunks to shake French and Cockran. They were already awake.

“What’s the bomb load, Sarge?” was French’s first question. “I’m not sure, Sir, but probably 500-pound demos,” he answered, while he checked us off his list.

“How much gas we carrying?” Cochran asked while he squinted and adjusted his eyes to the light.

“I believe it’s 2500.”

Sgt. Kelly left through our back door, after calling out the briefing time again. I could hear the top bunk groaning under Cochran’s short but stout frame. He and French were dressing under the blankets, as was their custom, while I was almost succumbing to the temptation to go back to sleep. The bed seduced me with its warmth when I thought of the cold hut. Then suddenly I remembered that this mission was to be an “occasion”.

“Well, boys, how does it feel to have just one mission between you and the states?” I called over to my pilot and co-pilot.

“Jees-sus Christ, Tims”, Doc Cochran began his Missouri drawl, “do you have to mention that now? I’m already feeling like a cow about to have her first calf.” His words escaped between shivers.

“Are you shivering from cold or fear----or both, Doc?” French chided him.

“Well, French I’ll just be dammed if I know, now. When we’re flying, the flak makes me shake; and when we’re not, the English weather makes me shake. You just can’t win.”

“You’ve did it, Yank” I told him. My mind was not warm enough to offer any other remark then that hackneyed English expression of resignation.

Our banter had awakened some of our eleven hut-mates, and was drawing a few pointed remarks from them.

“How much longer is it going to take you guys to dress?”

“As soon as I powder my nose,” I answered.

“Oh, go to hell!”

“Now wouldn’t you feel bad if we didn’t come back from the last mission,” Cochran admonished with a hurt tone. “You’d never forget those last cruel words.”

“God help the Jerries if they ever capture you guys.” Bedsprings were creaking in irritation and defiance.

After delaying our departure so that we could relish this customary early – morning pleasantry, we finally switched off the light and stumbled into the English blackout. Someone called, “Good Luck, fellows. See you this afternoon.” We spoke a few words as we walked to the mess hall. French and Cochran were thinking about the future, and searching for a vision of themselves drinking and celebrating that night at the club. They had seen others do it. Why not they too? Lampe and his crew just a week ago. My own thoughts were not so hopeful or trembling so on edge; mine were unsavory and shadowy with bitterness. If I had not been in the hospital, I should be finishing my tour today too. Time and distance between me and Elena were infinite.

When we entered the mess hall, we were warmed with the homelike-smell of hot coffee and fried eggs, heartened by the sight and sound of men at breakfast. How much sharpened were these familiar sensations when framed against the dark prospect of bombers, sub-zero temperatures, and the cold hostility of the air over Germany!

We got in line. Cochran was rubbing his hands together exclaiming, “This is real service. The last mission and fresh eggs for breakfast!”

Many of the men flying on the mission were already seated and eating their breakfast. Some were laughing, some were talking, and some were just eating. Some were old faces and some were new faces. These airmen presented a variety

of dress that would satisfy the wildest romantic conception of life in the air corps. As the three of us were looking for a table, we saw McGregor waving to us from the far left of the mess hall. We walked over to sit with him. We had known him well for many months, since phase-training in Boise, Idaho. Most of his crew had finished their mission already, and I knew Mac was close to the end of his tour.

“How many will this make for you, Mac?” I asked him.

“This is it, this is the last one!” He beamed like a small boy at Christmas time. “Isn’t this the last one for you two?” He nodded to French and Cochran.

“Yep, the last----one way or another,” French answered with a subtle taunt at Fate. “This is the third time I’ve sweated out this last one.” said Mac with a grimace. “If this one’s scrubbed, I’ll resign, so help me God! I can stand anything----Big B, the Tempelhof Airdrome----just so I fly this morning.”

“Now Goddam it, Mac, you’re asking for something,” Cochran interrupted with his humorously simulated whine. “I’ve already arranged it with Jimmy (Doolittle) to have a nice short, quiet mission to Southern France. No flak, no fighters. Now don’t go mentioning them awful places like Bremen, Politz, and Big B. Now Goddammit Mac, you’re all beside yourself.”

Doc Cochran was always able to convert tenseness to ease with his wholesome Falstaffian wit. It was a habit for Doc and me, on each mission, to make the visage of war less appalling for ourselves by an exchange of casual joking on the interphone. The whole crew was indeed fortunate in having a co-pilot like him to keep our tempers and nerves even.

“There’s Major McCoy eating breakfast. He must be leading the squadron today,” French was saying.

“Yeh, I think we’re leading the whole division in today,” Mac informed us.

“Major Mac’s been a good man to have as squadron C.O.,” French said reflectively. “I remember how he used to make sure we were tucked in the middle of the formation on our first few missions-- —to give us a chance to grow old.” “Say Tims, not changing the subject,” Mac interrupted, “what’s this I hear about you wanting to go to Big B. at least once before you finish?”

“Sure, Mac, I’ve got to go to the big city once, or I’ll feel like I haven’t had a complete tour.”

“The man’s crazy! Weren’t you satisfied when you almost got your head knocked off by flak over Politz? I heard about that!”

“Why that flak-happy sonuvabitch is never satisfied, Mac,” drawled Cochran, motioning to me in mock contempt. “Instead of getting down on his knees and thanking the Good Lord we aborted that last mission to Berlin, he still moans because we didn’t go. Even when the boys got back and we found out the other two ships in our element were shot down, the sad sonuvabitch still moaned.”

“Well, just wait till he starts on those last five.” Mac wagged his finger at me. “He’ll wish to God he could make all of ‘em to Piccadilly.”

“Son, that last one is really rough, believe me!” Mac was shaking his head with sad wisdom. We could not help laughing, so ludicrous was Mac in his dismay at having to “sweat out” the last one so many times.

“Hey, we’ve only got five minutes before briefing, guys,” French suddenly exclaimed. We arose from the table hurriedly, grabbin’ hats and jackets, and stuffing oranges in our pockets for future nervous nourishment. We mingled with the rest of the crowd going out and spoke several good mornings with a few more friendly baths. These greetings gave us an important human alliance to carry with us to the planes.

Thus the prelude to war, breakfast and fraternity, has been ended. >From this moment on history loses these men their identity, for each one will become part of a crew, which is part of a squadron, which is part of a group, which is part of a wing, which is part of a division, which is part of the 8th Air Force, which will bomb Germany today. As we walked toward the briefing-room near the flight line, we caught the full throb of engines being warmed-up by ground crews. Some were droning steadily and powerfully; others were playing the scale of their strength, now lightly, now thunderingly. The sound was ugly. It was the sound of death. It was the sound of man’s distinct genius turned toward destruction. The very immensity of this aerial war against Germany, day after day, dwarfed us who flew. A thousand lines of effort and preparation and strategy had converged, and we were the sharp point of this weapon that stabbed at the heart of Germany. We were the result of many men working the night through in many branches of the Air Force--Command, Intelligence, Maintenance, Supply, Meteorology, and

countless others. All this was in the sound of the engines warming up on the morning fields of England.

The first question in the mind of each airman, as he entered the briefing-room was the target for today. It was especially important to those like French, Cochran, and Mac, who were flying their last mission. The big map at the front of the room was always covered until the intelligence officer officially began the briefing. The room was alive with talking and joking. Flimsies and instruction sheets were being passed out, and roll of attendance was being checked by squadron commanders.

I watched the gum-chewing fliers and wondered if some of them would not return to England this day. Most of them can remember the sight of burning and exploding planes, I thought, and yet each one believes in his own insignificant destiny as able to preclude death. I do. Back of these men and across the seas too, are waiting their families. Perhaps they realize more than the men how the news of death can strike with its intolerable wave of nausea and leave the white face of anguish. Those families know it can happen.

“You’re target for today, gentlemen, is Kassel, Germany.” The S-2 Captain opened briefing with this announcement, and now waited for comments to subside. He had uncovered the big map with its lines of string revealing the route and the target at Kassel in Western Germany.

“Well, it could be worst,” I remarked to Cochran and French.

“Yeh, but it could be easier, too!” Doc retorted. We stopped talking to hear the Captain as he continued.

“It’s not necessary to say much about this target, since most of you were on the mission that bombed this same place a few days ago. As you know, it’s a tank factory on the edge of the city.”

I had been on that previous mission to Kassel, so my thoughts began to wander. Premonition is not as penetrating now as it is when we sit and think and anticipate in our huts between missions. In the immediateness of action, attention is thankfully turned to the particulars of duty, and the knife-edge of omen is dulled.

“You’ll turn south to keep away from the flak at Munster, and drive in between Hamm and the edge of the flak in Happy Valley (The Ruhr).” “There are probably twenty to thirty guns at Kassel, but you should not be in range for all of them.”

Fear is pushed into the background by each one of us. It is this direction of attention that allows us to perform well in combat and to respond to habits made in training.

“There are fighters based around Brunswick to the northeast of your target and near Gotha to the southeast of you. You’ll have good fighter support, however, P-51s will escort you in from the Zuider Zee; P-47s will furnish cover at the target; and P-38s and P-51s will take you out again.”

“I’d hate to meet the Luftwaffe on your last mission,” I unkindly whispered to Doc. He groaned.

“The 700th with Major McCoy will lead the group today, and the group is leading the entire 2nd division. In fact, you’ll be the first group in the 8th Air Force; the two 17 divisions will go in behind you to bomb other targets in that vicinity.” Some men even hold their thoughts of combat so deep in the sub-conscious that they actually have little conscious fear. It is a good psychical device to lessen the strain.

“If the target is to be visual, the code word at the I.P. will be ‘Hambone’; if PFF, it will be ‘Pea Soup’. The code word for the discharge of chaff is ‘Lazy Bones’.” The operations officer was talking now.

If a man is fool enough to ponder on the elaborate chain of causes that now places him in this position fraught with danger---well, he’ll soon be a madman caught in a warp of reason and duty. I directed my attention back to the front of the room, for the meteorology captain was briefing us on weather.

“The coverage will be 8 to 10/10 over England while you’re forming---tops at about 11,000 feet. It should taper off to 6/10 at the target with tops around 9,000 feet. You may have a visual run, but probably not.”

“Well, this is the last time you’ll hear Metro Moa,” I said to French and Cochran.

“I ain’t exactly unhappy about it.” Doc answered.

The operations officer was calling for attention. “All right, here’s a hack. Coming up on 3:51 in ten seconds..... 55-6-7-8-9-hack!” Main briefing was done.

An hour later I left navigation briefing and met the rest of the crew in the dressing-room. Of our six original gunners we had only one still flying with us, Greenly. Greenly flew the nose turret; and although he didn't know it, he was on his last mission also. Jacobs was an experienced engineer, and Fiske was one of the best radio-operators in the squadron, the latter finishing his tour today. Huddleston and Corman were our waist-gunners, both of them past half-way point on their tours of duty. Schwartz, though not an original crew member had flown as our tail-gunner for the majority of our missions. The entire crew, then, was composed of men finishing that day or very near to finishing. Corman was in his early thirties and the oldest man; Schwartz was probably twenty-two and the youngest.

After the ordeal of dressing for high altitude and then checking our ship, we took off at 0630. We climbed and made a circle around Buncher 6, over which the 2nd Division formed into SW squadrons and groups---a process of almost two hours duration. The first few minutes of flight I was busy adjusting my mass of equipment and laying out maps and my log sheet. At 10,000 feet the cold air began to bite through the fur lined pants and jackets; I plugged in my heated suit cord.

"Navigator to waist. Navigator to waist. We're at 10,000--put on your oxygen masks. We're forming at 13,000."

"Roger in the waist."

"Pilot to crew, pilot to crew. Look for four red-green flares, and let me know where they are." French was driving and Cochran was tuned in on VHF to hear the forming instructions from Bourbon Leader.

At 13,000 feet we leveled off. Greenly quickly located the right flares and we made a turn to get in formation with three other ships of our squadron. To the limit of vision, planes could be seen in all directions, climbing, banking, circling, attaching themselves to embryo formations. This was an ever-astounding drama--these vagrant ships floating aimlessly, yet gradually becoming integrated into the 8th Air Force aloft. Signals by flares and on radios seemed hopelessly confusing, although each signal was drawing ships from space into pattern.

"Bourbon Leader, this is Bourbon Red. Where in the hell are you? Fire some flares or do something! We haven't seen you all morning."

“Bourbon Leader to Bourbon Red. We’re 10 miles south of the buncher. We’ve been firing flares all the time.” Sing-song.

At 08:04 the 8th Air Force was in giant formation, and we thundered over Great Yarmouth on the English coast, thence out across the Channel. We began immediately to climb, the engines answering in full-throated roar.

“Navigator to crew. We’re over the Channel now, and we’ll hit the Dutch coast in 35 minutes. Check in on oxygen.”

“Tail okay on oxygen.”

“Waist okay on oxygen.”

“Pilot and co-pilot okay. Jacobs and Fiske all right, too.”

“Greenly okay on oxygen in the nose.”

“That’s roger for me too.”

“Waist to navigator. Tims, do we catch any flak before the target?”

“Only those everlasting two guns right on the coast. You’d better put on your flak-suits while we cross the Zuider Zee, though. We may be off course and see some flak at Munster or Hamm.”

“Roger, thanks!”

While I was busy finding a wind by Gee-box fixes, I heard French and Cochran discussing the ship we were flying--for the first time.

“Say Doc, this ship handles much better than the one we’ve been flying. Take it for a minute.”

Silence on interphone.

“Yeh, it sure does,” Cochran drawled. “We ought not to have any trouble with this one.”

At 08:38 we were over the Dutch coast at 20,000 feet, with a tailwind pushing us two minutes early. Two, then four bursts of flak appeared like gray mushrooms to our right and behind us. I was not surprised.

“By God, there’s Herman and Ludwig having their fun again today,” I heard Doc

drawing.

"Looks like they spotted us even in a new ship," I added.

"Oh hell yes! They know this is our last mission. They're seldom off this far, though. The clouds must be bothering 'em today." It was a standing joke on the crew---this talk about Herman and Ludwig, the two "post-graduate" gunners. Anytime the flak became uncomfortably accurate, we always attributed the shooting to our two "friends".

"Goddammit, Tims, I hope Ludwig's little brother in the Luftwaffe isn't up to celebrate our last one today!"

"I hope not, Doc, we haven't seen him in a good while. Knock on wood."

At the eastern edge of the Zuider Zee the undercast broke slightly, and we were able to see the amazing network of thousands of Dutch canals, which tempted imagination with the many figures they wrote out on the Dutch earth. At 09:06 we turned southeast to skirt the danger from Munster, Hamm, and the Ruhr. My dead reckoning showed us well on course, and no warning flak-bursts proved us wrong. We had leveled off now at 23,000 feet, and the whole Air Force was settling down behind us preparing to drive in and bomb. P-51s were riding hard on the bombers. I could see this huge fleet sitting in the sky behind us with the glints from silver-bodied planes giving sparkle to the cold, sunlit sky. The protecting fighters hovered and paused and slid fast away under us, hunting the challenge of the Luftwaffe. A strange and exultant sight---all ships fast friends in the sky battle. It was good to see them and not feel alone. Doc's voice came in on the interphone.

"Say, French, our VHF is dead. I haven't heard a sound for almost an hour."

"Better stick on it a while longer, Doc, to see if it comes back in. If not, you'd better get back on interphone before the target."

"Roger, but I'm sure it's out."

"Pilot to crew, did you hear that? VHF is out, so keep your eyes peeled for bandits. We won't have any warning."

Keen watchful eyes now ferreting out each object and holding it fast for identification. The gunners began calling out all ships near us.

"Three fighters coming in at 5 o'clock going toward 3 o'clock. Look like P-51s."

A few seconds of silence. Are they P-51s?

“Roger, they’re P-51s, sliding under us now.”

“Navigator to crew. We’re two minutes before the Wing I.P. Start throwing out chaff when we turn.”

“Roger in the waist.”

As we turned northeast toward the Group I.P., I set up the bomb racks, made a few quick entries in the log, and called to Fiske to open the bomb-bay doors. The billowing cumulus lay almost 10/10 below us; we would bomb by instruments. This was the time for tightened stomachs and deep breathing and itching nerves. This was the time I cursed the heavy flying clothes, oxygen mask, and lines that hung from me in all directions----all impeding swift, efficient movement. No flak yet! We had turned at the Group I.P. and were on the bomb run. I glanced at my ETA, then at my watch. Past time for the target, or else my own estimation was in error. In the tail turret Schwartz announced that he could see the white streamers of smoke bombs where groups behind us were bombing. He reported flak there, too.

“I believe we passed up Kassel,” Greenly said from the nose turret, “That must be it they’re bombing in back of us.”

“I think so, Greenly.” I answered him. “My own navigation shows us several minutes east – –which could be wrong, however, since I don’t have a fix position.”

“Watch it! There they go! They’re dropping in the lead ship,” shouted Cochran.

“Bombs away!” I called as I hit the toggle switch. I leaned to the window to watch tiny bombs fall away into the deep-white of the clouds. We turned southward instantly. Still no flak!

“That couldn’t have been Kassel,” Cochran argued. “We would have seen flak--but I ain’t unhappy about it. Let’s get the hell home, huh!”

Had we looked to the west of us, we should have discovered that our group was out of the bomber stream alone, too far east. We didn’t and no one seemed to realize that we had no fighters for cover. The tension over the target was broken, so we relaxed our vigil. We were heading for England and Tibenham!

“Navigator to co-pilot. Hey Doc, you and French ought to be ashamed to finish on a mission like this. Not a single burst of flak over the target! How ‘bout that? Where’s your pride?”

“Well now, Tims, I do feel kinda bad about it. We’ll just have to fly another one tomorrow, that’s all.”

“We will, like hell, we will,” French chanted.

Silence then. We turned directly west. I stood at my window to scan the group formation momentarily. And as I looked to our rear, what I saw froze the very marrow of my bones. A host of bee-swarmed fighters coming at us. Seeing and recognition were sickeningly simultaneous---a large spinner set in a large radial engine, the fuselage tapering down to slenderness. Focke-Wolfe 190s!

Silently and with awful intent they played leap-frog to get to us. There were more of them than I had ever seen at one time. As I was pressing the switch to speak and warn, I heard Schwartz sing out despairingly on interphone.

“Fighters, fighters! At 6 o’clock low. Hundreds of ‘em!”

No ball turrets in our ships! And quickly, action was sere-hot. I tried to call out the positions of the attackers to warn the gunners, but it was futile. They were all over us---splitting our formation, smothering us, crippling us, exploding us, knocking us from their German sky. Their 20mm shells were hundreds of light bulbs bursting ahead of them.

“Coming past us from 9 o’clock toward you, Greenly! Get him! Now!”

“Watch that one coming under us!”

“I got one! I got one!” yelled Corman.

“Three more of them at 9! Oh Jesus!”

I saw Parson’s ship to our left blossom with sudden, bright flame, then kick over and down in death struggle. Arrow’s ship behind him, hurt and distressed, trying to fight off the angry bees, trailed tell-tale smoke from its bowels. One man dropped through the escape hatch of the waist. Then the ship fell like a broken child-toy from the vastness of 23,000 feet, with broken-wing resignation--leafing and spinning---that ship.

I felt the nauseating thud of our own ship being hit hard. No. 1 engine caught fire and died. The fire went out, but part of the prop was gone and an ugly hole showed in the wing.

“Where are our fighters? Where are our fighters? Oh Christ!” In desperation.

I could hear the muffled staccato of our own 50s hammering away at the attackers, and I could smell the acrid smoke from them through my mask.

“For God’s sake keep off interphone so I can call ‘em off coming in!” Schwarst’s voice sounded my own animal fear.

“Watch that sonuvabitch on your side, French, he’s almost flying formation with us!”

“I can’t move over, Doc. Bruce is on fire and running into us!”

“Hit the throttle. Drop back!....Holy Christ, that was close!”

“I got another one, I got him!” Corman again, yelling like a football fan.

I saw the blue Focke-Wolfe flying alongside, so close that I could discern the features of the pilot’s face and see his oxygen mask. And Corman had hit this German plane, for it belched and gasped out smoke behind. As I watched, it rolled over on its back, and the German fell out past my window. The ship spun down abruptly.

McCoy’s lead ship had been shattered. A whole prop came flying back past us. From somewhere a body and a lone flying boot shot by. The combat air was a tangled, incoherent mass of burning broken ships, bodies, and debris. The high altitude changed fire into bright orange blobs.

“Steady, boys,” I called ---for my own morale as much as theirs. I glanced out of my right window and saw Bruce’s plane flaming furiously from the cockpit to the tail. The aluminum of its body was curling and baked brown. One after another I had seen seven fighters attack him and pour their murderous stuff into him. Never a chance! I caught a glimpse of one waist gunner fighting his window to escape, while dying his hot death. As I watched Bruce burning and still flying, I had the certain sensation that we were burning too. Every nerve in me reached out to anticipate

the fire that must be enveloping us. It was then that I thought of French, Cochran, and Fiske---their last mission, Mac's too. Just three hours from England and safety!

Then our ship lurched and shuddered as though it had been dealt the death blow, stricken at its core. It was convulsed with shattering paroxysm and seemed ready to split into fragments. With it came to us all the knowledge of utter giving up. Death was more certain then, than death can ever be again. There was no conscious fear. The heat of action had burned out fear-itself, but had left us the residue of utter abandonment. I only waited and hoped against pain. Greenly had his turret door open and was firing his gun while kneeling in his seat.

"Feather 3, quick!" I heard French and Cochran shouting at each other, but could not hear what was said. I know that straightway the trembling motion of the plane ceased, and we were flying almost smoothly again on two engines.

"Right rudder must be half gone," French called. We breathed in relief to have the ship's spasm cured.

In our own trouble we had not noticed that the fighter attack had slackened. It was unbelievable that I could see no 190s streaking in to finish what they had started. Instead I saw only three B-24s in formation now winging homeward, far in front of us and above us. I drew breath. A miracle!

"Oh Christ, here come four more of 'em queuing up on us at 9o'clock!" Someone calling out and strangling the infant hope just born. Oh God, to tease us with it and then to snatch it away!

"Look, look----straight ahead and high!" Greenly was yelling frantically. There was a new tone to his voice. P-38s! P-38s! P-38s! He could find no other word but each utterance was pregnant with wild joy. Then I saw them---swift-coming, silver guardians – hope riding in on twin-engined angels. Promise once born, then dashed, now resurrected! We came back from dead once more.

"Waist to crew, waist to crew! The bandits are gone. They went into the clouds away from the P-38s" Exultant. Now our fighters had wheeled around and were giving us protection.

"Oh you beautiful sonuvabitching, lovely angels, you!" The only words elegant enough for him to praise our fighters with were curse words.

"French look me over and see if I'm still here and whole, will you?" Doc broke in. I wanted to laugh; I wanted to shout with laughter at anything----just to let the

tension in my gut burst out and to suck in deep breath. "Pilot to navigator. Tims, how far inside Germany are we? How many minutes to hit friendly territory? We're losing altitude fast."

"Just hold on a second, French, I'll try to give you a reliable ETA to Belgium." I focused my attention on the chart before me and on my Mercator. I checked the altimeter to see that we had already dropped to 18,000 feet. Using the last airspeeds and headings entered on my log before the battle; I quickly plotted our approximate position, then calculated the time required to fly out of Germany, across the Rhine.

"Navigator to pilot. French, I figure about an hour and five minutes to get to the Rhine. We're losing altitude and bucking a head-wind at the same time."

"That long!"

"Waist to pilot, waist to pilot! The bomb bay's got a gas leak that looks like a waterfall!"

"Better go down and take a look, Jacobs."

"Roger."

"You fellows in the waist start throwing out everything possible----but the guns. In the nose too. Did you hear in the nose?"

"Roger, I received you."

In great haste to return to my navigation, I began to kick every object on the floor toward the bomb bay, papers and all. I pushed ammo boxes, oxygen bottles, everything but the bombsight, ahead of me in the narrow catwalk. When I reached the bomb-bay and saw the volume of gas and hydraulic fluid that rained down inside it, I knew Corman had not exaggerated in his description of it. Enemy bullets had peppered the doors with holes. One more incendiary bullet would have annihilated us! I shoved the jetsam out through the half-opened doors.

Minutes later I discovered that the airspeed indicator had been destroyed. I tampered with the Gee-box. It was out! Suspecting something worse, I called

French and told him to make a turn to test the magnetic compass. The needle did not move with the plane's turn! Confirmed.

"French, the magnetic compass is dead. I can only guess at what course we've been flying and hope I'm not off 90 degrees. You'll have to watch your gyro compass. Keep it on 270 as best you can."

"Roger. Are we out of Germany almost?"

"The airspeed is out, too, so I'll guess again. Another 30 minutes."

"Roger, we'll try to get under the clouds when you think we're over friendly territory, so let us know. Maybe you can get a check-point then."

The next half-hour crawled. Every eye searched the undercast for a break and some ground for me to identify. The fleece-like cumulus rolled under us unremittingly and monotonously. No break. No check-point. We flew on. "Pilot to navigator. Your ETA for Belgium is up now. We're going to let down faster now. Okay?"

"Not yet, French, stay above 'em as long as you can. I'm not sure where we are, and I'd hate to fly over the Ruhr at 8000 feet."

"Roger, we'll stay up awhile longer."

We decided to try to communicate by gestures with the pilot of the P-38 that was still flying escort for us. We thought that perhaps he would know if we were out of Germany but he evidently did not understand our sign language. Then, unexpectedly, we found the answer. Flak puffs, menacing and angry, formed with the instantaneous sound of dull, faraway explosions. The ship rocked slightly. Not again! Not after living the other! Oh Christ, NO! – but the flak bursts did not last, and we were not injured by them.

"Why those sonuvabitching, trigger-happy Heinies!" Doc exploded. I smiled.

"Them's my very sentiments," someone added in grim humor. Directly with that remark, I saw a brief break in the clouds and the first earth I'd seen in over two hours. My hungry eyes glimpsed two rivers joining a city. I called out my discovery.

"Look down! It's Koblenz! You can see the Rhine and the Meuse. We're almost in friendly country, boys."

“God save the King! England, here we come!”

The next half-hour was a happy one. We slipped down through the clouds and skimmed over friendly Belgium looking for an emergency landing-strip. We had No. 3 engine working again, but we dared not try to cross the channel to England with a ship as badly crippled as ours was; our only thought was to land and get out before we should blow up. We were not even dismayed when I discovered that, along with the other equipment I had accidentally jettisoned the pilotage map for Belgium and northern France. I pinpointed our position by memory; I recognized a Belgian town by the river curving through it in hairpin shape. Fiske eventually received a reliable radio fix to confirm my position. I called to French to turn directly south into France for I knew we should hit one of the airfields that stretched in a line between San-Quentin and Rheims.

When we spotted a P-47 base ahead of us at last, we circled, shooting flares and received the signal to come in. Then fate proved an ungracious loser and showed her chagrin by tantalizing us one last time. The nose-wheel would not let down! When Greenly announced the fact, we were gliding in. It was too late to pull up and go around. Once again we waited the tense moment through. The wheels touched; we rolled. French braked lightly to the left then locked his arm in the wheel-stick. The nose finally dropped and struck the runway. The ship scraped loudly and stopped tail-up at the edge of the grass. Clambering out of the cockpit escape hatch like a bunch of monkeys, we jumped to the ground one by one. The earth was far sweeter to our feet then, than thoughts of heaven to our souls.

“Stay clear of it! It’s got a bad gas leak!” We yelled the warning to the crowd that had quickly gathered. They began to throw a multitude of questions at us. We must have answered their questions unconsciously, for we all were in a trance as we felt the earth solid under us. We assured the medical officer that we had all escaped without a wound. When we closely inspected our broken ship, the miracle of our perfect health was emphasized. Almost every part of the plane’s surface had been riddled with holes of .50 caliber and .30 caliber sizes. Explosive 10mm shells had torn holes in the wings and had left an opening bucket sized. The gas and hydraulic lines had been shattered in numerous places.

“Well, all I can say,” Doc began, “is that every one of us must have been tuned in on the Lawd’s frequency.”

“You can say that again, Doc!”

"For Christ's sake look at this line of holes right where I was standing, will you." Corman whispered.

And so it went. We marveled until we grew weary of marveling. Later that night Cochran, French, and I stood at the bar of the officers' quarters----a handsome French chateau a few miles from Rheims.

"I wonder how many planes got back to England," I said. "I saw only three ahead of us and one below us to the right at the end. The group must have lost over half of 'em."

"At least half." French nodded. "The other squadrons were hit as hard as we were."

"I'm glad that Fiske was finally able to contact the base so that they know we're safe. I'll bet the sonuvabitches had started picking up our clothes, my battle-jacket included." Doc was not happy at that thought.

"Say, did either of you guys ever see McCoy's ship go down?" I asked.

"Yeh, he got it early," Doc answered. "That was his prop that almost hit us."

"I hope McGregor was as lucky as us----or had time to bailout anyway."

"Give us three scotch and sodas, please"----to the bartender.

I raised my glass. "Here's to the end of your tour, boys. I retract that statement about this being too easy a mission to finish on. I congratulate you for having flown a well-rounded tour of duty."

We gulped down the whiskey.

The moments of the going and returning of missions were the only breaks in the monotony of war for those who waited on the ground. As it had happened so many times before on the airfields of England, so it was now at 12:30 that the men of Tibenham raised vigilant eyes to the cold horizon. From there would come the issue of their work, the real meat of their war; for their accomplishment must finally rest with the men who flew.

The ground crews had assembled at their hardstands, ready to service the homing ships and to be physician to their wounds. Intelligence officers were grouped near

the dressing-rooms to begin the interrogation of landed crews; personnel in the drying-rooms were standing by; and the Red Cross girls had hot coffee and doughnuts ready for the weary, wise-cracking horde. Cut on the perimeter of the landing-field flight surgeons sat in ambulances watching for emergency flares that would tell of wounded aboard. Thus it was that the whole field fixed attention upon the mission due home.

On Hardstand 7, four of the former members of our crew were waiting to congratulate French and Cochran and to take snapshots after this last mission.

“They’re overdue now. It’s 12:45,” Moynihan stated.

“It wouldn’t be the first time a mission wasn’t on time,” Havard reminded him. O’Kelly and Winand were talking to the crew chief.

“There come some of ‘em, I think,” O’Kelly called and pointed. Three ships in formation were swinging around from the northeast edge of the field. They were wasting no time on formality and broke quickly into the landing pattern.

“Wonder where the rest of them are?” Moynihan worried.

“They’ll be along, Moynihan,” Winand laughed. “They probably broke up the formation to let down through the undercast.”

The words were scarcely from his tongue when the news of disaster struck with rude intrusion and spread electric-quick throughout the base. The control tower had caught the terse message from Major Graham in the deputy-lead ship. “We were hit by fighters. Practically wiped out. Wounded on board, two of us.”

“Where are the -----there are more than three of you!!! In consternation and great disbelief.

“This is all of us, I guess. One ship made it back but crashed near the field. Not sure who it is.”

The words sounded from mouth to mouth, even until men who were sleeping in their huts were awakened and told.

“Fighters jumped the mission, shot down all but three!”

“God-a-mighty! Only three out of thirty-five!”

“Who are the three? Who got back!”

“Who saw the numbers on the three ships?”

“Who are the three?”

“Who are the three?”

At Hardstand 7, the four men, stunned now, were hearing but not comprehending the tragedy. They left the hardstand reluctantly---as if their loss were made irrevocable by their departure---and gathered with the others at the squadron area to hear the story of disaster. Perhaps someone in one of the surviving ships had seen chutes open from French’s plane. Or perhaps someone saw them make it to an emergency landing-field in Belgium or France. Many men of many ranks had crowded around the weary survivors and were asking a thousand questions at once. Those in the rear strained and stood on tiptoe to hear their answers. Some wanted to know the reasons for such a terrible loss in planes; some asked where were the American fighters; others asked about the strategy of the Luftwaffe attack; still others wanted to know only how much chance certain crews had had to bail out.

“Did you hear McCoy contact the fighter support, Graham?”

“When they hit us, I heard McCoy yelling for Balance 3-4, and Balance 3-5. They answered and kept wanting to know our position. I’m not sure whether Mac ever had a chance to tell them; he went down quick.”

“How many 190s hit you?”

“About 125 of them, as near I could guess.”

“Yeh, there were so many of ‘em you couldn’t tell. By the time one wave went through us, another wave started barreling through.”

“They came through our squadron ten and twelve abreast, like the forward wall of a football team.”

“The minute I lost one of the bastards from my sights, I could turn in any direction and fire at another one.”

“What about Hunter, Major Graham? He was flying next to you; did you see him go down?”

“I don’t know. He was in trouble, but I never did see him go down.”

“What about Carrow?”

“On fire when I saw him.”

“And Elder?”

“Heitz?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you see what happened to French, Major Graham?”

“Yes; I saw him better than anyone else. He was flying right beside us and burning all the way back from the cockpit. He didn’t have a chance! I never saw a soul bail out before their ship kicked over.”

“Christ! And their last mission, too!” Whispered in benediction.

Questions were asked and answered until the entire story had been told, and everyone could picture the burning confusion of the air battle. Intelligence and Operations began to gather their impersonal data of the mission and to relay it to higher headquarters. Dead men became names on a report and data for future telegrams beginning with, “The War Department regrets.....” “Top officers came from Division (and even 8th Air Force) to offer condolence to the Group Commander, Colonel Jones. The mission was now becoming a written history. Excitement passed, and heavy grimness came like gray fog from the sea and sat on the field.

In our own quarters our hut-mates sat, believing and not believing. Switzler, who had been our bombardier for nine months refused, out of desperation, to believe us dead. Each one is deeply disturbed---not just for the sake of the missing men, but because today death has been made more familiar and possible to them. If they sit huddled, it is because death has proved it can reach out and touch them, too.

“They’re bound to be safe somewhere, fellows! Doc and French just two hours from the end of a tour! How could I ever write letters to Doc’s and Tim’s wives? —I know them both! They just can’t be dead!”

“There’s not much hope after what Major Graham said, Switzler. Sit down and take it easy, will you. This is not the first time someone’s been killed in this war.”

When the sergeant came from QM to take our clothes, Switzler refused to let him enter the hut. Later a lieutenant came on the same errand and was repulsed by a .45 automatic pistol in Switzler’s hand.

“Don’t lay a hand on those clothes, Lieutenant! Those guys are coming back!”

By the time the major arrived, the others had calmed Switzler and had scattered our clothes under bunks, or shelves, and in their own dresser drawers. The major left without our uniforms.

Late in the afternoon our radio message sent by Fiske from France was received at the base. It was Major Graham’s turn to be incredulous. To add to the good news, two more messages of hope were received. Hunter and Heitz, both of the 700th had come out of Germany and had crashed in Belgium, although several of Heitz’s crew were badly wounded. This unexpected salvage from the calamity dissipated some of the gloom over the field. Our hut, at least, rejoiced for the safety of the men who had once been pronounced dead. Switzler’s relief and joy unspeakable.

Having been flown from France to Tibenham in a B-24 from another Group we landed at the base the next afternoon. Our welcome was genuinely warm, and the handshakes were many. I thought I detected a few who kept staring at us to be convinced as to the substance of our persons; and Major Graham sent word that he must see us in the flesh before he could believe. Having spent the last few hours ourselves in walking about the good earth and in testing our reality, we laughed and assured them all that our fate had been “cold fear, not hot death.”

“I suppose you guys thought you’d had it for good, huh?” someone asked, after we had told our story.

“Well now, I reckon so,” Doc began. “The Lord wasn’t anointing my head with oil for nothing.”

Once out of our flying clothes and dressed again, we went to a special interrogation. It was there that we learned our group had bombed by mistake the town of

Cottingein, 23 miles to the east of Kassel, instead of Kassel. A lone group, out of the bomber stream and without fighter support, we had been pounced on by the Germans as easy prey. At the interrogation we turned in claims for five enemy planes destroyed by our guns, four of which we later received official credit for. I discovered what crew McGregor had been on and asked what had been their fate. "We have no report of anyone seeing Sollien's ship on fire or going down or of the crew bailing out. Perhaps McGregor's name will appear on the POW list in a few months."

"Well, at least Mac won't have to sweat out the last one again," I said to Cochran and French.

"Maybe he'll get to rest now in some nice Heinie camp for the rest of the war."

At the bar in the Officers' Club that night our hut-mates were buying us beer – and for once I did not hear the song, "Old Soldiers Never Die." Instead I overheard someone talking and gesticulating to a crowd of listeners.

"And they kept coming in like the forward line of a football team and..." Like the compelling chant of the Ancient Mariner.

Very suddenly I knew that the exultant music of return was changing within me to the infinitely weary beat of spiritual defeat. Time after time have men been snapped up by hungry suck into the insatiable man of war. This is but one tragedy in one war – out of many tragedies in many wars. Shall I exult that this time I escaped?

Sharon's Note: The following is the letter that Dad wrote to accompany the Kassel story written by his navigator, Bob Tims.

Sunday-Nov. 5

Dear Jeff and Sharon,

Haven't heard from you for some time now so we guess you must be busy and are having a good summer of fishing, etc.

We have had a fair to middling summer here. Jeff, your Uncle John Lewis was very sick & in and out of hospitals and nursing homes for 4 months. It was very sad to see him the way he was. We saw him about once a week or more and did our best to keep Betty's spirits up. He died in early August and it was a relief for him as well as the rest of us.

We did manage to get quite a lot of time in the boat on the nice weather days. It was so much more comfortable off-shore than the other boat was. We took a long ride out around the Isles of Shoals one day and another day went down to Rockport Harbor. Got a little over 37 hours all told so that was a lot more than usual.

I thought you would be interested in this account of my last (35th) mission as written by Bob Tims. He was my navigator on the crew we went overseas with, as were most of the others with us on the flight. This mission was one written about in a history of the 8th Air Force, because we set a record for most aircraft lost in a single mission "The fighter attack lasted 3.5 minutes – seemed a lot longer" from a single Bomb Group.

Bob gave me a carbon copy of this story years ago but the carbon copy is almost unreadable. Janice made this up for me and made the copies so I could give a copy to you and your brothers; now you all have a copy.

We have been busy with fall clean-up stuff. Elaine has been busy in the house and I have been doing leaves and acorns outside. The leaves are just about all done now but the acorns keep on falling – had a super large crop of them this year.

Everybody here is well and keeping busy. Jim is going hunting next week and Dave is going for a couple or three days too.

We are going up to Den's for supper tonight.