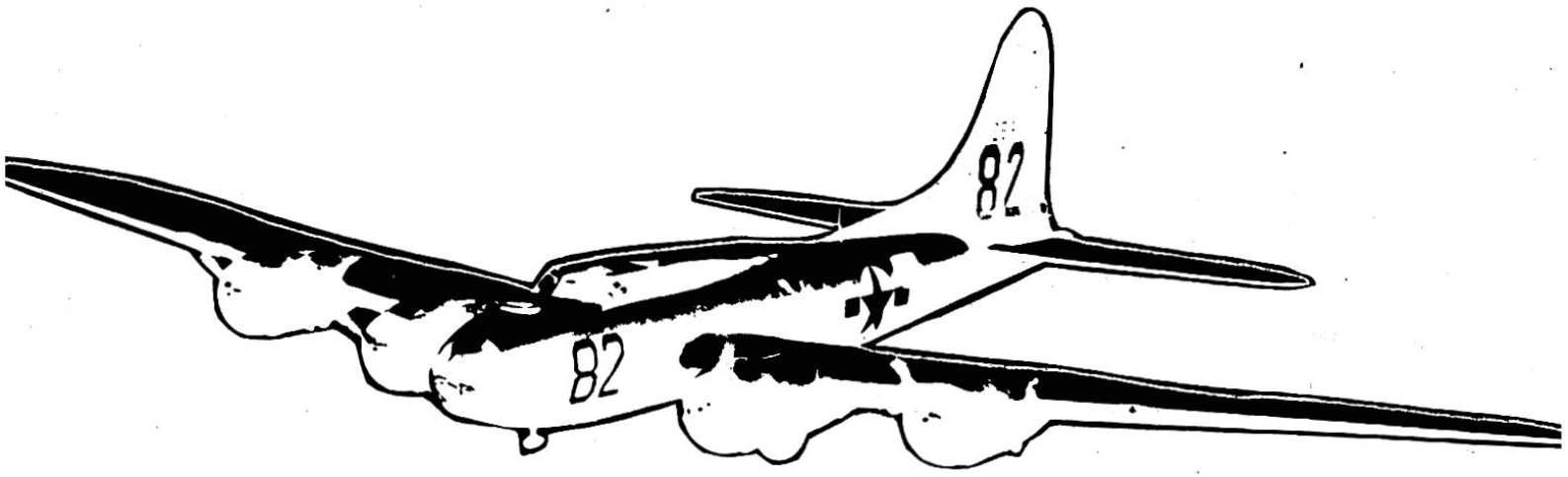
Not So Fond Memories of Oberpfaffenhafen

by Dale O. Smith



THE ops officers of the 8th Air Force had decided to try a new tactic on that 24 April 1944 raid against the Messerschmitt assembly plant at Oberpfaffenhafen. Extra aircraft and crews had been pouring in from the zone of the Interior (ZI) and we had become strong enough for each numbered combat wing to put up two air wings of 54 B-17s each. Thus the ops people had decided to penetrate with the two large formations flying abreast, called "A" and "B" wings. That way, they reasoned, we would expose ourselves to flak and fighters for a shorter period. It seemed reasonable enough, but there were some hidden hookers.

My combat wing commander, Brig. Gen. Bob Travis, was to lead the "A" wing as well as to command both formations of his 41st Combat Bomb Wing—a total of 108 Forts with about 1,000 airmen. As a matter of fact, Bob Travis was the leader of the whole 8th Air Force that day, some 800 bombers and perhaps half that many fighters, but his duties in this capacity amounted only to a decision whether to carry on or to abort the mission—and the 8th never aborted unless the weather got stinking.

Luck of the draw (depending how one looked at it) gave me the lead of the "B" wing. I was ordered to fly on the right of the "A" wing and dress left on it. Then, as we approached the target, I was to slide the "B" wing in behind the "A" wing of the 41st and ahead of the "A" wing of the following outfit. At the briefing this sounded easy.

It was a beautiful day, and we assembled without difficulty. Passing west of London we were at 16,000 feet on departing England at Beachy Head. Our double wings penetrated the French coast 20 minutes later at 20,000 feet amid a shower of flak. There we turned left 16°, and I had my first indication that something was wrong. I found my "B" wing somewhat behind 41 "A" of General Travis. He slowed down some, and I increased speed from 152 to 155 indicated. Soon we were lined up like West Pointers passing in review. A squadron leader had been shot down by flak at the French coast, but his deputy had promptly assumed command and we were in pretty good shape.

About 100 miles east of Paris we made another left turn, this time 30°. It became apparent then that the wings-abreast idea was seriously flawed. When we completed the turn I found myself miles behind 41 "A". In fact, I was even behind the "A" wing of the following formations.

Bob Travis called to me to dress up and I increased speed to 158 mph indicated, which was about the maximum for a 54-airplane formation of B-17s, and even then some birds began to straggle. But there was no catching up. A third turn to the left of 26° near Strasbourg cracked the whip once again, aggravating my problem. Those on the outside of my wing began to drop back dangerously. It was an invitation to enemy fighters, and they accepted it.

For over an hour we had flown across France with little or no opposition. But this all changed as we headed into Germany. South of Stuttgart enemy aircraft, sometimes six or nine abreast, were vectored in on our noses. They came in waves, firing headlight ammunition that sparkled like rain in the sun. It seemed impossible to avoid this hail of fire as hundreds of rounds flew directly at us. Of course our B-17s suffered much battle damage, but they could take a lot and still fly. Nevertheless, three of them went down under this withering attack. I had cut the speed to a respectable 150 indicated to allow the stragglers to re-

The author(l) congratulates his pilot, Capt. Edgar E. Ulrey on his graduation with 30 missions.

join the formation, but they hadn't caught up when the fighters hit.

I abandoned any thought of dressing on 41 "A". We were far behind and the parade of "A" wings on my left were jammed together as closely as a queue at a London bus stop. There certainly was no room for me to slip in behind 41 "A".

The plan had been to fly north of Munich and then circle around to the right. Theoretically this should have cracked the whip in the opposite direction, opening up the interval between the "A" wings on the left and permitting the "B" wings to slide in behind for the bombing. But at this point, the formations were so badly scrambled that an on-the-spot correction was called for. The big 54-plane formations were simply too unwieldy to do what the ops people had in mind.

I knew Bob Travis couldn't see the deplorable condition of the formations behind him. All he could see was how badly disorganized my 41 "B" was, and he let me know it over the radio in no uncertain terms.

Radio traffic was a tower of babble. Not only were the Germans attempting to jam it with their "mad fiddler," but it seemed as if everyone was calling for help as the enemy fighters took big bites out of our formations. At the first attack I had called and called for "Balance-one," the leader's call sign of our fighter escort which was supposed to have been in the Augsburg-Munich area. "Balance-one" finally responded through the radio noise (part of which was caused by the angry calls of General Travis ordering me to straighten out my formation and dress up). "Balance-one" assured me his fighters were on the way. The "Little Friends" protected some of the following wings but never got up to the front of the line where the heavy action was. 41 "B" lost two more Forts north of Munich, and others were badly shot up.

Being unable to slide in behind 41 "A," the option open to me was obvious, but it would require an act of insubordination. I could turn my "B" wing to the right before 41 "A" turned, bombing the target first.

I knew Bob Travis prized his position at the head of the bomber stream. He would be first over the target and have an unobstructed view of it while the following formations would have to bomb through the smoke and debris caused by earlier bomb explosions. Taking the brunt of the fighter attack, the lead wing certainly deserved that advantage. I knew he wouldn't look kindly to my move no matter how logical.

Perhaps I could have S-ed to slow our advance and looked for an opening somewhere back in the stream of "A" wings, but this would have taken the position of some other "B" wing. Besides, it would have exposed my wing unnecessarily to more flak and fighters. Our losses at this point were prohibitive principally because I had tried to follow orders and stay abreast. The integrity of my wing almost was lost before I cut the speed back. And I was condemning myself bitterly for having acted like a cadet. No, I decided, we'd go in first. To hell with what General Travis might do.

Augsburg and Munich loomed through camouflage smoke off my right wing and I knew Oberpfaffenhafen was almost due south of Munich. As we drew beyond the metropolis I began to wheel the big 50-ship 41 "B" formation around to the right, starting the circle of the city well outside the flak envelope. A scream penetrated the babble of radio voices and I knew who it was. I didn't intend to respond. I was committed. There was nothing else to do but go ahead with my plan of taking the lead. So I turned off my radio.

The Luftwaffe hit us again just before the IP. They were viciously flying through their own flak. My hot bombardier, Dick Crown, and methodical navigator, Bob Chapin, were busy working out the attack strategy and were unable to respond with the nose guns. I wished I had some fixed guns that I could fire from the cockpit like the fighters. It was a helpless feeling watching all that sparkling ammunition come at us.

Another Fort 41 "B" went down. The low group leader was badly hit but continued in formation. I couldn't see it, but I had an officer riding in the tail gunner's position who acted as eyes in the back of my head and kept me informed. (I wished Bob Travis had used this system, but as far as I know our 384th was the only group to practice it.) By now our formation had closed up well and the three 18-plane "groups" (or what was left of them) took interval smartly for the bomb run.

Each 18-plane unit was to bomb separately on the signal of its lead bombardier—the signal being the leader's bombs leaving his bomb bay. Only the lead group bombardier operated the bombsight, the following planes simply toggled off their bombs. This tactic had four advantages. First, the best bombardier of the group would do the bomb aiming for everyone and for my 18-plane group that was "Dead-eye" Dick Crown. Second, a tighter pattern of bombs would smother the target. Third, the bombing operation would be carried out more rapidly than if each ship bombed individually, hence less exposure to flak. And finally, the groups would retain a defensive formation of supporting fire in the event of fighter attack.

We had to fly straight and level for eight minutes to permit the bombardier to crank in drift and stabilize the crosshairs on the Norden sight. I switched to automatic pilot and gave control of the airplane to Dick Crown. Bob Chapin, as usual, had done a masterful job of navigating, and the large German aircraft assembly plant was clearly visible ahead as we slowly (too

slowly!) crept up on it.

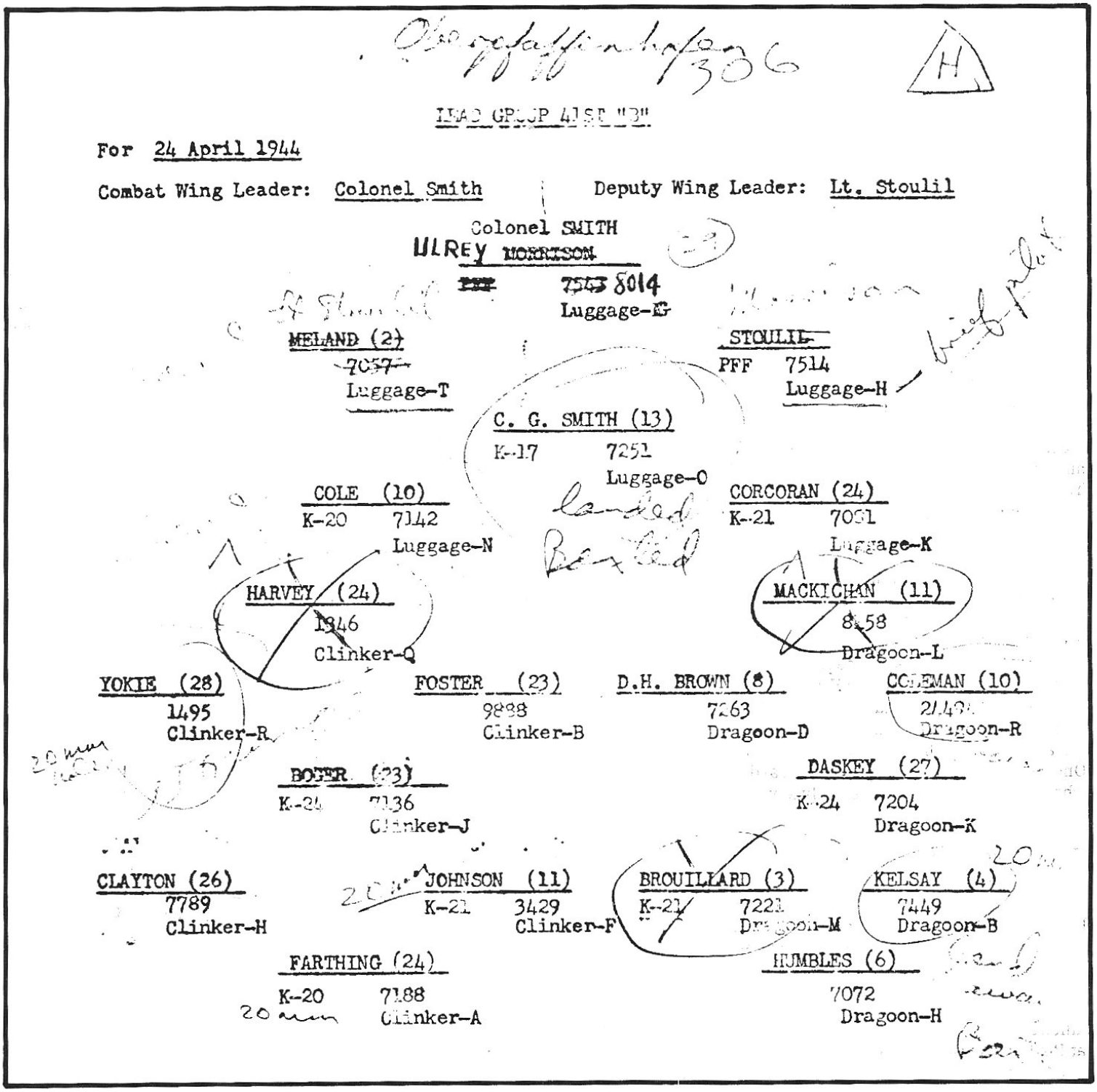
Flak peppered us unmercifully, but there could be no evasive action. It seemed that the Germans had no intention of letting us destroy this important manufacturing facility. For the first time on the mission I had nothing to do but sit and watch the awesome drama of soaring Forts running the gauntlet of deadly flak. I mentally flinched at every burst. I admired my skillful pilot, Ed Ulrey, who calmly monitored the instruments as if he were driving down Broadway. I liked to do the flying when the flak got thick, but that was impossible on this interminable bomb run. It was much better to be busy, concentrating on things other than fear. Explosions rocked our tormented B-17, and fragments of flak rattled on its skin. One spent hunk of metal came through the side next to me and hit my seat.

The eight-minute run seemed an eternity. Finally, the more-than-welcome "Bombs away!" came from Crown in the nose accompanied by a slight lurch upward as our ship loosed its load of 500-pounders.

Cool Ed Ulrey snapped off the auto pilot and grabbed the wheel. With hand signals I directed him to bank left and let down. Now we could maneuver to spoil the aim of the ground gunners.

I had the radio back on now and mercifully had heard no more from General Travis. A call came from my right wingman: "Cowboy leader, you're losing fuel."

A copy of part of the planning papers used on the mission to Oberpfaffenhafen.



After the return from Oberpfaffenhafen (Munich) 24 Apr. 1944. Capt. Edgar E. Ulrey was the lead pilot and 1st Lts. Robert Chapin and Richard Crown the navigator and bombardier.

Plastering my head against the right window I could see a misty spray of fluid leaving engine three. It would be just a matter of moments, I thought, before it caught fire and we blew up. I had seen it happen before.

Jerking off my oxygen mask, I sniffed the air; there was no odor of gas. It had to be hydraulic fluid. What a relief! I replaced my mask and passed the good word to our crew who were preparing to bail out. For the moment we were safe.

Forming back into a combat wing (sometimes called a combat box because a high group of 18 flew on the left of the lead group and a low group of 18 flew down to the right), we led the 8th Air Force on the withdrawal from Germany across France. Two badly crippled Forts had to peel off just after "Bombs away" and head for Switzerland. We never heard from them again. One was co-piloted by Floyd Edwards whose wedding I had attended only a week before.

MY records show that the 384th Bomb Group contributed 30 B-17s to the original 41 "B" air wing of 54. The 303rd put up 24 B-17s to fill out the 41 "B" formation. My records don't indicate the 303rd losses, but I know they were considerable.

Of the 30 we put up, 7 were lost. Four others that made it back to England had killed and wounded aboard, and two landed at Boxted, unable to make it home to Grafton Underwood.

The only good thing about the show was that we hit the target squarely. Dick Crown had done it again, and we had slowed the manufacture of enemy fighters.

But my worries weren't over. First we had to land without a hydraulic system; that meant no flaps and no brakes. And in those days there was no barrier at the end of the runway. To top it off, there was a Fort burning in the middle of the runway. I prayed the crew had escaped.

It looked like we might have to groundloop in order to stop on the airfield. Coming in low, we put it down on the grass just over the fence pointing at the longest diagonal possible. As our speed bled off, we headed toward a distant hardstand and used the last few feet of its taxi strip to roll to a stop.

The operations officer in a jeep had followed the fire and meat wagons that had chased us. He brought the bad news I expected.

"General Travis wants to see you in his office immediately!"

As soon as I could shuck off my flying gear I climbed into our beat-up Ford staff car and told Sergeant Montgomery to drive me the 12 miles to Wing headquarters at Molesworth. It was like riding a tumbril to my execution. Certainly my days of command were over. I would lose my group—might even be court-martialed.

General Travis was steaming with anger when I reported and saluted, but he was compassionate enough to direct me to a chair. No doubt he was as bushed as I. I suffered his tirade until he had wound down, reasoning that my best approach was not to contradict or even comment until he had dispelled some of his wrath. Then I might be permitted to tell the whole story as I saw it. At last he asked me to explain my insubordination.

As carefully as I could, I described how the left turns across France caused the outside wings to crack the whip and how I increased speed to catch up; how this had strung out my wing and made it vulnerable to fighters; how I cut back my speed to preserve the defensive formation; and how it became impossible to swing in behind him because of the jamming together of the "A" wings on the left.

Using my hands to illustrate the wings-abreast turns I showed him that my only logical course of action was to assume the lead on the right turn around Munich and I apologized for having to upstage him. Then I condemned the wings-abreast tactic as unworkable. (Incidently, it was never tried again with 54-ship wings.)

Bob Travis listened to it all. I have to hand it to him; he was fair and reasonable and he didn't hold a grudge. Disappointed as he was with the heavy losses on the mission, he evidently decided that it wasn't my fault and that I had taken the only reasonable course. Suddenly his expression softened and for a long moment he regarded the pencil with which he had been taking notes.

"Yes," he finally said resignedly in a low voice, "I guess you did the right thing. Okay," he brightened, "I want you to put yourself in for a Silver Star."

"I can't do that, General," I protested. "That's your responsibility."

"Do it!" he commanded.

And that was another order I disobeyed. I never did get that Silver Star, but a more appropriate award came out of the Oberpfaffenhafen mission. The 384th Bomb Group was given a Presidential Unit Citation.

Maj. Gen. Dale O. Smith, USAF (Ret.), a Command Pilot, is author of *The Eagle's Talons* and co-author with Gen. Curtis E. LeMay of *America is in Danger*, as well as other books and numerous articles.