

“A Rough Mission to Munich”

By Ted Bardue

384th Bombardment Group

545th Squadron

Crew Position: Top Turret/Flight Engineer

By mid-July 1944 our (384th BG, 545th Squadron) crew had made both deep and shallow penetrations of the continent, the deep ones including Peenemunde, Leipzig, and Munich (twice). On the 19th of the month, our eighth mission as a crew, the target was again to be one of Munich's neighboring towns (Hollriegelskreuth)... We were to target a hydrogen peroxide manufacturing plant. At briefing we were told to expect moderate-to-heavy flak, and that 'perhaps' we would meet with fighter resistance, too.

...Personally recalling all the details of that day's mission was never possible, but those I do remember are still quite vivid... We have yet to reach full agreement among four of us who were there as to the exact number of enemy fighters engaging our Vega-built B-17G, The Saint, on that day.

In action as fast as air combat with fighters, no one individual could see or keep track of more than two enemy planes at any one time, each of those looking just like the other. They were too fast, maneuverable, elusive: always the nearest 109, the greater threat, demanded a crewman's concentrated attention; and for the best of reasons the human organism can offer – Survival. Each crewmember's perspective and field of view differed from the others'; each had a different working station to tend and defend. The net effect was defense of the entire crew, the airplane, and ultimately the mission.

This was another of those long missions where we hadn't gone on oxygen till 16,000 feet while crossing the Channel. Approaching our target area we turned at our initial point (I.P.) and proceeded in the usual dangerous, seemingly endless straight bee-line to the target... Those of us up forward could see ahead the residual smoke patches in the box - barrages of flak fired at groups some distance ahead of us, so we were as prepared as we could be to penetrate the same dangerous gauntlet...

Bombardier Henry Sienkiewicz (Syracuse, NY) toggled the bombs and seconds after leaving the flak box the formation came under a head-on attack by eight or nine Me109s. Two other B-17s were seen out of formation and going down, one of them smoking from its number three engine.

In a second or two the first 109 started firing at us but we forced him to break off his angling attack at about our seven-o'clock. We had received an explosive 13- or 20-mm shot beside the cockpit near the left wing-root and a slug into Gaston's left leg, shattering both the tibia and fibula and causing very heavy bleeding...

While we were firing at each other, one of his many bullets broke through the turret's rim in front of my Sperry gun-sight, breaking a gunmount crossmember and scattering a shower of steel, lead, and cast-aluminum scraps into my left arm and hand and, most annoyingly, into the left

side of my forehead. The grazing double holes there started to bleed copiously down over and under the goggles and into my left eye. Well, the other eye was still 20/20, and my guns remained operable, though with questionable accuracy after the sight and gunmount had been damaged. Soon this 109 had slid into our six o'clock level position and could fire away at us from a relatively safe vantage point. But we still had an ace in the hole if we played it right.

...in this crisis...The Saint had become separated by a country mile behind and somewhat below the main formation after an error made by the group lead. Immediately after 'bombs away' he had led the formation into such an abrupt left turn that the pivot unit, our airplane, could not maintain airspeed enough to stay in formation without stalling.

Today I still wonder: Did the formation's leader make that abrupt turn because our expected P-51 escort was late in arriving at the target area, and he thought that by hurrying through the turn he could get the Group closer more quickly to a rendezvous with our eastbound - but tardy - friendly fighter escort? Or was the man simply scared to death?

Our sweet-toothed tail-gunner (Daniel C. Alred, Clanton, AL) shouted on intercom "Ah bin hit - Ah cain't shoot mah guns!" And indeed he couldn't. His hands and forearms had just been peppered and paralyzed by the shrapnel from a shell exploding on the protective armor plate in front ...We were getting clobbered. The prospect of more Purple Hearts being awarded to our crew, probably posthumously, was a very sour one.

...Concussion and small shrapnel had left my left hand with no feeling in it, thus no left-trigger control. (The Sperry turret boasted two triggers, either of which would fire both guns.) The instant the rudder moved the tail to starboard, my guns started firing. Holding the right trigger down, I had tracked the 109 right through our vertical stabilizer and the circuit breakers had re-closed, as designed. The 109, floating back there only a couple hundred feet or less, fell away downward and forward, the pilot apparently having been surprised and perhaps stricken by my fire. If he wasn't dead, I can only reason that its pilot may have thought our top-turret and belly guns had all been knocked out. They weren't.

Sitting on the cold deck at the nose compartment's rear bulkhead, bleeding some, I remember having unusual and brief bursts of weeping, then unaccountable, and have always wondered whether Pitts and Sienkiewicz ever noticed this; and I have often speculated about what emotions had caused those tears. Tears of pride? Relief and pride? I can't otherwise account for this highly phenomenal manifestation of the emotional senses on that day - when we were young and charged with necessary but usually unbidden virtue. Forty-five years later I learned to my surprise that because of my persistent bleeding I had been a strong candidate for an involuntary parachute 'jump', to reach medical attention sooner than the long trip back to base offered. To my good fortune, the pilot heeded the throng of more attractive 'second opinions', and Hank had successfully stopped the bleeding.

Later, back at the base...awards for the day's action never happened except for three Purple Hearts - and, oh yes, a round of new rockers added to our NCO stripes. My surviving crewmates and I have quit thinking about awards for that day's work but the details of that day remain surprisingly clear.

It must be mentioned that as a warplane, the tough, trustworthy B-17 could withstand awesome physical punishment, especially with alert gunners manning the twelve fifties we had aboard our own early 'G' model. After Hollriegelskreuth, our ground personnel counted well over two-hundred 13-mm and 20-mm shell holes in The Saint, but our pilots had been able to bring it back to the base, a 4 and ½ hour trip from the target.

...Somehow, "The Saint" seems a fitting name for a B-17 that brought back many aircrews from the war, whereas so many hundreds of bombing sorties were not round trips. The crew, who had given the plane that name, however, simply had adopted it from the popular 1940's radio detective serial and paperbacks of the same name. Seven of that crew were killed earlier in July in a mid-air collision while flying a B-17 other than their own. The Saint's nose art was some ground crewman's modest artistic impression of a 'stick figure' saint complete with halo. It seems he had copied it from a paperback cover picture.

I feel I shouldn't close without mentioning the personal closeness that developed between most members of an aircrew, friendships that in our case have stood the test of time and geographic separation.