

Mission No. One!

That first morning — we were living in a barn with about 25 other fellows. Little me - well I went to bed at eight o'clock the previous evening so I would be really sharp - this was it! But I woke early around two o'clock and just could not sleep anymore. Was it butterflies in my stomach or thoughts in my mind, or tenseness, - perhaps a bit of it all? Soon after hours of restless waiting, the officer of the day came to wake us—but not me, I was a veteran. The boys told me not to get up right away because you only stood around and waited. So I stayed in the warm sack, then hurried like the devil at the last minute to get chow.

We piled into trucks in the darkness of the early morning, and bounced along the road to briefing. What emotions filled my body! Yet, I wanted to sing. Several fellows aired morbid thoughts. And I was so mixed up; I didn't know what to think. We stopped and men hurriedly jumped off the trucks and jammed a doorway to see the briefing board. I was quick to find out their motive and adopt their crude technique-Get a glimpse of "target for today".

Vienna - it meant so little to me. Many were the comments but none apparently registered. I was all nervous. Excitement, combat, jolly voices. No one showed what was deep in his heart though there were many and varied expressions on the groups of fellows. In the movies, I had seen pictures like this - but I never was a part of it.

Came the briefing, target, weather, code words, time tick, and special briefing for the Bombardier. We were again jammed into trucks and headed for personnel supply. So many things had to be drawn -chutes, harness, muffs, mae wests, ear-phones, electric heated suits, gloves, shoes, etc.

Then we were at the plane, number 56 Cherokee, the sweetest ship on the field, because this was our first mission and so our pilot flew as co-pilot. Lt. Garner flew as pilot.

We checked bombs, equipment, and loaded chaff and flak suits. I was busy checking the turrets and oxygen equipment. Then once again those old reliable Pratt & Whitneys were fed the fuel and our aluminum home became a living animal. We taxied out to the strip and soon were "in the Blue". About that time, I piled into the combat equipment. Into a heated electric suit, then came the heavy flying suit, the a Mae West, my gun, heavy boots over electric heated shoes, and a parachute harness on top-Wow, I was like a little round ball (but later I put on more - a flak suit and a flak helmet).

About that time we were at 10,000

feet and I armed those twin fifties that wreak destruction on the Krauts! I worked and worked and so did the engineer. I checked the bomb bay doors and "No Buona". One side would open but the other refused to budge. We decided to wait till the I.P. (Initial point of bomb run) and tackle them thru. If it wouldn't open, we'd kick it open. But the one we had open would not go shut, and we were up to 23,000 feet and it was cold with the doors open. The engineer resorted to tricks practiced by his ancestors, and banging like a monkey risked his life to enable me to close the doors. Little did we realize what dumb sad apples we were.

About that time I was called on the interphone. The Ball Turret operator's electric heated suit had failed. He was so cold that when he got out of the turret he was unable to switch oxygen lines and had passed out. Larsen to the rescue. The pilot told me to go back and see what I could do. We installed a new fuse, engaged some heated muff and got him warmed up and quieted down. Later he went out again due to oxygen deficiency, as did the engineer. Oh what a day! Fifteen minutes before I.P. I called the navigator and with him at the middle, the engineer at the far end and me at the handle, and foot on the front end, we jarred the doors open. Then the flak came, and it was plenty heavy. I was really scared but mostly about doing a good job. I was eager to see everything but saw very little except the flak. Then "Bombs away" and they went O.K. except a couple seconds late. They did not hit the target, but landed in the town. So maybe we got several hundred krauts. We peeled off and headed for home. Somehow our squadron lost the wing formation and so six planes flew alone toward Italy. When the excitement and tension wore off, I called the navigator and asked where we were. He said, "Just passed Gioia!" Bang, bang, flak - accurate. The whole plane shook. "Wow", yelled the navigator, "they got our hydraulic system. I'm all full of oil!"

"Waist to crew - flak holes. I've got a piece - darn thing nearly hit me!" We continued on our way, a little worse for wear, - little did we realize how bad off.

On arrival in our area the pilot called the engineer and told him to lower the landing gear manually. We worked and worked but no buona. We decided to try and fix the hydraulics and get the gear down, the engineer and I went forward with tape and rags. A gasoline check showed us that we had about one hundred and fifty gallons. That was enough an hour's flying. The sight gage was correct. So we worked against time at an impossible task, but then we are

airmen, cream of the crop. I worked and sweated and it began to get dark. Oh my mind and body were so tired. Our efforts were futile as we could not hold the 500 lbs. pressure. I went back to the flight deck and the pilot realized that it was either crash landing or bail out. He said, "I'll ride her in - Nix what about you?" Nix agreed to fly her in and the engineer decided to ride her in. So I said, "I'll get the crew ready for bailing out." At that moment, the controls stiffened and there was a crashing noise and the radio gave out!

Now we had about 120 gals of gas and I was not for finding out how correct those sight gages were. I got my parachute all tightened up, slipped the first aid kit into my jacket, then my flashlight and finally my 50 mission cap. I found my way thru the catwalk and to the waist. There I was greeted by a group of very quiet serious E.M. Gave them a few last minute instructions, "Jump out, straighten out, count three, then pull." No sooner was I finished talking then the ball turret gunner went out. Every three seconds a body plunged out and into darkness! They seemed to slide right out and disappear into the black. I was the last to go. I was so tired I just wanted to get out of that plane. No scared feeling, no emotions, this was a necessity I had been emotionally begging for the last two hours. I sat down on the camera hatch opening and dangled my feet outside. Then a lunge and I was outside. Sure I knew what I was supposed to do, but I do not recall if I did just that. My hand was on the rip cord handle and I was scooting along in the air in a sitting position. I remember slowing down and a lovely rocking feeling. And that there was no sensation of falling. It was a wonderful feeling. "Let's keep this handle for a souvenir" and into my pocket it went. Gee is that parachute open?" Then I got my hand on my hat so I put it on - next I got a hold of the flashlight and so I turned it on and looked up. What a wonderful sight that open canopy was. I saw lights below and realized it was an airplane on the ground and someone was working on it. So I started flashing my light in that direction, in a semi-code fashion. Another plane was parked below me and I was worried less I hit it, but fortunately the wind blew me away. By this time, I stopped swinging like a pendulum on an old stairway clock. I was drifting and the wind was against my face. I tried to get turned around but no luck. So I flashed my light toward the ground and bent my knees ready for a soft landing. It seemed I was coming down so slow and smooth. Wow I hit hard! My feet buckled and I landed on my rump. In a dazed manner, I