

Your turn comes finally. The ship quivers momentarily as the engines eagerly bite more air. Then you're off, racing down the runway . . . then your motion becomes quieter and you're airborne.

Somehow you always watch the ground when you're in the air, just as you like to watch the sky while you're on the ground. You look below you and on the ground. You are not alone today. Around you are other bombers who have just shaken themselves from the Earth. You fly along as brothers with your fuselages sparkling in the morning sun. You're all fighting to gain altitude and to assemble your formation. Your ship falls into line with others ahead and those coming up behind take up positions.

Like climbing a spiral staircase the bombers circle in the sparkling morning, gaining altitude and accumulating late comers. Then when all is ready, an order is given, and you are no longer circling, but heading out over the Adriatic and up towards Germany.

The sea is deep blue and pretty this morning, although no one has time to enjoy the scene. Everyone settles down to the business of checking instruments, keeping formation. And--watching for fighters. The engines roar steadily on and time goes by. It gets colder as you go higher and everyone has his heated suit turned up and his oxygen mask muzzled on his face.

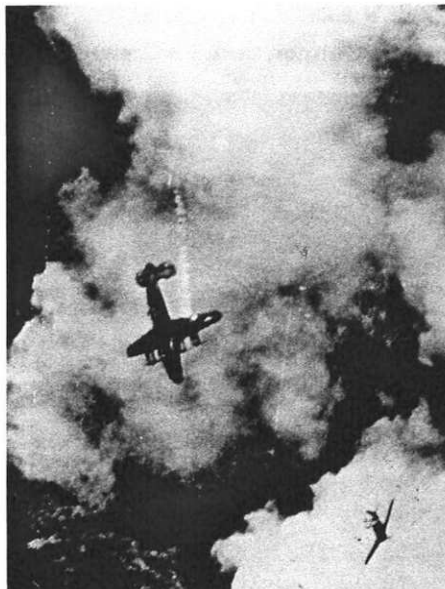
The interphone is as busy as a partyline back home, with friendly joking and conversation. It's early yet and trouble isn't really likely until they're further north--in fighter country.

The nose gunner in his turret of plexiglass scans the sky and sees a speck racing along the horizon. There's a moment of tension, until one of our weather scouts is identified.

Ahead lies the coast of Yugoslavia, magnificent in the morning light as she rises sharply out of the sea with her red cliffs forming a contrast against low lying clouds. Red tracers reeling into the ocean below signify that the ships are test firing their guns and soon the dull staccato of your own guns and the acrid smell of powder let you know all is well, as the mission enters a tenses phase.

Excitement ripples through the formation as fighter escorts--P-38s from the 82nd--race up from behind and sail above you, then race on ahead looking for trouble. Small wonder the escort holds a big place in the bomber man's heart!

The course is shifted now, high over the plains of Yugoslavia. You head north, more directly towards the target. By now the Germans are guessing and waiting, narrowing down their choices of where we'll strike and alerting their fighters.



*A GERMAN FW-190 FIGHTER PULLS AWAY FROM A BURNING B-24 AS IT MAKES ITS FINAL EARTHBOUND PLUNGE. JAMES C. DOOLEY PHOTO 461ST B.G.*

Forty minutes till target time now and the Austrian Alps show through the clouds. They're impressive and beautiful with little valleys whose roads and villages in the snow make you wonder about the people living down there.

Flak suits are passed around and the flyers slip on their armoured vests and steel helmets. You've finally reached the I.P. ("Initial Point") and turning as one the formation begins the downhill run at twenty-five thousand feet.

The bombardier warns over the interphone against talking as he and the pilot tersely listen to one another's signals; the bombardier working his utmost on the target ahead and the pilot following his orders and holding to the run. Vienna is just something hazy in the distance ahead as you strain to see her outlines. You're first to go over today so you won't see flak 'till you're almost upon her.

The order comes for bomb bay doors



*A B-24 IN DISTRESS LEAVES THE FORMATION HIGH OVER THE ALPS (NOTE: THE RIGHT-MAIN GEAR HAS DROPPED DOWN) GEORGE F. BRINKER PHOTO 461ST B.G.*

to open, and the rumble of air vibrates throughout the ship and runs up and down your back. And you feel strangely vulnerable hanging there with your insides exposed.

Ahead Vienna is now a city spread out like the chart at briefing; a city of a thousand years of history--a history in which you're now playing a part.

A black splotch of oily smoke suddenly mushrooms in the air ahead--and another! And another. They follow in quick succession, filling the sky with black smoke--feeling for you.

Your ship is dispensing chaff now...silvery stuff like Christmas tinsel which falls behind like a blanket, jamming the ground batteries radar. But they can still track and shoot you realize, as one explodes directly below and another whams alongside. The fragments slam into your fuselage, sounding like pebbles flung onto a tin roof. You can see the red flashes in the close ones and even sometimes the blink of the batteries below. And you swear you'll never go duck hunting again!

Number three engine is hit and is feathered, and the engineer and pilot are busy. The navigator checks to see that everyone is OK, and the co-pilot passes a warning to look out for fighters. You're off the target now, and the formation's tightly packed. It's a matter of group pride--and survival against fighters.

Shooting across the deep blue comes your escort, beautiful and reassuring. And then they're off again, playing around seemingly...but looking and ready.

The engineer is transferring fuel now and there are problems. And he sounds worried.

Then you hear it! "Dog fight at ten o'clock high," in the top turret gunner's deep voice. "On your toes." There's something going on up there alright, and your escort is grappling with it. Then behind you the tail gun-