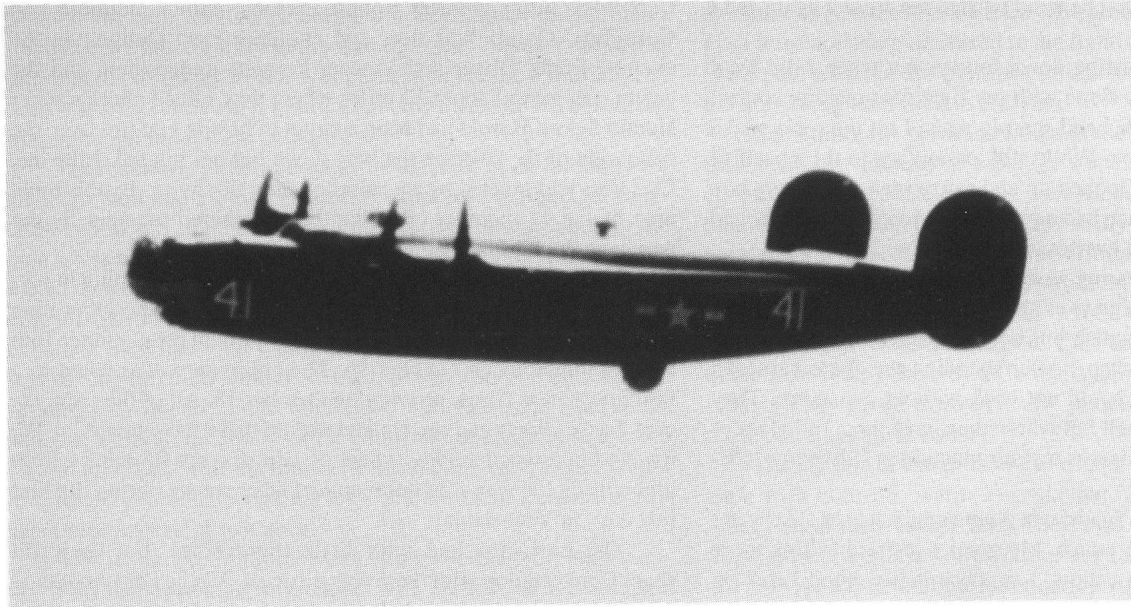


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# Our Longest Mission

by Jack Robson



## The October 14, November 23, 1944 Mission

As I left the tent that morning for the mission briefing, I remember Ken Dowdy stirring in his cot and saying to me, "See you later this afternoon." Bob Warne and John Dooley, the other members of my original crew bunked in the same tent, were not awake. None of them would fly that day. It was October 14, 1944.

I remember too, the usual buzz when the wall map was uncovered at briefing. The line on the map traced our route across the Adriatic, then past Yugoslavia, Hungary and Czechoslovakia to the southeastern section of Germany. It was a long mission. For our crew it was especially so. It lasted 39 days.

Our crew that day was described later by Carl Voss, our navigator, as a "potpourri" crew. Carl meant that most of our people were from several different regular crews and were flying together for the first time. However, nine of the eleven had flown twenty or more missions and four of us had a mission count over forty.

The assignment was to bomb the Odertal oil refinery in the Blechhammer area of Germany. Takeoff was scheduled to begin at 0756 and estimated return was 1536; we all departed a little late due to weather. Events proceeded routinely for us until approximately 1210, (about five minutes before the IP) when a runaway prop problem developed. Repeated efforts to toggle back did not help. Finally, it was necessary to feather the engine. Although power was increased in the other engines we were not maintaining our proper formation position. (Charlie 21). With three other planes flying close formation on us, it was important to relinquish our place by dropping down and back. As we made that move the other pilots properly adjusted filling up the spot we vacated. I attempted

to tag to the rear of the flight but by then we were below and behind the formation and we were not maintaining altitude or distance. I decided to return to base. It was the first time in over 40 missions that I had to abort other than with the total group due to bad weather.

( We learned much later that the Group also did

not carry out the original mission because of weather cover over the target but bombed an alternate target in Hungary.)

After leaving the group we continued to have problems maintaining constant altitude with our full load of bombs so we jettisoned two of them. Later, Frank Oliver, bombardier spotted a small factory on course ahead of us. We decided to make a bomb run on it as we passed over and the crew reported that Frank had straddled the target with several hits.

Although we were flying alone deep in enemy territory we did not encounter any enemy fighters and only light flak along our early route back to base. Somewhere in Hungary we received radio contact from a P-51 flight leader of three planes who indicated he would provide cover for us. We never did spot these escorts but their radio contact did help to relieve crew tension. The relief did not last.

Around Lake Balaton our flight engineer, Fred Dodge, and Carl Voss, navigator, reported that we had only about 20 minutes fuel remaining. We were still at least one hour away from the Yugoslavian coast. It was clear then that we would not be making it back to base that day and I would not be seeing Ken Dowdy later in the afternoon. I advised the crew of our situation and told them to be prepared for bailout on short notice. We also evacuated "Chief" Waukolee from the ball turret.

Shortly after this another solo B-24 from the 461st group joined us. The 461st crew watched us bail out over Yugoslavia after another engine cut out. When they returned to base they reported the event and our position (near the point where the Sava and Una rivers join SW of Zagreb). Eleven of us (including a photographer) were scattered around the hills about 45-55 miles south-southwest of Zagreb.

When I bailed out, I pulled the rip cord quickly, too quickly.