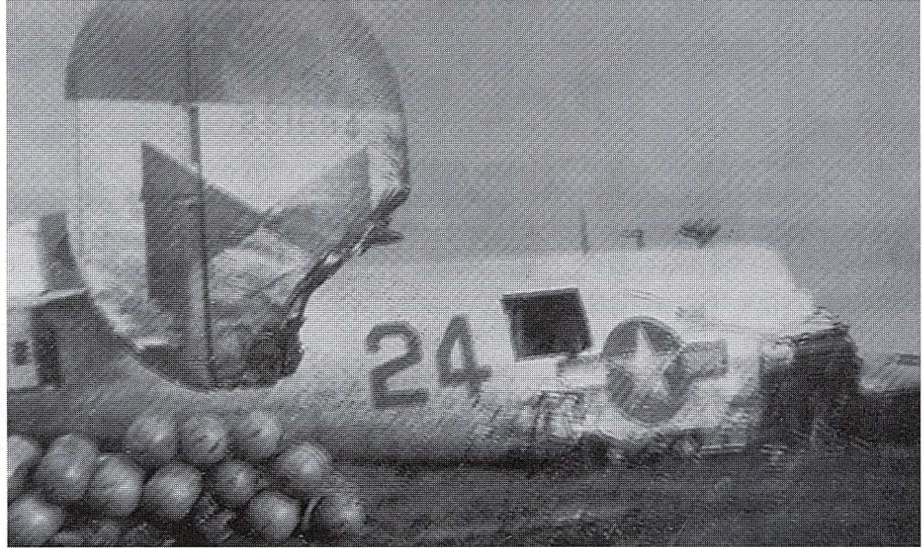


We had not even been ordered to throw out any chaff that day. Radio silence was now broken as we heard the call for "Bombs Away". This came from our Bombardier who followed the drop of the lead ship in the formation. The Pilots quickly responded to the sharp left dive of the formation leader as they all tried to escape the flak from the gunners below who seemed to have a dead fix on us as they continued to pound away. The formation tried to pull back together as the leader set out for the waters of the Ligurian Sea as he intended to return home over water down the west side of Italy. The formation seemed to be regaining some sort of order and us gunners all resumed our positions as we pointed out to each other the many visible flak holes that had riddled the ship. As I started to pan around I could see that all was not well with the ships in our formation. The tightness of the vees had gone up in smoke you could say, and quite a few of the planes were struggling to maintain their positions. Years later a pilot discussing this mission claimed to have seen losses of up to 7 ships in our group. Officially 2 were reported. I never understood this discrepancy. I also had seen more than 2 planes struggling. I now started to hear a lot of technical jargon about engine troubles coming over the intercom from many sources. The order for our engineer to come to the flight deck was one order that I did recognize as I felt a noticeable change in the flight and sound of our plane. An engine on the right side was running rough. The pilot now advised us that a couple of the engines had been hit and that the number three engine was losing oil. They were working on the situation but we were going to drop back of the formation as he could not keep up. He proceeded to drop down to get away from the rest of the formation. Everyone in our crew still remained at their positions. I could see that the last formation had completed their bomb run, and the flak had disappeared as the batteries cooled off. For some reason the first and last formations had been spared but the middle of the group had been saturated by all they could throw at us. You name them, Ploesti, Vienna, Munich, we had hit them all but we had never experienced flak like what we had just felt and seen. It was a known fact that the Germans mounted their ack-ack on railroad cars and trucks. This had been observed by partisans. It is possible that they had taken the few batteries at Trento and moved them up into the nearby mountains. They could easily have gained 5000 to 10,000 feet above sea level by their move. Add this to the fact that we went in lower than normal, well just maybe the cannoners had an edge that day.

We were having all types of problems with number 3 and we were losing altitude. The gunners were ordered out of their turrets and the crew was told to stand by. We had dropped down, and now lagged far behind the formation. We weren't the only ones as there were other stragglers still in view. Pilot Zimmerman now informed us that the number three engine was running away. We should open the escape hatches, put on our chutes and stand by.

He was going to try to maneuver the plane, and make the prop fall off away from the plane. We were not to jump till he rang the bail out bell which he would now try so we would know what it sounded like. We were scrambling around for our chutes as the startling tinny test was sounded and frankly it didn't have a reassuring ring.



*Plane 42-51694 nose no 24, showing battle damage to the right rudder after being dragged to the bone yard.*

Everyone in the waist section was now standing around the open floor door that had been cracked open by gunner De Lambert. We kept looking at one another as the plane started to go into a series of moves. One of us just kept shaking his head, another seemed to be praying. My reaction was a nervous unbelieving throaty chuckle as I noticed the label on my chute. It had been made by the Atlantic Parachute Co. in Lowell, Massachusetts, my hometown. We all wound up staring at the open sky below us. They also had opened the bomb bay doors. Unbeknownst to us some of the crew were standing on the catwalk ready to bail out. The whirling prop was making an unbelievably high pitched eerie sound as once more the pilot started to put the plane through these odd movements. No one knows how or why but I experienced this so I know it really did happen. The prop did fall free and clear of the engine, not away from the plane but towards it. One of the prop blades like a sharp knife pierced it and came through the right side of the plane into the bomb bay. The blade cut back as far as it could, until it came in contact with the cat walk support post in the middle of the bomb bay. This stop caused the whole prop assembly and blades to cad wheel away from the plane, but as they spun away they had one more hit and cut to make. As the blades passed near the right rudder they sliced off about half of it before spinning away from the plane. The cut off piece of the rudder followed the whirling prop assembly, and they both fell earthward. As soon as the blade had sliced into the bomb bay, three of the crew members standing on the cat walk had bailed out believing that the ship was falling apart. If you could have heard the noise that slicing prop had made you would have done the same, I'm sure. We, who were standing by the waist escape hatch saw the three bodies hurtle by right below us. Just then in the waist there