

View From The Nose Turret

by Joseph Shugrue, 827 Sq



Herb Brooks was not the closest friend I made, during World War II, but I have perhaps thought about him more than any other during the past 50 plus years. He had been in southern Italy, at the Torretta Air Base 100 miles or so northeast of Naples for several months when I arrived in the summer of 1944. We were both nose turret gunners on B-24 bombers of the 15th Air Force which was engaging the Germans and East Europeans in the fierce air war over Europe. At the time, I was 18 years old. He was a year or two older and had several bombing missions to his credit on the way to what he hoped would be 35 and his ticket home. He was friendly and kind to me, a good guy. He gave me several tips from his experience on daylight bombing missions. I liked him a lot.

We were both in the 827th Squadron of the 484th Bomb Group and lived in nearby tents mired in an ocean of Italian mud, which surrounded a huge complex of steel mats, and tufa block buildings that served as our air base. Just a year earlier Allied forces had invaded the Italian mainland. After a bruising campaign fighting their way up the peninsula, they were still battling Germans in northern Italy. The first mission my crew flew was a relatively easy one (a milk run) supporting General Mark Clark's troops in the north by destroying German barracks and warehouses in lightly defended Bologna.

The Bologna mission did not prepare us for the next day, Friday, October 13, 1944, when I got my first taste of real war.

Both my crew and Herb's were in a raid against Vienna, Austria. While a young man, Hitler spent several years in Vienna among tramps and drunks, working odd jobs, often sleeping on park benches, eating in soup kitchens, and nurturing his fierce hatred of non Germans.

When he became German dictator, he seized Austria and made Vienna one of his main arsenals. Around the city were refineries, aircraft plants, ballbearing factories, and underground complexes. Out of Vienna, railroads serviced the East and Balkan fronts. Vienna was the most heavily defended enemy city in southern Europe. But we came to Vienna that day not to destroy a city, but to help stop a madman. A few months later, the Soviets took Vienna. Former resident Hitler killed himself soon after.

This was the first of seven missions I would fly to Vienna. After several hours of flight, we turned on to the 20 minute bomb run to our target. We were not allowed to deviate from or take evasive action from that run which was set by ground commanders. We saw the billowing black clouds of flak through which we had to fly many miles ahead of us. The reaction was shocked obscenities. Ready to fire on us were nearly 400 dreaded 88-millimeter guns controlled by German-developed radar, which for that time was surprisingly sophisticated. Fear of instant death was a constant companion on these runs and the sense of relief when one was fortunate enough to make it through was a feeling unduplicated in my life's experience. The loss of men and aircraft over Vienna was phenomenally high.

On that mid-October day, the temperature at the 24,000-foot altitude at which we were flying was 45 degrees below zero. The primitive aircraft of that time were not pressurized nor heated. Threats from the cold ranged from frostbite from which all of us suffered regularly to freezing to death, which happened on occasion. In anticipation of the frequent failure of our crude and fragile electrically heated suits, we wore several layers of winter clothing. We also wore a holstered 45 automatic pistol for defense on the ground, a parachute harness, an inflatable life preserver (Mae West) and flak jackets, which were impossible for most of us to keep on, and still squeeze in to our turrets or get through the ship's tiny passages. I sat on mine, which was one of the smart tips Herb gave me. From many missions, our planes, and sometimes our men, came back riddled with flak.

For a human to function at the altitude we flew, it was necessary to wear an uncomfortable, rubber oxygen mask for hours at a time. Death caused by two or three minutes of oxygen deprivation was not unusual. Vulnerability to failure of oxygen masks required constant intercom checks of each position by the pilot.

The 29 ships in our group (nine returned early) approached Vienna around noon in the traditional tight formation which was designed to concentrate the fire of our guns at enemy fighter planes if they attacked. In our six-plane squadron box, the ship assigned to Herb's crew was out of my line of vision. Over the target, ground