

fetch a helmet full.

The number one morale booster was mail. Daily mail call after a mission could brighten the whole day. Various friends, my parents, sister and grandparents wrote frequently. A young lady who I met shortly before enlisting wrote about once a week. Spotting her pale blue envelope among the letters was like a glimpse into the Promised Land. She reminded me of all that was missing in life and the hope of what the future held. It would be impossible to measure the importance of mail.

The most difficult hazard was flak. For each target there was an initial point or IP, about 20 miles away. At this point control of the plane was turned over to the Bombardier. We had to fly straight and level until the bombs were dropped. For a well defended target like Ploesti and Vienna the flak was very intense. These black puffs of smoke began filling the sky. When they got closer you could see the red flash inside the black smoke. When they were closer yet the explosions would rock the plane and you could hear a sound like hail on a tin roof as flak struck the plane. This flak was the shards of the exploding shell. They were jagged and usually about 2 inch wide by an inch or so long. When the flak was really close you could smell the acrid explosive. I do not recall tasting flak but the other four senses of seeing, hearing, feeling and smelling were all too common. The worst part of flak was that we could not do a thing but sweat it out and hope it did not have our number.

There were 15 to 18 crews in our Squadron and normally half flew on each mission. On mission days we were awakened by an orderly between 3:00 and 5:00 AM. There was breakfast then briefing. This occurred in a room with a large map on the front wall. The first thing to see was the red string that marked our flight path. Ploesti, Vienna, Munich and several others were most dreaded. The S-2 or intelligence officer, Holstius, was a super nice guy. After mission details were covered we filed out and deposited personal effects, wallets, letters and other items that might identify us or our families in a box for safekeeping.

One day, breakfast led to a near mutiny. The Mess Sergeant cooked up the regular fare of Spam and powdered eggs the night before. At breakfast the Privates and Pfc's on the serving line dipped a pile of cold watery eggs on our trays. On this particular day we returned from a rough mission and discovered that the Mess Sergeant had fresh eggs and cooked them to order for the Ground Echelon while we were out dodging flak. Lt. Holstius led the debriefing after each mission and we hit him with a barrage of complaints. Breakfast was much, much better after that. Not good, but much better.

Missions continued. One special one was June 9th. We were heading for Munich when we had to abort for some reason, probably because we could not transfer fuel from the auxiliary wing tanks to the main tank. At the north end of the Adriatic we headed home. Shippy dropped down to about 10,000 feet so we could get off oxygen. We were relaxing and eating K-ration snacks when Boldy called "Flak, 12 o'clock". The crew started kidding him when he said "It's real". We had accidentally flown over a surfaced submarine. The Bombardier was in the bomb-bay re-inserting pins in the bombs to make them safe. By the time he could be notified and we could circle back, the sub had submerged.

The next memorable mission was June 13, 1944. Due to weather, we bombed the alternate target, Innsbruck, Austria. The mission is described in a Presidential Unit citation. Of 37 planes that took off, three returned because of engine trouble, three were damaged by fighters or flak and dropped out. Six did not return. Five were

shot down by fighters and one ditched in the Adriatic.

We were flying in position D 23. There were seven planes in our flight but tail end Charlie flying D 31 aborted because of engine trouble. Approaching the target we were hit hard by fighters. Six Me 410 twin engine fighters attacked the three planes in Fox flight. On three successive passes all three planes behind us were shot down. On the next pass I got one. He dove down and later at debriefing, a gunner in another plane reported he exploded soon after. Boldy, in the Nose, and Dusty, at Waist, each received credit for a fighter. One of my guns jammed and the other was on the verge of quitting.

As the Me 410s circled for a new pass I tracked them as I worked on my guns. At this time I spotted a number of single engine fighters approaching from 4 o'clock high. It looked like Me 109s joining the party. At this time the Me 410s broke away. A second glance at the approaching fighters showed they were P-51s and they soon chased our tormentors away. The Citation reported that Me 410s, Me 210s, Me 109s and FW 190s were involved. It was the heaviest fighter attack we ever had.

Some of our training was not well suited to actual combat. In gunnery school we had to strip a machine gun down to its components then reassemble it while blindfolded. This was to demonstrate our knowledge. In the real world of a tail turret things were different. The two guns were mounted outside the enclosed compartment. To reach a gun it was necessary to open a small access hole and reach one hand through the opening. The hand either had a heavy glove on it or it was frozen stiff by the outside air temperature of 25 below zero. About the only service we could perform was to pull on a charging handle which was connected to the gun by cable. You could extract the bullet in the chamber and load the next one. That took care of a misfire but little else. Another lesson was the pursuit curve. Professors had determined that in order for a fighter to attack a bomber its relative motion always followed a path towards a point directly behind the bomber known as 6 o'clock level. As long as the fighter was flying with its nose pointed at the bomber then the proper aiming point was between the fighter and 6 o'clock. It works every time. Except when 10 to 20 attackers formed a line abreast in front of the formation. They then did barrel rolls while firing guns and rockets as they flew through the formation. They did not follow a pursuit curve since they did not aim at a particular plane but simply fired at random towards the formation. If they were able to hit someone then the damaged bomber would fall out of formation and they could attack the straggler.

Reviewing the list of missions there was a break from June 13 to June 22 and another to July 3rd. One of these weeks was the time we had a rest leave on the Isle of Capri. It was a great treat. The enlisted crew stayed at the Metropole Hotel on the harbor. Italian cooks took the Spam and powdered eggs, which were the usual fare, and created delicious breakfasts. Capri has mountain peaks of 1200 to 1500 feet on the east and west ends. Between these in a saddle lies the town. A funicular or cable car connects the harbor, Marina Grande, with the town of Capri. The island is near tropical and was a favorite summer resort for Europeans with many fancy villas. The Red Cross had a hospitality house but the most relaxing thing was simply walking around or more accurately up and down. A highlight was a visit to the Blue Grotto. This is a cave at the west end of the island at the base of a 1200-foot cliff. The entrance is a very low opening