

Missions flown by the Lightbody crew #97R

Mission No. 1 15 February 1945

Mission No. 175

15 February 1945

Target: Vienna Penzinger Marshalling Yard, Austria

Again, a double header mission, Vienna, and ten-tenths cloud coverage. Again pathfinder bombing and unobserved results. Again good protection against the flak by the cloud coverage.

Major Poole, who started out leading the Red Force, was forced to abort. The lead was taken over by the Deputy, Captain Cooper. Only one plane in this formation was hit by flak, but a man on that plane was wounded.

Major Mixson was the leader of the Blue Force. No flak damage was sustained, but oxygen failure cost the life of Corporal John O. Moore.

Escorted Army Air Force heavy bombers attacked marshaling yard and other targets in the Vienna, Austria area, Thursday. No results were observed. It was the third day in a row Viennese objectives were attacked.

Communication targets were bombed Tuesday and oil refineries on Wednesday.

The next morning at breakfast, I looked around and, thankfully, saw the same faces that I had seen at breakfast yesterday. Nobody was missing. I said a quiet prayer, "Thank you, Lord." We now had one mission under our belt. We were not experienced by any means, but we were not "green horns" anymore, either.

Mission No. 2 20 February 1945

Mission No. 179

20 February 1945

Target: Fiume Shipyards, Italy

Thick Cirrus at the head of the Adriatic with tops over 23,000 feet compelled the Group leader, Major Mixson, to abandon the Bolzano Marshalling Yard, Italy, as a primary target on 20 February 1945. The second alternate target, the shipyards at Fiume, Italy, was bombed visually for a score of 37.3 percent. The main concentration of bombs fell in the built-up area near the docks with hits on the docks, warehouses, and harbor jetty. This mission resulted in three cases of frostbite, an unusual experience for the flying personnel of this Group.

We were briefed for a target in and around the Brenner Pass, which was heavily defended by anti-aircraft guns mounted on railroad cars. However, since this sortie was briefed to be a "visual run" (meaning no instruments bombing would be employed on this target), total cloud cover drove us to hit our #1 alternate at Trieste, just on the Italian-Yugoslavia border. Trieste is one of Italy's main Adriatic seaport towns. The results were fair, photo reconnaissance proved, though we observed occasional bursts of flak. All planes and personnel returned safely.

Mission No. 3

22 February 1945

Mission No. 181

22 February 1945

Target: Kempton Marshalling Yard, Germany

Colonel Lawhon took off in the lead of a thirty-plane four box formation to attack the marshalling yard at Ingolstadt, Germany, on 22 February. Due to impassible weather he was compelled to abandon the primary target and search for a target of opportunity to be bombed visually. The target selected was the marshaling yard at Kempton, Germany. The choke point of the target was well hit but the mission was not scored by the Air Force because the target was a non-briefed one. Six airplanes were damaged on this mission and three men were wounded.

The *Stars and Stripes* read:

Carrying the greatest tonnage of bombs ever lifted from Italian bases in a single operation, escorted heavy bombers of the Fifteenth Army Air Force today smashed at enemy communications lines in Germany, Austria, and Northern Italy.

We bombed a rail center at Kempton, just a few miles southwest of Munich. Returning home from the mission, we sighted what turned out to be the first German jet fighters that we had ever seen! We were astounded at the high

speed the planes were flying at very low altitude. All of our planes and personnel returned.

Mission No. 4

1 March 1945

Mission No. 186

1 March 1945

Target: Moosebierbaum Oil Refinery, Austria

The first mission of the month was a double header with the oil refinery at Moosebierbaum, Austria as the target. The Red Force, led by Colonel Lawhon, got through the bad weather over the Alps and reached the target. In the Lake Balaton area the impassible weather made it necessary for Colonel Lawhon to abandon the briefed route. Instead of attempting to take his formation under the weather, he did a 360 to gain altitude and swung far to the right and east of the Russian bomb line in an effort to find a deck low enough to get over. The formation was lost by the time it got up above the weather. The radar navigator, Lt. Loverin, finally picked up Vienna, which he used in orienting himself at the initial point.

By this time the formation was an hour late. The combination of bad weather and another formation immediately ahead of Colonel Lawhon's Red Force made it impossible to drop the bombs on the first run. Despite the flak, the formation made another run on the target and Captain Churchill, finding a hole with only three-tenths cloud coverage, bombed the target visually. The Red Force was one of four out of forty-two formations in the Air Force scheduled to attack the target which bombed visually.

Photographs show that a concentrated pattern of bombs fell at the north edge of the refinery. Several direct hits were scored on the distillation plant, the compressor house, the cracking unit, and the hydraulic acid plant. Other bombs fell on the railroad siding and still others in the building area at the west edge of the refinery. The mission was scored at 33 percent.

The Blue Force, led by Major Mixson, was unable to find a passage under, above, or around the weather in the Lake Balaton area and returned its bombs to base.

We were briefed for a target in the Vienna area, at Moosbierbaum, Austria, which was a pretty "flak happy" area. En route, somewhere over Yugoslavia, we hit an uncharted flak area where possible railroad anti-aircraft shot out our #1 engine and did other damage to the nose of our plane. We could not maintain sufficient airspeed to keep in formation, so we turned around for home base. The anti-aircraft gunners, seeing that the rest of our group formation had passed beyond their range but that we were returning directly over them, concentrated their guns on us and threw up

everything but the "kitchen sink." I do not recall at any time during combat seeing any more black smoke in the air than we saw on this mission. How in the world they missed hitting us directly is beyond me! Our bombardier, Don Hermanson, made a hurried bomb run on what he thought to be enemy gun installations, and we salvoed our bombs. Then the flak stopped, and by now we were approaching the mountain range in Yugoslavia. We were not losing any altitude since we had dropped our bombs, but neither were we able to climb any higher. Tommy and I discussed the situation and made a decision to throw everything loose out of the plane with exception of the parachutes. So, Mac, Rosie, Larry, John, and Paul threw everything out the waist windows of the B-24. We reduced our weight to the point that we were slowly climbing then and began to clear the mountain range. We saw some enemy planes in the distance, so we called for fighter protection, as we were a lone B-24 in the midst of bad fighter country. By the time we had the ship under better control two U.S. P-38s were covering us for home base. All planes and personnel returned safely. Fighters from the U.S. Tactical Air Force shot down 5 enemy fighters in the area where we had been a "lone wolf" for a while. Flak over the target was intense but somewhat inaccurate. Results were reported fair.

Here's an article from *Stars and Stripes* that brings this part of the air war into prospective:

Not since the pre-invasion of last summer in France and western Germany has the already damaged transportation and communications system of the German Army undergone such a prolonged air battering as during the current record effort by the Fifteenth Army Air Force which yesterday completed 16 straight days of attacking enemy targets. This is the first 16-day stretch of good weather since September of last year — that enabled the Fifteenth to send out more than 15,000 aircraft, most of them heavy bombers.

The *Stars and Stripes* continued its report of the episode as follows:

Earlier in the year, factories and airfields, which based German interceptor planes, received priority in attention. As fighter opposition was reduced, attention was then turned to oil plants and reservoirs which are the lifeblood of the Wermacht. After Ploesti, Fifteenth Army Air Force heavies ranged far into Poland and over the southern Reich, until enemy oil plants

were severely damaged and knocked out. On the first day of this series of attacks, marshaling yards at Vienna and Graz in Austria were the principal targets. In succeeding days every important freight yard and switchyard in southern Reich came under severe attack. Take a look at the map and pick out these towns: Innsbruck at the northern end of the Brenner Pass, Linz, Salzburg, Villach, and Vienna, the hub of them all. They represent the main feeder points for enemy troop and material movement by rail to the Italian, Yugoslav, and Russian fronts. All have been bombed heavily.

The *Stars and Stripes* completed the article with the closing comments:

Reconnaissance shows that continuous bombing clogs the railroads with damaged rolling stock, tears up rail sidings and cuts main lines much faster than they can be repaired. Movement to the fighting fronts of German reinforcements and supplies is being reduced gradually. By the same token, these attacks would greatly hamper any possible withdrawal, especially from Italy. To all destruction wrought by the heavies, add that caused by strafing fighters, which during 16 days have averaged at least 10 locomotives destroyed each day. Oil cars have been left burning, troop trains shot up, casualties inflicted, and radio installations and power lines crippled.

Mission No. 5

16 April 1945

Mission No. 216

16 April 1945

Troop Concentrations in Bolgna Area, Italy

The following day the Group again sent a large force to Bologna in support of the Fifth Army. Enemy troop concentrations were the objective, Major Trommershausser, who led the formation, upon finding the target effectively screened by eight-tenths cumulus at 10,000 feet, ordered the formation to return to base with all its bombs. The Group did not take credit for a mission, through the Air Force allowed sortie credit.

On this day we went all the way to the target, but cloud coverage controlled the dropping of our bombs. We were briefed for a "secret mission" which I can now relate. The British 8th and U.S. 5th Armies had started a big push in

northern Italy. The U.S. 5th was trying to push out of the Apennines, and take Bologna, Italy. Our job was to "bomb out" some of the German troops in an approximate three mile area. This was so the 5th could start rolling at that particular point and thus cause a break-through in the enemy lines. One of the most interesting facts about this mission was our briefing. We were instructed that as we neared the front lines, if there were complete cloud cover, the U.S. anti-aircraft guns would fire shells into the air that would explode at about 10,000 feet. This was in anticipation that with heavy cloud coverage we could not distinguish where the front lines were located. As we flew along, we began to see puffs of flak smoke in something of a line, coming nearer and nearer, at altitudes below us. Seeing an occasional shell that did not explode at 10,000 feet but that came on up to our altitude, exploding near our aircraft was, to say the least, a little nerve wracking! What a thought—being shot down by your own ack-ack guns! After we identified the front line, we flew a specific number of seconds to a certain point and dropped our bombs. With the bomb groups scattered out, this pattern bombing was to strike the enemy at just behind their front lines.

The *Stars and Stripes* simply said:

The heavies of the Fifteenth were out today in great strength, bombing targets in support of the 5th Army offensive.

Mission No. 6

17 April 1945

Mission No. 216

17 April 1945

Troop Concentrations in Bolgna Area, Italy

This last mission to Bologna in support of the Fifth Army brought Operation Buckland to a close. Major Trommershauser led the formation of forty-two planes against German troop concentrations. Only thirty-five planes in this force were able to bomb. One box of six planes found the target obscured by smoke and had to abandon it after three unsuccessful attempts. Photos show that the bombing was good and the pattern well concentrated. No enemy resistance from either flak or fighters was encountered.

On this date, I flew my sixth mission. We supported further U.S. 5th Army advancements near Bologna, Italy. I flew in "C" box. We made three passes at the target (our box) and still didn't drop our bombs. After our first pass, the Germans went into action with their anti-aircraft; however, the "flak"

was inaccurate at our box. The group ahead of us did get shot up pretty much. Strange that we didn't get any more "flak" than we did! We destroyed a German headquarters and supply dump. All ships and personnel returned safely. We returned with a feathered prop.

Stars and Stripes said:

Returning to the Bologna area, the Fifteenth Army Air Force Liberators and Fortresses plastered the target area, in support of the Fifth Army assault drive on Bologna. This sustained effort began 15 April, the day the Fifteenth broke all records for planes operational and bombs dropped, and was continued 16, 17 and 18 April.

Mission No. 7

19 April 1945

Mission No. 217

19 April 1945

Avisio Viaduct and Railroad Diversion, Italy

The Avisio Viaduct, located approximately six miles north of Verona, is one of the vital links in the Brenner railway line. It was frequently visited by Groups of the Fifteenth Air Force and made inoperative on several occasions. Notwithstanding this, the enemy by the ingenious use of pre-fabricated spans was able to remedy the damage and continued to funnel traffic through the Brenner Pass at night. To make interdiction of all railway lines feeding into the Brenner absolute and complete, the Air Force assigned several Groups to destroy the Avisio Viaduct. The 461st Group participated in this operation.

The field order called for a maximum effort of thirty-six aircraft; the Group supplied thirty-nine aircraft. Major Thackston led the Group formation. Haze partly obscured the target but good bombing results were obtained. The pattern fell across the Viaduct and continued to a point one thousand feet west of the aiming point. Air Force scored the mission at 40.3 percent.

Flak was moderate at the target but not very accurate for not a single plane sustained damage. The Luftwaffe was out in force. Both FW-190s and ME-109s were seen in comparatively large numbers in the vicinity of Lake Garda. Enemy fighters, however, did not engage the Group formation.

We were briefed for a railway bridge in the Brenner Pass area. The target was described as having accurate and intense flak. At the briefing that day, we were told that the Brenner Pass was a natural flak alley. The briefing

officers said, "The German guns are located mostly on top of the mountains surrounding the Pass, so when you fly up the valley at a reasonable altitude, they could blast at you from all sides." In flying the mission, as we actually entered the valley preparing to bomb the target, the ack-ack guns were blasting away, throwing up a box barrage of flak. Flying in, we just missed the barrage flak by a matter of a few feet. In the formation just ahead of us, I saw a B-24 get a direct hit (probably in the bomb bay) and explode in mid-air. One minute the plane was there---and the next second it was gone. All we saw was debris falling down below us. We couldn't tell airplane parts from people as it fell away! No one got out of the ship! We hit our target, rallied, and scrambled for home. We were all nervous and disturbed at seeing the B-24 explode and disintegrate.

Mission No. 8

20 April 1945

Mission No. 218
20 April 1945
Lusia Road Bridge, Italy

Major Phillips led the successful mission of 20 April against the Lusia Bridge in northern Italy. This bridge, one of the few left standing, spanned the Adigo River and was being used by the retreating Germans.

One thousand pound RDX bombs were dropped to obtain excellent results. Flak at target, described as slight, inaccurate, and heavy, damaged one plane; save that it interfered little with the accuracy of the bombing, for the mission was scored at 91.9 percent. Direct hits were observed on abutments and approaches of the bridge, as well as the span itself. One lone JU-262, pursued by two P-51s, was seen in the area of Bologna.

On this mission, we were briefed for a main highway bridge in the Bologna, Italy area, which, if knocked out, would hinder and slow down the Germans' inevitable withdrawal from Northern Italy, or their unconditional surrender. No flak was briefed, but we did encounter some just before the target, going down the "bomb run." The fighter situation was briefed as questionable because the remaining Luftwaffe in northern Italy, German ME-109s flown by Italian pilots, still operated when adequate fuel was at their disposal, and they had the odds in their favor. We hit our target good and solid, and smoke, dust, water, and "busted bridge" cement climbed upward in a never-ending spiraling column that we could see for miles as we flew away from the target. We did see about five or six enemy fighters cruising off to our

right but staying a good safe distance away from the Liberators as they waited to pounce on a lone straggler. All planes and personnel returned okay. I fly again tomorrow.

Mission No. 9

21 April 1945

Mission No. 219

21 April 1945

Attnang/Puchiem Marshalling Yard, Austria

The briefed target for this mission was to be the marshaling yard at Brenner, Italy. En route, in the vicinity of Ljubljana, Yugoslavia, the formation encountered impassable weather and was forced to abandon the primary target in favor of alternate target No. 2, the marshaling yard at Attnang, Austria. Major Poole led the formation. Bombing through a three-tenths undercast, which necessitated as many as five passes at the target by some boxes, the Group nevertheless obtained good results. Air Force scored the mission at 61.1 percent. The pattern began just short of the marshaling yard and carried well into it. Neither flak nor fighters were encountered.

I got off Mission #9 on this date. We were briefed for a marshaling yard in the Brenner Pass area. Marshaling yards were where troop concentrations and supply collect. This target the last few days had grown from a very sparsely flak-defended objective to one of the hottest targets in northern Italy. Also, in this area, the Italian pilots were still sporadically operating with their ME-109s, however, bad weather encountered over the Alps Mountains caused us to turn to an alternate railway target in southern Austria, just below Munich. Due to other groups attacking the target, in accordance with bad cloud coverage, our Box made five runs before "bombs away." In that period of time, the Germans got wise and pulled most of the rolling stock out of the yards into sidings. However, we completely uprooted the tracks and nearby installations. All planes and personnel returned okay but not without incident. We had to fly about half the mission on instruments. I saw one squadron get "vertigo," i.e. dizziness, from failure to establish in mind actual directions and altitudes because of poor-to-no visibility. However, the colonel talked the lead plane back into proper position and out of a slow spiral, and the mass of planes that had suddenly grown to look like a swarm of bees circling in the narrow mountain valley below the clouds re-formed into a smooth formation, once again safe and upright. Formation flying was extremely hazardous and laborious on this mission because the clouds were so thick sometimes we could hardly see our

wing tips, much less the plane we were trying to fly off of. My war diary says, "I'm doggone tired tonight, and I've hit the sack early with no dinner—no '150 proof shot'—I need pure rest."

Mission No. 10

24 April 1945

Mission No. 221

24 April 1945

Rovereto Marshalling Yard and Gun Emplacements, Italy

Major Baker was in command of a force of thirty-seven planes which bombed the Rovereto Marshaling Yard in northern Italy on 24 April 1945. The bomb load consisted of 500 pound RDX's; three aircraft, however, carried fragmentation bombs for the purpose of bombing gun emplacements at Rovereto. Results were good. The marshaling yard was effectively hit, but it was not possible to determine whether any of the gun emplacements were hit. One aircraft was damaged by the slight flak at the target.

I earned this tenth mission, with sweat and a bundle of nerves. If anyone can imagine how it feels to be a human "clay pigeon," that would just about dramatically describes it. The 461st bomb group was briefed for a marshaling yard in the Brenner Pass (Roverto). As an experiment, the high command decided they needed three volunteer crews who would get credit for two missions if they participated. We volunteered and we were told that the last three B-24s in our Box were to attack "flak guns" at the target before the rest of the bomb group came in to bomb the main target. Just before the initial point (IP), the last three ships—piloted by Lightbody, Carlisle, and Alexander (I was flying co-pilot on this mission)—peeled off, got ahead of the group formation, and made a bomb run on the ack-ack guns. When our three B-24s flying at 5,000 feet came lumbering over the pass without fighter escort, the Krauts cut loose with everything they had to shoot at us. We were carrying experimental bombs that had to be dropped with precision. The bombs had atmospheric fuses that would ignite the bombs a few feet overhead of the ack-ack gunners, hopefully destroying them and their guns. We needed one minute of straight and level flight with Bombardier Don Hermanson flying the plane through automatic pilot with his Norden bomb sight. Shells were popping right and left, leaving big plumes of black smoke. The air currents were tossing the ship around some, and excitement was everywhere! Since we had to fly with such precision through the bomb drop, we could not rally out of the flak barrage until all of the bombs were clear. Due to the long period before rallying, we just about

got shot out of the sky. No person got hit. We had lots of holes in the airplane, but we were successful! The rest of the bomb group went in and really plastered the target with bombs, without another single round of flak being fired. Our experiment was tried and proven. A new method of attack had been perfected by the Fifteenth, but I didn't like being one of the guinea pigs. However, we never had to do that again!

One of the saddest memories I have about the air war in Europe happened one day after bombs were dropped away and we rallied for home base. We saw a B-24 on fire in a slow spiral headed for the ground. Hanging underneath in an opened parachute was an airman with his opened chute hung up in the plane's bomb bay. He was swinging back and forth underneath the plane, as it spiraled to earth. I often wondered ... did he get too excited about bailing out and pull his rip cord too soon, getting the chute tangled in the plane's bomb bay? Was he conscious or unconscious? If he was conscious, then he witnessed his own death . . . seconds away!