

"A COLD CAN OF BEER"

By Clair Alexander 764 Sq.

I was saving it for my last mission, if there ever was to be a last mission.

Our operational training for my flight crew took place at Mountain Home, Idaho. We were then directed overseas as a replacement crew and traveled by ocean convoy in a Liberty ship. We left Norfolk Harbor on September 1, 1944 and arrived in Naples, Italy one month later. After a few days of exploring the town, the army unceremoniously dumped us in a boxcar for the two day railway trip to a replacement depot. A squadron B-24 picked us up the next day and flew us to Torretta, Italy, the home of the 764th Bomb Squadron of the 461st Group of the 15th Air Force. Here we would spend the next eight months, living in a tent, with ankle deep mud or snow in the winter and blowing dust in the summer.

In the first few days of combat most air crew men realize that fate was playing a prominent role in their existence. Superstition became a large part of their lives, which was exemplified by: a new testament carried in the shirt pocket, a lucky charm, or a girl friend's stocking worn as a muffler. Thus, such events as the thirteenth mission were approached with apprehension. Our crew drew a big sigh of relief when the dreaded thirteenth was passed.

My eighteenth mission of February 7, 1945 stands out in my mind. The evening before, our name along with the other crews which were to fly the next day had been posted on the squadron bulletin board. A few discreet inquiries revealed that the aircraft were being loaded more gasoline and less bomb weight than normal. This could mean that we would be going deep into enemy territory the next day. I was awakened from a fitful sleep very early the next morning by the roar of aircraft engines as the crew chiefs began to pre-flight their ships. At 4:00AM we were roused out of bed. We rapidly dressed in the cold and dark, then hurried down to the mess hall to warm up and eat breakfast. We rode in the back of a truck to group headquarters for the day's briefing. A murmur swept through the crews as a curtain was drawn from the large wall map. Our route for the mission led to Vienna, Austria,

our heaviest defended target. Back in the truck to ride to the equipment shack to pick up our flight gear. Then on to the B-24 which had been assigned to us for that day's flight, Herb Frank, who was from another crew, was flying as co-pilot. In the early morning light we taxied out to wait our turn for takeoff on one of the two parallel runways. We rolled into position and just as the plane ahead lifted off, the tower gave us the green light. I opened the throttles and our ship slowly gathered speed. Rapidly approaching the far end of the runway, the 30 tons of aluminum, steel, gasoline, high explosives, and ten human beings lumbered into the air. Each B-24 climbed to its assigned place in the formation while the group circled the field. With all planes in their proper slot, we turned north for the long climb to Vienna. The trip to the target went smoothly and as Herb was an excellent pilot, I spent a good bit of my time watching the landscape below.

Four hours after take off we turned on to our bomb run, and all of us donned our flak vests and helmets. I was flying as we neared the release point, trying not to notice the black puffs of exploding shells which surrounded us. We dropped our bombs and started our turning rally, to evade the flak, when suddenly our ship was soundly jolted by a bursting shell. I watched as the plexiglass dome covering the nose turret was blown away with the fleeting thought that Jack Holcome, the nose turret gunner was blown away too. Simultaneously all four engines ran away. With the propellers in flat pitch and extremely high rpm, the airplane lost most of its thrust and I had to lower the nose to maintain airspeed. While Herb and I were striving to get the engines under control, Bill Kassay, the engineer/gunner called on the intercom in the tail section stating that Ray Eitel, radio operator/gunner had received a bad shoulder wound and asking if we were going down. I replied "Don't bail out, and give Ray first aid." Meanwhile in the nose, Jack who had just stepped out when the flak started, and Frank Gaudio, bombardier hearing the screaming engines and watching the altimeter unwind, tried to bail out through the nose wheel door. Luckily the emergency release wouldn't work and when they crawled back to the bomb bay, they found everyone still with the ship. Herb and I finally got three engines under control, but number two, trailing oil and heavy smoke wouldn't respond. Suddenly the bearing of this engine seized on the crankshaft and with a jarring thud the propeller