

understand that flying a predetermined number of seconds in an established direction from the river and then dropping the bombs is not going to insure that the damage will be confined to industrial areas. We probably did our share of damage in residential portions of town, perhaps even to churches and hospitals. Radar missions were never run over France because of this. Our bombing accuracy by bombsight, however, was really remarkable considering the conditions under which we bombed.

"A mighty sky fleet of possibly 750 American Flying Fortresses and Liberators struck deep into southeastern France today to bomb and burn a half-dozen key railway targets from Riviera to Lyon", gives good news coverage of our longest mission. This mission covering 9:20 hours of flying time was at the extreme fringe of our range. To make matters worse, we flew along the Italian front for morale purposes. The smart pilots conserved gas as much as possible by keeping engine RPM as low and manifold pressure as high as engine temperatures would permit. There were some pilots who were forced to land on the Island of Corsica on the return trip from the target, Lyon, because of the shortage of gasoline. Most of us made it back, however, and the shot of "mission whiskey" tasted mighty good.

Mission Whiskey

I haven't mentioned "mission whiskey" before, but after each mission, every combat crew member received a two-ounce glass of rye whiskey. A roster was kept of the participants of the mission and, as the issue was made, the names were checked off. There were several different practices followed by the recipients. Some drank the issue on the spot. Others signed for theirs and gave it to a friend, (non-drinkers were cultivated for their friendship) and still others had a bottle to which they added the shot and, after a sufficient number of missions, had a celebration. Arrangements were made between friends as to who would inherit the bottle if the owner of a nearly full bottle of whiskey was unlucky enough to be shot down. None went to waste.

The mission on which our group achieved its best bombing accuracy did not elicit much of a comment from the newspapers. "More than 2,200 American heavy bombers and fighters fanned out over Europe in record strength for the third straight day" made no mention at all of the Fifteenth Air Force. Our group was selected to lead

the wing, consisting of five groups, on a mission to Wels, Austria. The weather over the target was perfectly clear, there was practically no opposition, the bombardier was able to zero in his bomb sight perfectly, and we really did a job. Our group commander received the Distinguished Flying Cross for leading this mission on which the target was totally destroyed with no losses, and we couldn't have been more conceited if we had all personally received the same.

The newspaper accounts "From 500 to 750 U.S. heavy bombers escorted by swarms of Mustangs and Lightnings struck from Italy at Ploesti and enveloped at least one major refinery with flames and smoke visible for many miles" merely outlines what really happened. Our squadron had received some replacement crews and the practice was to fly the first pilot of these crews as co-pilots with seasoned crews to give them experience. On this mission to Ploesti, I drew as co-pilot one of the aforementioned first pilots. It was his first mission and he really drew a "lulu". Ploesti was considered one of the toughest targets in Europe and, for us, it really upheld its reputation. I can still close my eyes and visualize the solid black cloud of flak as we approached the target and, when we reached the target area, how the big black balls with the vivid red centers ballooned all around. I can remember how the airplane bounced from the force of near misses and how we ducked as shells exploded in front of the ship and we flew through the smoke. I recall how two ships, in front of me, pulled out of formation trailing smoke and fire and the blossoming of chutes as the men jumped to safety and captivity. I remember seeing tall columns of smoke which reached above our level of flight, as we circled the target and headed for home. I recall my surprise at the sight of a hole the size of a dinner plate in the wing just two feet to my left. I still smile when I think of the terrified look the copilot had on his face and his question, "Are all of them like this?"

And his agonized expression when I replied, "That was an easy one, wait 'til we go to Vienna." He didn't know that I was just as scared as he was, maybe more so.

We had several missions that elicited no comment from the newspapers. Our group was the only one assigned to this mission, and the target was a Par River bridge. We carried three 1000 pound bombs for this trip, (our usual load was nine five hundred pound bombs) and the armament crew hung them on the lower bomb racks. After the bombs

were all loaded, they found it was impossible to close the bomb bay doors, because the fins were so big they extended below the track. The squadron armament officer, rather than change the bombs, ordered the tail fins bent to permit the closing of the doors. We went to the target, dropped our bombs together, and came home. The strike photos revealed that the bridge had been destroyed but they also showed isolated bomb explosions more than a mile from the target area. The photos disclosed holes in the bombing pattern of our squadron and before the day was over the Group Commander had the story. The bent fins had caused some of the bombs to go astray and from four miles up this meant quite an error. I didn't see the armament officer around the officer's club for a week after this happened.

The invasion of France and the break of the stalemate in Italy now provided enough news to fill the newspapers and the exploits of the Air Force were forgotten. The first mission we were attacked by fighters occurred just after dropping our bombs on an oil refinery near Ploesti. The first inkling I had of the attack was the sudden hammering of the nose and upper turrets. In a matter of seconds two planes were shot out of the high flight. Every plane closed up until we were flying wing to wing formation. I had to watch the plane flying in front and above me because every time the tail gunner fired his turret guns the empty cartridge cases would stream by overhead. I had to stay low-enough to let them clear the upper turret to avoid having the plexiglass dome broken. The gunners were also having their troubles. A cartridge belt broke on one of the guns in the tail turret, and the gunner thought he was running out of ammunition. The ball turret gunner became so terrified he wouldn't stay in the ball turret. The engineer, a fiery little tech, Sgt., from Kansas, threatened to shoot him. This kept him in the turret but he never fired a shot. (This was his last mission and his last day as a Sgt.) We were under attack for a period of twenty minutes which, to me, seemed like two hours. The group sustained heavy damage and lost five airplanes. There weren't many that passed up their "mission whiskey" after this mission.

One of the worst things that any combat crew could have done was violate group integrity. The thing uppermost in every first pilots' mind, when making a decision, should have been first the group and then his crew. We had several crews, mostly replacement crews, in every squadron, and I have nothing