

My Flights With The Wisemen

By

Claude M. Basler, 827 Squadron

By way of introduction my name is Claude M. Basler a radio operator and gunner, on Lt. John S. Wise's, crew the pilot of our B 24, heavy bomber, we affectionately called "Wiseman" no matter what aircraft we were assigned to. The crew consisted of 10 men. Our association started September 1, 1944 at Boise Air Field, Idaho. This is the place we received our pre combat training. Each day we flew a practice mission so that each crew member got experience and expertise at his particular combat assignment. As the pilot and commander of the plane, Lt. Wise was most seriously aware and concerned about all the details and functions of the plane and each crew member. He was a task maker of the first water, firm, but not in an offensive manner, always able to win everyone's whole hearted cooperation without any shape or form of resentment, having the great ability to adjust to changing situations and respected by all of his crew of fellow officers.

As a member of the 15th Air Force, 484 Bomb Group 827th Squadron based near Cerignola, Italy, we flew 19 combat missions. This included the last mission the day Hitler surrendered and the war was over (not the one to be on). The first mission we flew was in the last plane of the last formation over the target. This meant hundreds of planes had already gone by and they were getting good target practice. Not good. The last mission, Hitler's day of surrender, he was the lead plane (1st.) over the target. Since all the enemy forces were pulled back, it gave them a more intensive, accurate, effective attack and fighter planes.

In both the first and last mission, we lost exactly half of the planes sent up by our group.

A capsule review of our first mission should be titled a session in "Murphy's Law" or "Ignorance is Bliss". Here goes:

He had the hottest target, Leuz, Germany, in all Europe. (Heavy Flack, Heavy Fighters).

He had tail end Charlie position (lousy, misery loves company)

He was assigned the plane which had the most missions in the European theater. A record high command was very proud - and you were reminded.

The plane was also the slowest, so much so he had to jettison a 500 lb. bomb in the Adriatic Sea to keep up with the formation. Less courageous people would have turned back and gone back to base. This was acceptable by the High Command.

Finally got to the target and the bomb bay doors wouldn't open — had to be cranked down manually. Navigator became unconscious due to lack of oxygen during this procedure.

Shortly after, got a direct hit, plane dropped 500 to 1,000 ft. on the wing — gave

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signal to get ready to bail out. fought controls and finally got leveled out.

On the bomber run, which is at full throttle, it was like he was driving a model T at the Indy 500. By the time he finished and dropped bombs, there was no American plane to be seen. All you could see were clouds of smoke, planes on ground on fire, many.

He had 2 of his 4 engines knocked out, oil pouring and splashing back on the win-

dows, partially blocking the view.

A very lonely, desolate, desperate, defeated feeling as we flew over enemy airstrip, felt like a sitting duck.

Conversation over the intercom went like this. "Pilot to Navigator, how far is it to Switzerland"? (He had just about revived). Navigator, "Why, is there something wrong"? (We knew we were in trouble then). Pilot "****!***, I asked a specific question and I want a specific answer". Navigator "Gee, I don't know, my maps were blown off my table when the bomb bay doors opened". The real answer came in a couple seconds in the form of three enemy fighters planes.

We lucked out on the first 2 passes (breaking radio silence, only allowed in desperate situations, we gave our position and cried for fighter cover).

Just as the 3 enemy planes were making a run on our tail, 3 of our American P-38's came out of the clouds, each zeroing in on an enemy plane, blasting them out of the sky.

Incidentally, there were 3 black pilots — quickly they got in formation, did a roll over underneath our plane — all you could see were white scarves and teeth and a hand signal indicating they were going back up in the clouds and would escort us out of enemy territory. A greater scene, miracle, I have never seen or felt.

Just when luck seemed to be coming our way, fuel became a problem.

At one point "ditching" in the Adriatic Sea became a possibility. After many calculations, "crossing our fingers", his favorite expression, he decided to get back to our landing field, and he did.

Once that plane touched down on the runway, you never heard any better cheering at a football game.

Lt. Wise got a lot of pats on the back and hearty happy handshakes.

His serenity, courage, wisdom and stamina had been tested to the maximum and his confidence prevailed. He had completed his baptism of war — it was a serious, thankful crew that left that plane.

Incidentally, the plane ran out of fuel 200 yards after it touched down and had to be towed off the runway.

- Every mission "Murphy's Law" seemed to say hello but never like the first or last missions.

The End