

Germany. Our plane was flying in a tight formation only minutes away from the IP when the #3 engine supercharger went out. The pilot throttled the engine off, feathered the propeller so that it wouldn't windmill, and dropped out of formation. At this point, we turned south and headed for home. Our bomb load was dropped on the first mountain top as we recrossed the mean looking Alps. On the flight north, we had been flying into a head wind, and now as we flew with three engines, we had the help of a 70 mile an hour tail wind. This mission was a six hour and 30 minute ride that didn't count for anything. We did get the plane back. On the ride home I saw a steady flow of B-24s in diamond formations flying north to bomb targets somewhere behind us. We sent them our wishes of good luck, though they may not have known that we had used some of ours up.

The 5th mission was on 6 December 1944. We were supposed to bomb the Maribor Marshaling Yards in northern Yugoslavia. We were flying in the older model B-24 H with camouflaged paint. Painted on it's sides were "Old #45", a plane that had flown many times, but was beginning to get tired. As we approached the IP to the target, we discovered that there was a solid undercast, so, our formation leader took us in search of the alternate target. Ralph wrote that this time, the weather closed in on us and we lost our bomb group. We then headed for Italy. As we crossed the Adriatic Sea, we unloaded our bombs in deep water, and flew home. We were credited for a combat mission that lasted six hours and 15 minutes. On 7 Feb 1945, "Old #45" was shot down with another crew on board.

The 6th mission, my crew was calling this one our fifth, until we later were given credit for the fourth mission to Munich, was dated 11 December 1944. We were briefed for a target at Vienna, Austria. The lead formation approached the target site far to the right and we followed the leader. B-24 bombers are not maneuverable when heavily loaded and from the IP in over the target, they are flown straight and level. After missing our specified target, the lead ship appeared to circle out and around to make another run over the ground where some 600 to 800 flak guns were taking their toll, and try again. Somehow, someone must have figured that this was pretty dumb to stick around any longer than necessary, and after a large counter clock wise circle around and away from Vienna, we headed for Graz, Austria, which was our 5th alternate target.

We saw no fighter planes, neither theirs nor ours, but the sky was filled with flak patterns that darkened the sky under us, in front of us and all over. Vienna gunners had been getting good training with their 88mm cannons and were improving their skills. By the time that our plane banked away after the bomb run, we were hearing the sound of shrapnel ripping holes into aluminum first, coming in, and then going out. This was the mission that ended over Benkovac, Yugoslavia, less than half way home.

Again from Ralph Christensen's diary. "Monday Dec. 11, 1944, briefed for mission to Vienna, Austria. We were assigned to fly in ship #77, that had been borrowed from the 827th Bomb Squadron. This plane had just been repaired after crash landing on the Isle of Vis. We missed the target at Vienna, passed to the right because of overcast and saw a lot of flak. The lead ship ordered us to bomb the 5th alternate target Graz, Austria, Marshaling Yards, and received flak at 4 different places, one was Zagreb, Yugoslavia. Dropped bombs on Graz, caught more flak, one engine was hit, and running rough. The lead ship took us the wrong way using a lot of gas. Flak may have caused some of the loss. The engineer

Charles Shanklin transferred fuel while we planned to head for the emergency landing strip on the Isle of Vis. We dropped down to 12,000 feet, we lost two engines and the pilot Ruben Kaiser told us to prepare for crash landing. The four of us in the waist braced against the bulkhead. Yurochko, the ball turret gunner, was on the intercom when the pilot gave the order to bail out at 5,000 feet. I was the first out the bottom hatch and when I pulled the rip cord, it really gave me a jolt. I tried to turn around to count the chutes coming out of the plane, but I couldn't. In about a minute, I hit the ground, and it really come up at me fast."

Ralph's personal account continues: "I landed on my back and cut my head open in two places and split my lip. My nose bled for awhile but stopped. The area where I hit was all flat rocks. We landed about 30 miles from the Yugoslavian coast. After I landed, a group of Yugoslavia Partisans under Marshall Tito's command picked me up and helped me on with my shoes and off with my chute harness. When preparing for missions prior to the takeoff, we tied our GI shoes together through the strap handle of our parachute, so that we would have our walking shoes, if we should ever have to bail out.

"They all shook my hand, when they found out I was an American. They wore what looked like British battle dress and Nazi boots, and guns taken off of Germans they had killed.

"They pointed out where another one of the crew had landed, about 200 yards away, and took me to him. This was Lt. McKone, our navigator. They pointed up on a hill nearby where another chute came down. We both went up and found Eddie Yurochko, lying there with his neck broken and he was dead.

"The Partisans carried our chutes and harness, and took Lt. McKone and myself to a farm house about 2 miles away. They gave us some Yugoslavian wine and liquor and some brown bread. We remained there until they brought in other members of the crew. The area where the parachutes opened was in a valley on the opposite side of the mountain from where the plane had crash landed.

"The first to be brought in was Charles Shanklin, engineer, he had hurt his right hip. Next came Charles Elsesser, nose gunner, he had a sprained ankle. Next came Lt. Laster, bombardier, he had hurt his back and two Partisans were helping him. The last to arrive was Albino Frigo, tail turret gunner. "

We were fortunate to have Albino Frigo on our crew, as he was a second generation Italian, and could speak the language that he learned from his parents when he was growing up in Chicago. Many Yugoslavians spoke Italian. Charles Laster was a big man, over 6 feet tall and weighing more than 200 pounds. He was the only one with back pains and was given the only bed to sleep in the first night we spent in Benkovac. We spent the night on the floor in the Mayor's home, each of us wrapped up in old blankets. There seemed to be no heat to ward off the winter chill.

Ralph wrote: "one of the Yugoslavians spoke English. He told us to wait until they could get a truck to go pick up Eddie Yurochko's body and they would then take all of us to the town with the Partisan Headquarters. We arrived at the town of Benkovac and found that Lt. Raiser, Lt. Chester Jones, co-pilot, and Calvin Teel, radio man, were there. We had crash landed 5 miles outside of town. All three of us were OK. The Partisans fed us and gave us our choice of wine, cognac, vodka or vermouth. They told us the Germans had cleared out of their area 3 weeks prior. They put us up for the night in the Mayor's house. The English speaking interpreter's name was Rudy Moscovick. He had been living and working in the United States before he returned to Yugoslavia in