

The ball turret now seemed to momentarily pause in mid air, and then it hurtled into the tail section like a thrown baseball on its way into a catcher's mitt, and settled there. With that the suddenly old #24 moaned, groaned, tilted to one side and died. In the waist we were all alive although pinned in by the crumpled aluminum. The metal had pressed up against my chest but quickly I slipped out of its grasp headed for the nearest opening and like Superman I bounded out an open window just as the plane uttered its last gasp. I landed on my side in a large pool of gasoline but almost in shock I couldn't feel a thing. Fearing a fire or explosion I got to my feet in a hurry, and ran to escape the approaching holocaust

A quick look backward assured me that there was no fire, so I slowly came to a halt, bent over, placed my hands on my knees, took a deep breath and spoke to God in silent prayer. This mission was over. There were people coming towards the plane from all parts of the airdrome. Before we knew it some of us in the crew were forced outside of the inner circle of the curious onlookers as all tried hard to get a look at the twisted mass of the wreckage., I made my way through the gathered assembly back to the front cockpit and could plainly see that Pilot Zimmerman was still calmly seated there in the main pilot's seat. One of the blades of the feathered #2 engine had sliced through the skin of the plane. It was a strange sight because it seemed to be resting in the seated pilot's lap as if it had cut off his legs.

In answer to queries about his health and safety he was reassuring everyone that he was OK, and he started to extricate himself from this odd position. I drifted back to the waist section with some of the others and retrieved a parachute that I had plans for. After Pilot Zimmerman was out of the ship he called for a head count and we found that besides the three who had parachuted over enemy territory we were all accounted for and except for a slight cut on Jim Carney's hand all had come through without a scratch. A virtual miracle had to occur to bring seven men out of that mess without a serious injury. One of the onlookers, an RAF pilot, told me they were taking bets that no one would come out alive. He also took pictures of the wrecked B-24 and later he mailed me copies that I still have and treasure. We had touched down on one wheel but then the good old unreliable nose wheel had collapsed right on schedule just as predicted it would. The other main landing gear evidently had not locked and it collapsed on ground contact causing the plane to spin off the runway. We grinded our way off the matting, and wound up on the turf part of the field sliding between the tower and a parked Spitfire before old #24 spun to a stop. This British airdrome was exactly 32 miles from the German lines. The milk run had turned into a near total disaster.

We each gathered a few remaining mementos including my parachute, calls were made, and pretty soon we were aboard a C-47 on our way to Ciampino airport in Rome. We were kept

there for a few days at an Air Force section. We were debriefed by intelligence personel there who seemed very interested in the details of our mission. We were not allowed to leave the base, and that was as close as I ever got to seeing the city of Rome except from the air. A plane from group came over from Torretta and took us back to base. With only 3 more missions to go we ran into a stretch of bad weather that held us up till the 7th of February. By the 17th we had finished our missions.

On the last three raids we went to Regensburg, Vienna and Rosenheim, Germany, where we saw our first German jet but it did not attack. Not exactly a couple of milk runs but we made it. Two of the missions were flown in a battered old veteran of a plane that was still painted green, but the old tub carried us back safe and sound. Bravo, Ole, and Hip, Hip, Hoorah.

The missions were ended.

By the 28th of February, 1945, I was in Naples awaiting shipment to the USA aboard the USS Richardson. The sailing was a success and we made it back to the states where I served out the rest of my stay in the service. I soon was discharged from the Air Force and returned to my hometown Lowell, Massachusetts in better shape than when I left. What happened to the parachute you ask? I managed to get it back to our tent at Torretta. There I pulled the ripcord, cut out two full panels for myself, gave the other panels to any one who wanted them and buried the pack under the floor of our tent. I wrapped my panels into a neat tight little package which I brought back with me when I returned. I kept the silken panels till after I was married. I then had them made into a nightgown that I then presented to my wife, whom I have known and loved dearly for 50 years. She still has it in a cedar chest with some of her other keepsakes.

The only time I have ever been up in any type of aircraft since I returned from that last mission was when I just couldn't resist going up in a visiting gas balloon some few years ago.

The End



*No 3 propeller sliced into the skin of the plane and into the Captain's seat.*