

Alone In A Hostile Sky

By Amos Pollard, 827 Sq

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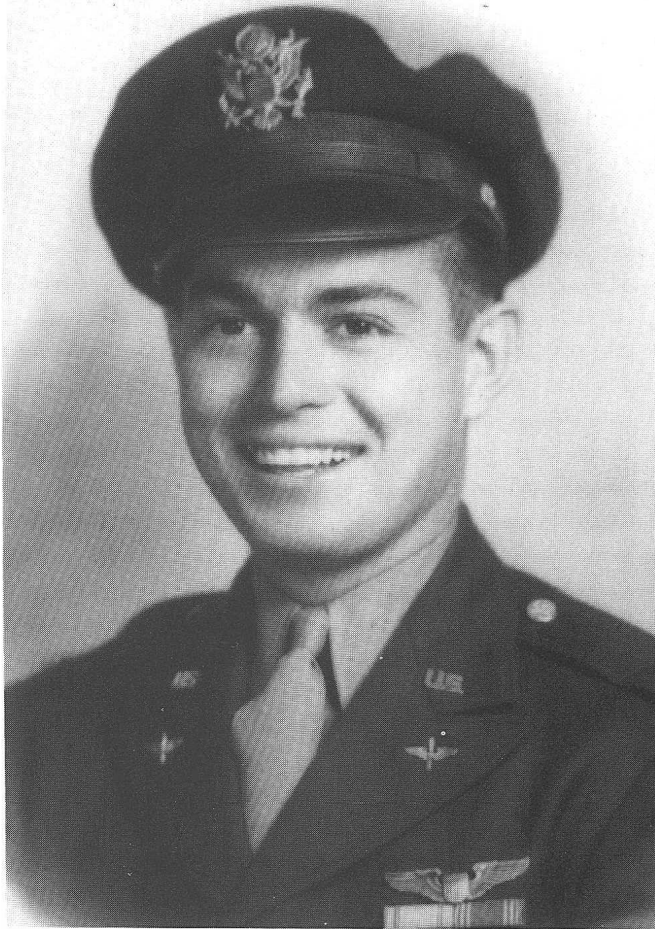
Captain Amos Pollard was only twenty-five, but to the crew (average age, twenty-two, the youngest, nineteen) he was the 'old man'. They had been with him since July, 1944 and he hadn't lost one yet. Now it is 1945, a cold, January morning in Torretta, south of Foggia near the Adriatic on the 'boot heel' of Italy. Amos and his crew are members of the 827th Squadron, 484th Bomb Group, 15th Air Force. His job this day is to take his crew to downtown Munich.

At the briefing, weather, routes, radio frequencies, call signs, are noted. Weather won't be a problem, but the Italian Alps will be if you get into trouble. Estimated target time; 1145 hours. Bombing altitude will be 23,000 feet. That means they'll have to climb the entire route to reach altitude before crossing the IP for the bomb run. "Any questions? Good Luck!"

Amos is considered an old hand now, experienced enough to know how the day will go. He woke up groggy, but he'll perform the flying part wide awake, routinely, carefully, the best he can do. At first he'll be busy with check out, start up, taxi and take-off, but after he settles down on course he'll have time to think about what can go wrong with the plane, about enemy fighters that may be waiting as you approach the target, and again as you leave the target, about the flak over the target.

And he knows that he will transition from being scared to being terrified and finally to an overwhelming feeling of relief when he gets back home, if he gets back home. He won't show any of it to his crew if he can help it for as long as he can help it. But right now it's time to go.

Today he's flight leader for the four squadron group. His call sign is "Callhoun 88." He'll be flying a Mickey, one of two radar equipped B-24s in the outfit. They are called Mickey because the target radars they carry are about as reliable as a kid's Mickey Mouse watch, half the time they don't work. Hell have two extra crew members, a radar operator and a mission photographer. That will make twelve souls aboard for this flight, twelve souls he'll try



Amos Pollard

his best to bring home in one piece.

He leaves the briefing hut, steps into snow melt muddy slush and walks to a vehicle piled hood -to -spare tire with his crew and their parachutes and gear. Stuffed into their flying suits they all look like teddy bears. They reach the big, gangly, four engine B-24 and pile out. While the flight crew climbs aboard, he and Jim Smith walk around the plane for a pre flight check-out with their crew chief. His boys have been working out in the freezing cold all night getting the plane ready to fly, checking engines and electrical, mechanical and hydraulic systems, and loading bombs, fuel, ammunition, oxygen and signal flares aboard. The ground crew is as important to the mission as the flight crew and they know it. Amos lets them know that he knows it, too. It's "their" plane. They just let the crew have it to fly missions. What they try not to show is how much they care about the flight crew. Dog tired from working all night, they'll stay to watch the take off, then get some chow and go to their tents to sleep a while. Late in

the afternoon they'll get up and stand around in the cold, watching, waiting, looking at their watches, hoping "their" plane will get back OK. They'll tense up when they hear the planes returning. They'll count them coming in, note the ones having trouble, note the ones firing flares in the landing pattern denoting they have wounded aboard. If a crew's plane is missing, they will keep a lonely vigil long after the field grows silent, watching the empty sky, hoping their bomber will limp into view.

As flight leader, Amos taxis first with the rest of the group falling in behind. The runway is dirt, no matting, just hard packed dirt. There's the signal from the tower. Pollard moves all four throttles forward and monitors the engine gages to make sure each is developing takeoff power. The big four blade propellers chew into the air and the heavy bomber lurches forward. The wheels drag through patches of mud and standing water and Amos has to play