

the big twin rudders to keep the nose pointed straight. Copilot, Smith, calls out the air speed. The needle on the gage creeps up slowly. "Come on, baby!" The bomber is barely off the ground when the end of the runway flashes beneath them.

The squadron unit of seven lumbering B-24s forms into a self defense box. Three other boxes from the three remaining 484th Group squadrons form up on Pollard's unit and begin the long, slow climb to 23,000 feet. This morning, 112 tons of high explosives will fall on Munich. The Germans know it. They'll do what they can to stop it. The men in the planes try not to think about what the bombs will do to people on the ground. Their job is to drop them.

There's been a foul up. The escort fighters fail to show. It's happened before. Just short of the IP the group finally reaches 23,000 feet and levels off. The temperature is thirty degrees below zero. The fuselage is not pressurized or heated. The waist gunners are standing at open ports. The crew wear electrically heated, leather, fur lined suits, but they are still cold. It is not a nice place to be even when no one is shooting at you.

Every man is scanning the sky for enemy fighters. They are absent today, but the flak comes up to welcome the 484th. Black puffs of smoke begin to appear slightly below and ahead of the flight. They look innocent, but each one marks the explosion of a shell into sharp shards of hot metal capable of tearing ragged holes through anything they hit; engines, wing spars, fuel tanks, men. The German gunners soon get the altitude right. Ugly black splotches appear close by as if the sky has contracted some hideous plague.

Just as Amos begins the turn downwind onto the bomb run his number two engine loses power. Jim Smith grabs the engine controls. He quickly adjusts the throttle and mixture and is able to keep it running, but at only partial power. Whatever the problem he won't feather it unless it catches fire; partial engine power is better than none. He assigns Cpl Marvin Goldstein, manning the top gun turret, to keep an eye on the crippled engine.

Pollard hands off the lead to the plane on his left. With one engine sick, Calhoun 88 is losing speed, falling back through the formation. His bombardier, Lt Dan Paul, is no longer lead bombardier. He releases his bombs when he sees the closest planes ahead drop theirs.

By now the entire group has passed Amos. They have cleared the target, he hasn't. Suddenly his number three engine shuts down. Mechanical failure? A piece of shrapnel? Fly the plane! Maintain control! Let the copilot deal with the engine.

The flight engineer, Sgt. August Kovacic, leaves his gun to help Jim Smith try a restart. It's no good. Some kind of liquid is streaming off the wing behind the dead engine. "Feather Number Three!" They have only two and a half engines, but at least they don't have a fire. Speed drops way back. By now Calhoun 88 has fallen so far behind they can't see any of the group up ahead. They are slow and alone and losing altitude, and the Alps are in front of them.

The intercom comes alive. Sgt. Tom Fitzmaurice is the first to suggest throwing all the guns and ammo overboard to lighten the plane. The tail gunner thinks maybe the crew should bail out.

Amos tells them no one is to jump unless he says so, and no one is to throw any guns or ammo out, not yet anyway. He tells them they're still flying, he's got the aircraft under control, and he reminds them of one other thing they're still deep in enemy territory, they may need their guns.

Pollard is no longer cold. He's sweating from an adrenalin furnace deep inside his gut. He's running the two good engines hard and praying they will hold together. He asks his navigator, Lt. Robert Babcock, for a direct course south over the mountains for



The Pollard Crew

home. It will carry them closer to the enemy fighter base at Udine, but Amos figures he doesn't have much choice. He can't hold altitude. He has to cross the Alps now by the most direct route or he won't cross them at all. They are already down to 17,000 and still descending. Soon Amos has to abandon his navigator's course because he can no longer hold the straight line of flight. He must fly around individual mountain peaks because he can't fly over them. He finds a cut toward the south between two peaks and takes it. Then he has to fly east or west until he finds another saddle between peaks, and another. The peaks and ridges seem to be growing around him as the plane continues to lose altitude. If he makes a wrong turn he could become trapped in a bowl with no way out.

Down to 11,000 feet and he just barely clears a ridge. He is just before ordering the guns and everything else they can tear loose thrown overboard when he looks up and can see the Adriatic far ahead! They are on the down side of the Alps! If he can hold his present rate of descent he will make it!

It is at that moment the intercom comes alive with a voice crowding panic, "Bogies! Two Bandits at three o'clock!" Copilot Jim Smith says he sees them too. "They're hanging out there looking us over. I don't know why they don't come on in. We're a sitting duck." Amos gets on the radio, the fighter escort frequency. He hasn't seen a friendly all day, but maybe