

Lutzkendorf

A story by Ken Blakebrough from his new book "An Old Copilot Remembers"



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On my first mission, the airstrike against Schmalkeiden, I encountered a minimum of anti-aircraft fire (flak) and a solitary enemy fighter attack which was repelled. This experience left me with a confident feeling that there was a chance to survive the required 35 missions. My optimism was shattered when I flew my second mission on February ninth.

This time the target was an oil refinery at Lutzkendorf in eastern Germany. In the briefing room the curtain was removed from the large wall map showing a deep penetration flight into Germany of nine hours duration. We were warned to expect heavy flak plus aggressive fighter attacks. If shot down we were reminded to avoid capture by the now increasingly enraged German civilians. Clear weather was predicted at the target with a deterioration to heavy clouds on the return flight.

In the equipment room I checked out a parachute a flotation vest and, for the first time, took an electrically heated suit which was of a coveralls type and activated by plugging its cord into an electrical unit in the cockpit. The choice of the suit was a mistake. When I tried to use it in the severe cold at high altitude I found a problem with its heat distribution which required me to frequently adjust its temperature.

Takeoff and Group assembly proceeded as briefed and we joined the long stream of bombers heading toward Germany. The long flight to the target area was uneventful. Our plane and the eleven others in the low squadron of the Group maintained a good tight formation. Ahead of us I noted the lead and high squadrons were also keeping a good formation. We reached the Initial Point.

The bombing run began. As we closed in upon the target, bomb bay doors open, we were suddenly engulfed in a barrage of black, hour-glass shaped, bursts of heavy and accurate flak. A shell exploded near my right window sending metal splinters through the plane's thin fuselage and into the cockpit. My first reaction was that I must be wounded but there was no pain, no sign of blood. I turned to look at Ralph and Peschan but neither of them complained of wounds. It was a close call for the three of us.

The flak continued during the course of the bombing run. It seemed as though any second we'd be blown out of the sky. Finally, the plane gave an upward lurch as the bombs were toggled out by Steve in the nose compartment. This was followed by a yell over the intercom by Beran, "Let's get the hell out of here." An outcry which he made thereafter on every mission as the bombs fell away. It also meant he and Steve were removing their masks and lighting cigarettes from which they would alternately inhale smoke, then switch back to their masks to inhale oxygen. This was their way of smoking in an unpressurized plane at an altitude of 25,000 feet, five miles above the earth.

An overcast of heavy clouds developed and continued to drop lower on the long, and what I felt was tediously slow and stressful, homeward flight.

When we crossed the English coastline the formation spread out due to the clouds and fast approaching darkness and we soon found ourselves separated from the other planes. Within minutes it became too dark to use ground references to navigate. We were forced to fall back on "dead reckoning", an inexact system wherein we followed a compass heading given us by Beran based upon his best estimate of our present position in relationship to the airfield at Glatton. As we flew this compass

heading which would in theory bring us to Glatton, each crew member was assigned to a window as lookout for other planes, hopefully to give sufficient warning against collision in the dark and plane-filled sky.

The flight continued for some time, altitude 1,000 feet. Then, we glimpsed the dim outline of runway lights of an airfield below us. A hurried discussion between the cockpit and the navigator. Yes, it was agreed that we had flown sufficient time via "dead reckoning" to place us over the Glatton airfield. We started to fly a counter-clockwise landing pattern, landing gear down. Suddenly another B-17 loomed in front of us. Ralph yanked back on the control column to avoid collision. I held my breath, prepared for a fatal collision, it seemed there was no way to avoid a crash. We missed but it had been very close.

We turned on a final approach to the runway. Too late to contact the control tower now. The altitude gained during the effort to avoid collision was making us come in too high, too fast and slightly to the right of the runway. I hit the full flaps position just as Ralph chopped the throttles all the way back to idle speed, we had to lose height and speed otherwise we would overshoot the runway. The plane settled to the runway, bounced, then stayed down in a full three-point stall. The end of the runway was in sight. Full brakes applied with the hope we wouldn't nose over. The plane stopped rolling at the very edge of the concrete. Ralph and I were momentarily exhausted. We slumped on the dual control columns and breathed deeply.

We started to taxi, looking for our parking hardstand. We saw other B-17s parked adjacent to the taxi strip, but something was wrong. These planes had the insignia of a triangle enclosing the letter "S" on the high dorsal rudder rather than our own triangle "U". We'd landed at the wrong airfield. This was Deenethorpe, home of the 401st Bomb Group.

In view of the weather conditions there was no question of a takeoff and attempt to find Glatton that night. Before we left our plane I pocketed several of the jagged-edged shell fragments lying on the cockpit floor. After we were served dinner, a truck from Glatton picked us up.

The Lutzkendorf mission was an awakening for me. Enemy anti-aircraft fire and the German Luftwaffe were not our only perils. Both the severe English weather with resultant lack of visibility plus the crowded skies were also our enemies. How to survive 33 more missions?

How?

Note: The name *Lutzkendorf* no longer exists on a map of Germany, The area is now known as Krumpa.

The author of "Lutzkendorf" is Ken Blakebrough. (story used here with his permission)

Ken lives in retirement in southern California. He is married to Arden Hume and has a son named David. His passions are tennis, history, and cruise ships. He is the author of the book "Fireball Outfit".

Kenneth Blakebrough passed away on December 31st 2015 at the age of 92