

Ach ! Munich !

By Herb Lambert (453rd)

That recollection, (Moment of Glory) by Michael J Donahue (93rd Group) in the Sept. 1985 edition of the *Journal* certainly evoked memories. My reading of Donahue's comments was, well, with routine *Journal* interest until paragraph five and reference to 12 July 1944. Interest mounted there because our crew began flying combat in July. Nope, we weren't in the 93rd. We were in the 453rd at Old Buck. Then when I got to paragraph six and I saw "Munich" I'd figured I better I'd better dig out the logbook on completing reading Donahue's tale. That was "der Tag" for our crew: Mission Number One!

We were a replacement crew, not one of the original 453rd cadre. We were so green we didn't know enough to realize the portent of that long line of cord stretching from Old Buck to Munich and back (we hoped) to Old Buck. We did know, from the length across the briefing map, we had drawn a dilly for the first combat foray.

In retrospect, it appears that since we were a replacement crew (as many were at that time) we were also considered "expendable." I use the term statistically, not morally, for no crew in any group was truly considered expendable. But new green crews seemed to be handed the most battle weary, and, therefore, expendable ships. I don't recall the name of the ship we were assigned, but do recall that it had really been through the mill.

Obviously, this writing is evidence that we got home from that first mission – and the ones that followed – but surely not without some very tense and scary moments. It was comforting, I can recall, to learn that the cover of "little brothers" would be there for a good part of the Munich trip. But it was sobering to know that they could not accompany the bombers to the target – certainly not on such long haul.

And long it was. It was the longest mission, 9 hours and 10 minutes the logbook shows, of my combat tour. And it was far rougher than we realized, even though the crew had an ample introduction to those black puffs of flak – often concentrated enough so that it appeared you could land on them. I guess we did learn, after return and perhaps in a few days, how rough a mission it was. But that picture – or those statistics are dim now and, too, would not have registered so deeply on a new crew. But I quickly noted, in Donahue's narrative, that the 389th must have taken the brunt of the fighter attack, losing a greater part of the day's 44 Libs shot down. So far as I can recall, the 453rd did not get bounced that day. At least the 732nd squadron, of which we were a part, did not get hit. While we did not know at once that 44 ships were lost that day, we did know that losses in some groups were heavy. While the two can hardly be compared – your first solo and your first combat mission – two firsts of this kind can hardly be forgotten.

After this, things were humming. Our green crew logged five missions in our first seven days on operational status. Right after the Munich jaunt, we went the Ruhr twice and then participated in the "assist" to the ground forces working up to the breakthrough at Caen and St. Lo. As I recall, the B-24s went in at about 16,000 feet, seeking to be as precise as possible in the bombing of hedgerow terrain.

That introductory pace for our crew kept up: we logged 18 missions in the 36 days from 12 July through 16 August 1944. And, as I recall we were assigned slightly better equipment to fly. In contrast, it took us 89 days to log the other 12 missions. Our stateside training in radar navigation was finally recognized or begun to be put to use and we were "stood down" -- so to speak – for lead crew training. The remaining 12 missions were as a lead crew and very often we were alerted for the next day's mission, only to have it scrubbed, for us, because the weather on the Continent had cleared and the need for radar navigation was lessened. And so we sweated out those last 12 missions.

But we finally climbed aboard for No. 30, and on 21 November 1944, more experienced, but no less apprehensive than on number one. I guess it could be debated forever which is worse: the first mission (especially such a long one) or the final one (realizing you've survived 29 and hoping, praying, wishing the final one will not be "final").

If our crew's introduction to combat missions, Munich, was notable, that 30th was equally so: Hamburg! Even as I write this, I can recall, as though it were yesterday, my thoughts as we plowed through the intense flak: I wish some of those newspaper reporters could be here right now – those fellows who have put out numerous stories saying that 'Hamburg is a dead city'.

While Hamburg may have been laid waste by November 1944, it was hardly a 'dead city' in terms of visiting its airspace, as we were doing. The Germans evidently had moved hundreds flak guns in by rail. No "dead city" could have put up the black barrage that was encountered that day! Almost solid black clouds of flak blossoms covered Hamburg and the B-24 rocked from the concussions. But we made it and headed out across the North Sea and eventually back to Old Buck. I can recall the admonition to myself as we approached the base: "Be extra careful in the approach, in the landing and even in the taxiing. It would be sadly ironic if something happened *now*."

We'd made it! Thirty times outbound and no aborts. No more stress from that awful condition of gearing up for a mission and then having to re-do that gearing up the next day, or another day to get credit for one more mission. True there were a few "milk runs" scattered among the 28 other missions, but they were few. There were some mighty tense ones for our replacement crew, even as there were for all the other crews who managed to make it back and managed to complete a tour.

We made it back to Old Buck 29 times. The one time we didn't was, after being "flak bit" over Dessau. The right outboard engine was shot out and we managed to feather it. Then the right inboard began acting up and then ran away – running hotter and hotter. There were stragglers all over the sky that day (Dessau flak was accurate and intense) and there were many calls for "little brothers." We were finally picked up by one, a P-51, who had answered my Birmingham, Alabama co-pilot's appeal for, "Lil brutha, we need an escort". Ralph Tucker's southern drawl was a bit desperate. That wonderful looking P-51 tucked it in close and followed us down through the undercast until we broke out. It was impossible to maintain altitude and the Channel hardly looked inviting. We finally made it to an RAF base sitting; it seemed, right at the edge of the cliffs. "Coachwhip" was its call, though I do not recall its proper RAF name. It looked like the end of the rainbow to us, struggling on the two good engines. We barely made it across the perimeter and even as we rolled down the runway the windmilling engine caught fire. As we slowed, and it became possible, most of the crew dropped or stepped off the catwalk in the bomb bay and onto the runway. The RAF fire trucks met us as we rolled to a stop and surely, prevented a fire disaster right there. That probably was the worst situation among the 30 missions.

One other perhaps warrants mention for its near disaster but, lo, many years later, also for its wryly humorous aspect. The mission was to Bremen and before we crossed the Channel one engine began acting up, but we did not want to abort. We nursed it along and somehow managed to keep our position in the formation. We made it all the way to the IP and then got on that so-called "30 second," but really interminable, bomb run. Then, approaching the release point, we heard a big sound, even through the helmets and earphones: the bombardier, somehow hit, or pressed, or bumped, or whatever could be physically done to the release mechanism, and salvoed the entire bomb load through the about to be opened bomb bay doors! We went across Bremen empty and with the bomb bay doors hanging. Somehow, before we got back to the field, the flight engineer, Kyle Clay, perched precariously on the catwalk and using, I believe he said, electric cords from the plug-in-suits, managed to snag the door rollers and tie the doors up high enough to clear the runway and allow an OK landing. There was no humor in the incident then, but looking back there was wry humor and luck.

I guess I never really got to know the "old hands" in the 453rd because we did not start out at March Field. And once the 30 missions were completed my crew headed home and I went to the 2nd Wing on temporary duty. Then I went to Hdq., 2nd Air Division to work in Operations before heading home in May 1945.

To wind up this recollection on a brighter note, I saw some of those 2nd A.D. Hdq. People, for the first time since May 1945, at Palm Springs in October 1984 at the reunion there. Among the very first of the people I saw was a bombardier, Wendell Jeske, who had flown with another replacement crew at the 453rd. His pilot and I had followed the zig zag route from flying navigation students at Hondo, Texas, through B-24 transition at Smyrna, Tenn., to Salt Lake to pick up a crew, to Pueblo, to Westover, to Langley to train as a radar crew, and thence to the U.K. His pilot, Kenneth Parten, flew P-51 (weather reconnaissance) after completing the B-24 tour at Old Buck. He died later in an aircraft accident.