

“Escort to Valor, Courage and Undaunted Determination”

As seen through the eyes of a former P-51 Mustang Fighter Pilot of the 8th Air Forces Fighter Command, 4th F.G.

By Major Warren Johnson

“...with undaunted courage and obvious bravery, the B-24 bombers made their way to the target through murderous enemy flak, thick enough to get out and walk on ... then one bomber at a time would receive a fatal direct hit and suddenly or sometimes slowly, roll over and begin going down in flames ... as an escorting fighter pilot who had to stay clear of “Flak Alley”, I witnessed the B-24 bomber crews dogged determination to reach their assigned targets ... I felt so helpless, wanting to do something more to help those brave men through their courageous defiance of death ... we could only pray for them and count the chutes as they would appear coming out of a burning B-24, hoping that we’d be able to count all ten crew members as survivors who would, though soon to be captives of the enemy, remain alive ...”

During the fourth years since the end of World War II and as a former member of the “Mighty 8th” Air Force I have always felt that too little has been said about the heroism and death-defying courage of those brave and determined bomber crews who smashed the war-producing industries of Hitler’s Third Reich. I can vividly recall our arguments on the ground with the crewmembers of a B-24 Bomber Division, as to which of us had it the best. They claimed that “they had it the best because they had four engines where we fighter pilots only had one.” Actually, in my own opinion and considering the loss of our own fighters, I still maintain that the bomber crews had the toughest job. However in fairness to both sides of an argument of this nature, I would like to point out that for every fighter pilot we lost in combat escorting the bombers, we’d lose four when we’d Rhubarb an enemy airbase or try to take out Nazi mechanized armor, or even trains. The Germans had very deadly ground fire capabilities and many of our fighter pilots buried in Germany attest to this fact.

There are numerous missions which I recall whereby our assignment was to provide fighter escort for the B-24s of the Second Bomb Division. It was during a very cold April day in 1944 when we entered our Operations Room at 0500. Our Operations Officer lost no time giving us the customary data as to targets, the “anticipated” weather conditions’ and of course, where and at what altitude and time we would rendezvous with the 2nd Bomb Division. I recall that one of the targets would be Mannheim because it was to be a primary target. There was also a “target of opportunity” in case inclement weather made the bombing of Mannheim impractical, even with the use of Pathfinder radar. We were dutifully warned of the possibility of heavy enemy fighter opposition, which by this time had become common to us.

It was barely light as we left our hard stands, got on the taxi strip and began “S-ing” our Mustangs from side to side to avoid running into the plane ahead of us. This had to be done because our tailwheels were still on the pavement and you couldn’t see without swinging back and forth. Once we reached the main runway we were all airborne quickly. We met up with a large force of B-24s over France at the pre-ordained time. As our squadrons drew up alongside of the B-24s their crews began waving to us and we waved back. We soon began our ascent and climbed above the bombers where weaving back and forth enabled us to stay with them due to the variations in the cruising speeds of the bombers and fighters. It was clear and cold up there and we, as well as the bombers, were leaving white contrails. We were now approaching Ulm, the southern part of Germany, and if the Nazis hadn’t already picked us up on their radars, we knew our contrails would be just as effective. About a half-hour away from Mannheim, one of our fighter pilots broke radio silence and excitedly shouted, “Bandits at one o’clock high.” Those of us who hadn’t cleared our guns did so at once. We were soon attacked by a “Gangurschwaden”, usually comprised of twenty ME-109s, and they were vicious. They tried to break through our fighter cover but we shot down five of them before they could get within effective range of the bombers. I guess that those remaining Krauts got the message and headed elsewhere.

When the bombers lined up on their P.I. and entered “Flak Alley”, all hell broke loose – it was murderous and devastating. Although we had to climb up and away from the B-24 bombers, we nonetheless had to clench our teeth and pray for those poor yet brave and courageous dedicated souls who were now on their assigned target run. Many of the bombers received direct hits, rolled over and began plunging towards earth as they left a trail of flames. We tried to count the chutes but sometimes there were none to be seen.

The Nazi gun crews were demonstrating the deadly accuracy of their anti-aircraft batteries with a vengeance, especially as we fighter pilots saw more of our comrades in arms rolling and going down in flames. Those B-24s, who survived "Flak Alley" and made it to the target, really did a memorable job on Mannheim. The bombardiers had set their intervalometers in such a manner that very little of the target, if any, escaped. I vaguely recall that they bombed from 22,000 feet and it was a masterful demonstration of superb skill.

Right after the bombers began turning away from their target area and entered their pre-selected course for returning to England, we were jumped by the Luftwaffe from several different directions. The Mustang fighters tore into them in a desperate attempt to save the B-24 bombers. Although we managed to shoot down several Nazi fighters, quite a number of them managed to get through to the bombers whose gunners succeeded in shooting down several more. The bombers managed to sustain numerous and vicious attacks but they most certainly held their own against the Luftwaffe. The battle entered into a large formation of cirrus cumulus clouds and many of us got separated. We learned the Krauts had broken off their attacks and called it a day, although they did pay a stiff price for their efforts. We had not lost any of our fighters.

By this time, other than the compass heading that I knew I should be on, I was lost. Having a soft spot in my heart for crippled bombers; I dropped down to 8,000 feet to see what I could find. To this day I didn't know whether it was intuition or just plain luck, but I came upon twelve badly damaged and severely crippled B-24 bombers, most of them trying to make it on two engines and leaving numerous trails of smoke. I pulled up alongside of the starboard bomber, dropping my flaps fifteen degrees and pulling back on my throttle. I had to be careful to keep my nose up to avoid getting into a stall angle. I looked the B-24s over and to say they were in bad shape would be the understatement of the century. They were sure glad to see me; they knew they were sitting ducks for an attack.

I decided to risk breaking radio silence and put out a call for P-51 fighters, giving them our heading, speed and altitude. It proved to be a good move on my part. I received many "Rogers" to my call and within several minutes eleven Mustangs arrived on the scene, none too soon. A lieutenant fighter pilot asked me, "How do you want to work this, Major?" I replied, "You take five of the silver birds with you and weave back and forth underneath the bombers, while the rest of us do the same thing above." About ten minutes after we'd all gotten into our respective positions, we saw another "Gangurschwaden" of Kraut fighters swooping down to kill off the nearly helpless crippled B-24s. Somehow those Hitler-loving S.O.B.'s didn't see us in time as we gathered together, gave our Merlin Rolls Royce engines 75 inches of mercury, opened up our throttles and went on up and met them head on. We quickly split them up, shot down six of them and gave chase to the rest in such a manner that none of them even got near the crippled bombers.

Our fervent tenacity to protect those crippled B-24s was too much for der Fuhrer's finest and they quickly broke off and headed for home. The bomber crews by this time had seen what we had done and they were ecstatic with joy and relief. We talked to them over our intercoms and they couldn't express enough appreciation. I told them to be sure to "ring for room service" whenever they needed us, and they all laughed. We stayed with them until they all made it back to England. I'll never forget their waving to us as we parted.