

Last Mission – Lasting Memories

Mission 258 of 453rd Bomb Group – Old Buckenham

Deputy Wing Leader – Lt. J.E. Baier

By William Voight

Lt. J.E. Baier's crew their 18th, and what turned out to be their final mission of WWII on April 10, 1945.

The primary target was an airfield situated 50 miles north of Berlin. It was the German Luftwaffe's experimental base at Rechlin, Germany. This particular air base had been redesigned for the development of jet propelled aircraft. Three squadrons of the 453rd had been assigned this target. Two of the squadrons dropped their bombs at Rechlin; however, clouds prevented the 735th lead bombardier from releasing bombs on the airfield.

Lt. Love, with Maj. Clingan as command pilot, was leading the 735th and the Second Combat Wing and was directed to leave the bomber stream and lead his squadron to the secondary target – the railroad marshalling yard at Wittenberg, Germany.

All went well until we were about 10 miles from our new target at Wittenberg. At that point, the formation ran into intense flak. As it turned out, we were directly over a flak train. We were in heavy flak for about three and one half minutes, but it seemed more like an hour. The squadron leader, Lt. Love, was hit and had to leave the formation and we, (Lt. Baier's crew with Capt. Johnson as command pilot) slid into the lead slot.

Directly behind us (Lt. Powell), the plane received a direct hit and went down in flames. Our tail gunner told us he saw two chutes appear for a few moments, but they then caught fire and burned. We dropped our bombs on the target with excellent results. After "bombs away" the flak stopped and it was so peaceful it was hard to believe what we had just experienced.

On this mission a total of 19 planes received damage in varying degrees – all from flak. We had received numerous holes throughout the plane but the most severe damage was to the hydraulic system. As we neared England, we had to crank the landing gear by hand, which is no easy task, but sure a lot better than a "belly" landing. Since we would have no brakes on landing, all the crew with the exception of the pilot and co-pilot were in the tail section. On landing we dragged the tailskid as long as we could, but still used the full length of the runway.

We were happy this mission was behind us. The next day, April 11th, 1945, the 453rd flew its 259th mission and also the last before the group was stood down. All crews with over 15 missions were transferred to other groups in the Second Division and all crews with under 15 were re-assigned to the Pacific Theatre. Our crew was assigned to the 467th Bomb Group at Rackheath.

The only flying we did after our transfer was a few "trolley" missions over Germany. These were to show the ground personnel the damage done in Germany and let them see that their hard work and dedication had not been in vain. The ground crews were the only ones who really kept the planes flying and without them we would have been nothing. They are the unsung heroes in my book.

The plane we flew on this, our last mission was a brand new B-24M and was on its first mission. It had many punctures and holes, and yet had not lost any of the four engines. Also, there had been no hits on any of the control surfaces. We all felt very fortunate that the hydraulic system was the only casualty. Since the 453rd was stood down on April 16th, it is doubtful that the old girl ever made more than one mission, but thankfully the one she made was a complete round trip.

This is the way I remember it, to the best of my knowledge. After all, 49 years is a long time to remember names, dates and places.