

# OUR LONGEST DAY - 4 April 1945

By H. Cameron Murchison (453rd)

It all began, as always, long before daylight: wake up, dress for cold weather, fried egg breakfast, then briefing for a target never hit before by the 453rd Bomb Group – runways at airfields used by those fearful Nazi ME-262 jet fighters which had knocked down quite a number of our “flying refrigerators” of late. Our assigned target was a field near Wesendorf in north central Germany, where we were to bomb hard runways to prevent takeoffs, and by close pattern bombing expect to destroy or damage the 262s hidden in the proximity of said runways. With two engines and heavier than ME-109s, they apparently didn’t like grass runways.

We were off the ground shortly after daylight, headed east for the North Sea buncher marker where the group climbed, circled, found our squadron position, then formed the group front climbing on course toward Holland with landfall about 12,000 feet. Flak at the coast was light and sporadic, although the weather was clear, high clouds and four to six tenths broken, just as briefed. Ideal for AA gunners. Deeper into Germany, we headed southeast, diverting attention from our intended target, climbing to 22,000 feet maximum altitude, pointing toward Berlin. The flak intensified now well inside Germany, but no aircraft had been lost thus far. We turned north before reaching the Magdeburg area, heading to an IP (initial point) southeast of Wesendorf, the bombing run planned for a northwest heading, briefed to turn left, descending after drop, off the target in an evasion maneuver.

A number of the 262s came up on the way to our IP and caused some real havoc – several downed B-24s, but none from our squadron. We were so busy up front flying tight formation that we had no glimpse of the fighters, but our gunners saw some at a distance, and radio chatter called out a number of them, excitedly, and the victims as well. They had a field day, and as briefed, they hid in the high broken clouds over the bomber string, and screamed down unnoticed until they were very close to their bulbous targets. They also had the advantage (unknown at that time) of having the most experienced fighter pilots the world ever saw, ranging from 100 to 300 kills per pilot. Their JV-44 squadron commander, Adolf Galland, recently demoted commanding General of the entire Luftwaffe Fighter Command, ended up with 104 victories! JV-44 carried the torch for Germany, described by the Luftwaffe as “the squadron of experts.” This squadron was the only one in the world whose personnel downed over 1000 aircraft.

The fighters didn’t worry me as much as the flak, since we had bombed airfields of 262s only four days previously near Brunswick, where we slipped through the traps with no passes on our squadron, though the jets did increase their scores on earlier bomb groups. Flak this day was different. It was not as heavy or intense as three earlier missions to Magdeburg refineries. But some of it was no longer traditional black puffs. On our north leg to the IP, some puffs were bright orange gobs of destruction. Some of our old, hairy combat veterans in the group (I was still 20 years of age) told us that when you see this color flak, it is very close. We soon learned the truth of that.

At the IP we turned left about 50 degrees onto a short six to seven bomb run. We hugged real close formation to drop a tight pattern, and toggled off bombs on the squadron lead ship. Just as we reached the approximate point of release of the 1,000 pound bombs, we felt a super, giant “thermal” heaving us skyward, faster than a loaded B-24M can climb! In case you boll weevils think I’m led to exaggeration, let me explain that late in cadet training I started a game with myself of trying to fix a mental picture of familiar aircraft wingspan at the end of a known runway distance. I was well aware then of how a 110 foot Liberator wing looked at the end of our main 6,000 foot runway at Old Buck – for a fact, those little Libs in 453rd garb with which we were in formation, were *not that big*. We’re told that the AA guns’ muzzle velocity is near that of a GI rifle, almost twice the speed of sound. Surely, I also don’t understand how even that speed plus the explosive thrust of a 105mm flak gun (which this one obviously was) could lift a mass of perhaps 33,000 pounds (nearly half our fuel gone) to that height! How did that impact hit our exact center of gravity? We did not tip forward or backward. How did the impact hit our longitudinal axis within a few inches? A small deviation right or left would surely have blown off the wing, igniting the main fuel tank, making one huge fireball. Earlier I had seen three such fireballs – not pretty. How did the timing of this flak burst coincide with our safetied bombs, which had to be not more than 20-30 feet below us, protecting the main fuselage? I calculated that approximately 1/200th of a second sooner or later on this burst would surely make us a fireball. One reason for our survival, I’m convinced, was prayer. Six of us were diligently praying (I asked five after landing); I feel we all were. The Almighty was apparently not finished with us yet.

Now we were suddenly alone and vulnerable up in the sky, so we hurriedly poked our machine downhill, power back, and found our assigned place in the formation. It didn’t last long – our Old Buck buddies steamed up and left us. Less than three minutes after we restored cruise power, our No. 4 engine’s cylinder head temperature gauge needle hit the high peg, oil pressure to zero; we had to feather it. While our group was still close, we started checking the engine for fire and for other damage. The gunners noted several holes in the horizontal stabilizer, the fins, and wings outboard of the engines. Another miracle – not a single control cable, trim tab, aerial, nor any radio equipment was hit. Final count late that day showed 28 holes in the A/C, but no large, tearing gaps, thankfully.

None of our crew was injured; all made it through our vertical wild ride, but the horizontal remainder of our trip was really grim. No way could we make it home from under 20,000 feet when we were pulling maximum power on our three good engines without overheating, and living with a 200 feet per minute descent. No holding altitude, loaded as we were, and we dared not dump our guns and ammo yet, since we were a choice feast for Nazi fighters. Jack Gneitling, our navigator, figured out we should stay well south of the heavier defended coast, so we headed west toward Cologne, hopefully minimizing flak and likely the shortest distance to friendly territory. Allied ground forces had crossed the Rhine River not long before.

Ready for another miracle? Maybe just a mystery, solved only about three years ago by a book given to me by my son, Stuart, titled *Fighter General, The Life of Adolf Galland*, 1990, AmPress Publishing. At under 10,000 feet, well inside Germany, we were “almost” joined by another B-24 with tail ID of our 2<sup>nd</sup> Wing – it had a white horizontal slash on a black fin. Our new acquaintance flew off our right wing almost line abreast, but stayed almost 100 yards away. He flew with us at least 25 minutes, never wavered, never answered our radio call on any channel, had no gunners, had waist doors installed (I’d never seen such on our A/C.) Our gunners first noticed that no turrets were moving – a mandatory procedure for 8th AF bombers in a combat zone. WE noted that the pilot had a slightly different helmet on than ours, though we couldn’t make out his face. He wore no flak helmet ... very strange. He did not respond to our signal to close up formation. We discussed the option of shooting him down – he was spooky; but we couldn’t be sure if he was a big bogie, and we were the crippled one, not him. We didn’t have long to think on it; as we neared the Rhine River he banked sharply away from us and headed east, back to his Nazi lair.

As noted on page 231 of *Fighter General*, above: “(General) Galland set up a travelling circus (Wanderzirkus) of Allied aircraft that were in flying condition. He remembered how helpful it had been when he had patched up one of the first downed B-17s so fighter pilots could board and fly in the American bombers, simulating U.S. gunners as Luftwaffe fighters made mock firing passes. That helped morale. The travelling circus expanded this idea ...? “Allied aircraft of all types toured fighter training schools, operational training units, and active fighter bases. German pilots flew in these aircraft. In the bombers, They were placed in different crew stations and got first-hand experience on the aircraft they were trying to down.”

We improved our descent to about 100 feet per minute, but still could not hold altitude. Now in friendly territory, we headed directly for Manston RAF (emergency) Air Base, near the southeast corner of England. WE prayed that we would not have to ditch in the frigid North Sea. We were aware that at this time of year, our maximum time to live in this water was five minutes.

As soon as we neared the coastline, we dumped overboard all of the “heavy metal” no longer needed: our ammo, machine guns, flak suits and helmets, even our fire axes – they’d be no use in ditching a B-24 since float time averaged well under a minute. Welcome relief came as we reached Manston RAF Base. With surplus heavy items gone, more fuel used, and denser air, we now could hold our 1,000’ altitude. No indication that our hydraulic system was damaged, we quickly tested our toe brakes, which seemed firm, and now felt riding home to Old Buck was not too risky. We landed without incident, a while after the group returned and debriefed.

It took some time for us and our ground crew to examine the plane’s condition, counting holes, etc. One more aberration (minor miracle) we had a tough search for the reason the No. 4 engine was out. No holes could be found anywhere in the engine cowling or fairing. Taking off some of the cowling finally revealed an oil line completely smashed closed, without cutting it. Nearby, the mechanic found a flak chunk about 7”x 3 ½”x almost ¾” thick. This chunk had come from ahead of our engine through the air intake, with no noticeable prop damage, and rattled around, chipping some of the cylinder head cooling fins, before it hit the oil line. We had flown right INTO that flak and swallowed it.

Our intelligence troops took longer than usual to debrief us, helping us figure out in detail what happened. They didn’t seem to know of another case when our own bombs had been both a “sword and shield” and prevented the distinction of being war casualties.

You may wonder how I remembered the above in such detail. It was the most dramatic event of my life, changing my outlook of faith, and I’ve reviewed it in my mind hundreds of times just as though it happened five months ago. It happened exactly fifty years ago today as I write this. Another wonder hit me recently, looking back. This 8:20 hour flight took place only one month and two days before Nazi Germany surrendered. Six hours of this mission felt like somewhere between tension and panic. Yogi Berra was right: like baseball, war “ain’t over till it’s over.”