

# The Rough Edges

By Ken Stevens

*This story was written by Lt. Hubert Cripe in 1944 while a prisoner of war. The story was written on a book of blank paper furnished to the P.O.Ws by the Y.M.C.A. By now the ink is a little faded and the paper beginning to yellow. But when you talk to Hubert, you will find the memory as vivid today as it was when he touched pen to the paper*

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The time of this story beginning is 0230 hours on March 6th at a bomber base "Somewhere in England." A G.I. orderly is sleepily making his way down the wet and muddy walk that leads past a row of Nissen Huts where combat crews are sleeping. Already there are sounds of activity on the base. A plane is being tested for a sour mag that drops 100 R.P.M. It's supposed to be fixed at 50 R.P.M. but some crew chief is off the ball and it got worse. The orderly opens the door of one of the huts, turns on the light, and calls "Lt. Cripe?" "Huh," comes the sleepy answer. "Breakfast at 3 o'clock, briefing at 4." He leaves at this and goes on to call other crews.

Lt. Cripe, that's me, got up and shivered as the cold night air struck me. I called my co-pilot, Russ Anderson, and my navigator, Lt. Dallacqua. Now I know how my father felt when he called my brother and me on a cold winter morning, only more so. Well, I got them up with lots of grumbling and cuss words. We put our helmets, oxygen masks, coveralls, and parachute harness in a C-3 bag, dressed and went to breakfast of powdered eggs and hot cakes.

Groups of men were grouped around the stove speculating on the target. However, trucks were waiting to take the crews to briefing so we cut it short and loaded up. Immediately on arriving at the briefing room we drew our electric suits and put them on. Then we went to briefing. On the far end of the room was a large map of England and the continent. The room soon filled and Major Hubbard directed the route he put on the map. A hush settled over the room as the S-2 men thumbtacked a thin sheet of plexiglass in such a way that a red crayon line on the sheet disclosed our route. Groans went up over the room as the red line stopped at—BERLIN!

Major Hubbard demanded order and called the role. I was given another bombardier as my own Lt. had pleurisy and was unable to go. Capt. Foster was to go with me but nobody woke him so I was given Lt. Dineen, the regular bombardier on Lt. Hart's crew. Destiny had a queer twist for Falla and Fay and an entirely different one for Dineen and two other members of Hart's crew. Major Hubbard continued and assigned ships, told gas load, bomb load, and call signs. S-2 took over then and the first words they said were "Gentlemen, OUR target for today is Berlin." Then the officer described our target, an electrical plant on the south side of Berlin. Then he continued that if we were unable to get back to England to head for Sweden. "If you are forced to land in Holland or Belgium your chances of contacting the underground are pretty good. However, no such luck in Germany. Good luck, gentlemen." Next came the weather officer who described what kind of weather to expect. The briefing officers had been up all night preparing this mission and with a few final remarks Maj. Hubbard dismissed us.

Back to the equipment room we went, drew parachutes, mine was a new back pack, and the Mae Wests that were to prove the factor to cheat death. The equipment I wore was long underwear, blue bunny electric suit, coveralls, electric gloves and shoes, fleece lined boots, helmet with oxygen mask attached, Mae West, and finally the parachute. I remember I left a short coat, pink pants, green shirt, and my cap in my C-3 bag in the dressing room. Past experience had taught me to take along a winter jacket, as the electric suit might not work. Thus equipped we went outside, loaded our equipment and ourselves on a truck and went out to our hardstand.

The gas truck had just finished topping out tanks after pre-flight. "You'll have 2700 gallons of gas," Maj. Hubbard had said and the crew chief was seeing that we had just that. Dawn had not come yet and the lights were on inside the plane. As I crawled into the bomb bay to put my equipment in the cockpit I noticed the bombs. Eggs for Jerry—10 of them—600 pounders, too. S-2 must have wanted the place bombed good. I rejoined the crew who were checking the guns, ammo, and turrets. I was tense and Russ and I walked away from the plane to have a last cigarette.

“She’ll be a rough one today, huh,” said Russ “Yeah,” I said, wondering if it would be like the mission 2 days before when we got as far as Helgoland and were forced back on account of weather. Well, I vowed, today would be different. We’d blast that place wide open, I told myself.

Ten minutes before starting engines time, we (the crew) had a final pep talk and boarded the plane. Russ read through the checklist and the engineer started the Put-put. The clock on the instrument panel had come to engine starting time as Russ snapped on the switches and said “Starting No. 3. The starting motor gave a low whine and increased. “Mesh No.3” “Meshing 3.” Came the answer and the big prop started turning slowly. The 1200 HP engine coughed, caught, blew out a cloud of blue smoke and burst into life. In such a manner the other three engines were started. After satisfying ourselves the engines were thoroughly warm, we waited for taxiing time. The lead bomber had already taxied past our hardstand and the others were following in order.

## **SCARY TAKEOFF**

We were flying off Lt. Witzel’s wing and when I saw him begin to move I released the brakes, increased the R.P.M. and slowly made our way to the taxi strip. By the time we had taxied half way to the end of the runway, the lead plane was taking off. He was airborne before the end of the runway and the other planes followed in order. They all showed evidence of their heavy load – 6000 lbs. Of bombs plus 2700 gallons of gas plus ten men and ammunition for 10 machine guns, a total of nearly 35 tons.

We stopped at the run up area and went through the take-off checklist: 20-degree flaps, Hi RPM (2700), manifold pressure 47 inches of mercury. We taxied to the opposite side of the runway Lt. Witzel used in order to escape his prop wash and held our brakes awaiting the green light from control. Hatches closed, cowl flaps closed, auto rich, brakes set, and 25 inches of mercury.

There’s the green light and here comes the white knuckles. Brakes released and we’re rolling – Throttles wide open and the 4800 Pratt & Whitney Horse’s beller their song. Full military power – we get 49” mercury, maximum from the ram effect. Sgt. Garrett, replacement engineer stood between Russ and me and like Cool Hand Luke, he calmly called out the airspeed. 60-65-70-80 – Come on baby, come on, we’re already past half the runway length – 90-95 – She’s getting lighter – keep that nose wheel down, don’t let her fly off yet. 100-105 – back pressure on the wheel – 110-120 and we’re in the air just over the end of the runway. “Gear up! Gear up!” I screamed. Why does it seem I’m the only white knuckled guy aboard? Russ calmly answered “Gear coming up.” And the massive gear swung out and upward. Use brakes to stop the spin of the wheels or they will be just like a gyro. Yeah, we sure got a load of baggage. We can scarcely climb but we are gaining. Five minutes of maximum military power are the limit and Russ lowered manifold pressure and RPM and milked up the flaps. Our speed increased and we started our climb.

Have you ever made a takeoff for a bombing mission? If not, you have to start a climbing turn almost as soon as your wheels are up. If you don’t you will be miles away from the formation. We started turning almost as soon as our wheels were off the runway. By turning inside of Witzel we soon caught up with him and assumed our position off his right wing. He had already assumed his position in the action and the plane that took off behind us got into position off his left wing. Our section got into a semblance of a formation and closed up. Lt. Crockett, leading the section of 12 ships led us up to the first section. Our position was No. 2 in the hi right element – The Purple Heart element. After our group had formed we started looking for the other two groups in our wing – the 389th and 445th. All the B-24s are in the second division and after much maneuvering in banks, rolling in prop wash, and racing engines the entire division was formed. Planes seemed to be everywhere. This was a maximum effort and every plane that would fly in the 8th Air force was up. Far ahead of us were the B-17s. They had started earlier. High above were more B-17s. Time was marching on. The Air Force was formed and there was work to do. The Air Force started climbing. As the shores of England moved by underneath my left wing I thought, “Well, here’s No. 8.”

## **BOMBS AWAY**

At 12,000 ft. Russ and I put on our oxygen masks and at 15,000 ft. I ordered the crew to put theirs on. It was going to be a long raid and a long time on oxygen so save all you can. The choppy, cold North Sea was beneath us now. We seemed to be standing still but the air speed indicator read 165. After what seemed to be hours the coast of Holland came into sight. Enemy territory! Little did I know I would be on Holland soil in a very few hours.

The engineer had finished transferring gas out of the Tokyo tanks and was back at his top turret searching the sky for enemy fighters. High above us were many single contrails. Fighters! Maybe they are our own. Sure enough. As they got closer the wing and tail positively identified them as P-47s. If any enemy fighters were present they kept away from us while we had fighter protection.

We were well inland now and Spike, the navigator, called up and said we would be over the German border in 7 minutes. Well, so far, so good. No flak yet. The gunners were keeping a line of talk going over the inter-phone. For myself, I was comfortable. Electric suit O.K. Oxygen mask O.K. Plane O.K. except No. 3 is getting pretty warm. Suddenly out of nowhere dark smudges of black smoke appeared in the group ahead of us. Flak! Hope they leave us alone. I didn't see any apparent damage but by then we were in it. It wasn't too accurate though and we flew on unhindered.

Our route took us out of most of the flak areas and we flew on seeing light flak occasionally and many of our own fighters, which had changed to P-38s. We'll change again before the target to P-51s. We were well over Germany by now and Spike called again to tell me we would change course for the I.P. in 15 minutes. Well, so far this had to be a milk run. I would have been plumb happy only we were 250 miles inside Germany.

We changed course for the I.P. all right but 10 minutes later Witzel suddenly pulled out of formation. Well, being out of formation 100 miles from Berlin is like slitting your own throat but I followed him. He was definitely in trouble. And sure enough -- he feathered No. 3. What to do? Why didn't the dumb fool try to stay with the formation? But no, he's going home. ?!\*%?!\*!! Well, I've got to catch the formation or my goose will be cooked. I gave her full throttle and caught my group just after they had passed the I.P. but I got the wrong section! I was in the first one and my own was behind me. Well, I'll stay here.

Ahead of us was the target. Berlin, here we come. Jerry had the welcome mat turned upside down and inside the door. Over the target was the most concentrated flak barrage I have ever seen. It was almost a solid black cloud with red bursts of exploding shells. We could see it 50 miles off and it filled me with dread. Right then I preferred fighters to flak. We kept approaching our target, the lead plane using the bombsight and making corrections. Our bomb bay doors were open and we were going to drop our eggs when the lead plane did. Suddenly we were in the flak. It was everywhere. When you can hear it, it's too close -- and I heard plenty. Spent pieces of flak bounced off our ship like BBs. A burst directly to one side rocked the ship. Boy, a hit in our bomb bay and we've had it. There go the bombs! Instantly the bombardier hits his bomb release. They're off. After what seemed like ages we are out of the flak and the bomb bays closed. Our section isn't without damage. Whoever was flying No.2 on Stock has a bad gas leak in the bomb bay. Flak got a gas line or tank. It was Crockett and I learned he ran out of gas and ditched.

## **WE'RE HIT**

We were now going home and I was very glad that we were through the flak and damage. The only apparent damage I could see was a tiny flak hole the size of a dime just in front of the wind screen. Immediately after releasing our load I noticed the manifold temperatures started lowering, a good sign as we could close the cowl flaps. The formation was pretty ragged but it got better as we started letting down to 14,000 ft., the altitude on the return leg. I tried to get into a position but was chased out by other planes so rather than brush wings I let them have it until I finally got on the left wing of Lt. Tobin who had one engine feathered. We didn't know then that that was a mistake as he started lagging behind. Flak was negligible and neither Russ nor I saw any enemy fighters. Things were going too well. Sporadic conversations were coming over the inter-phone so I let Russ fly and I tuned in the radio to the fighter-bomber frequency. Enemy fighters were around. As the airwaves were full of frantic calls to our fighters to come to our aid, I glanced around. Our formation was quite a ways ahead of us and we were letting ourselves wide open for attack!

We were in the Dummer Lake area where lots of enemy fighters were concentrated. Should I leave Tobin, chance getting to the formation, or try to give the stricken Tobin what protection we could? The Jerries settled that question. One minute all was tranquil, the next I heard an explosion in our ship! We were under attack and we had been hit! Almost immediately I saw a large gaping hole appear in the trailing edge of Tobin's left wing as a 20mm shell exploded. The attack was from the rear. I jerked my head to the left and looked out the side window. There was one of our attackers! He was making a graceful left bank and the black crosses on the wing were plainly visible. Why don't the waist gunners get him? He's a sitting duck! I got on the radio and called for fighters. A cool Texas drawl came back "don't get excited, sonny, poppa's coming."

Almost immediately two P-47s appeared and chased the ME-109s I didn't look to see if they got them as more pressing business was at hand. Tobin evidently had had it. A figure appeared in his waist window and bailed out. Then my engineer called from the top turret and said we were on fire, left wing. I looked out. Sure enough, flame was coming out of a 20mm hole that had punctured the tanks. If the engineer hadn't left about 20 gallons of gas in there when he transferred, the fumes would have exploded, undoubtedly blowing our wing off. However, now just the gas was burning. Should we or shouldn't we bail out now? Maybe we can slip out the flames. We tried but to no avail.

Meanwhile, we were nearing the Holland border. My decision was to try to ditch in the North Sea. That was a bad one. Trying to ditch a 24 is bad enough without it being on fire. The radio operator, as soon as he heard my decision, started sending S.O.S. on his radio. The cockpit was filled with gas fumes so he cracked open the bomb bay doors. Russ took off his oxygen mask and suggested smoking a cigarette, as we probably wouldn't get any for awhile. I ordered him not to and to get ready to bail out. Over the inter-phone I ordered the crew to stand by to bail out, as we might not reach the North Sea.

## **AND SEVEN MEN DIED**

Then I started losing altitude. At 10,000 ft. we entered a cloud and the flames mounted higher. We weren't going to make it! I unfastened my belt, took off my mask and clamped down on the alarm bell, the signal to bail out. Spike's face appeared in the astrodome. He grinned, waved and vanished. Dineen had bailed out before him through the nose wheel door. Russ climbed out of his seat and went back to the bomb bay. I tried putting the ship on Automatic Pilot but it wouldn't work. To hell with it, I'm leaving. I crawled out, walked through the radio room and saw Russ on the catwalk fastening his Mae West. I thought everyone had left her. Russ and I shook hands and he jumped. I saw his hand on the ripcord and with just a little bit of fear I stepped off into two miles of space.

My first sensation was a 170 mph slipstream hitting me and – quiet. I felt no sensation of falling. My last glimpse of the plane was flame all over the left wing and fast getting to the fuselage. I must have been on my back when I saw her. I grabbed for the ring and yanked. Instantly there came a loud report as the nylon caught the wind, followed by a hard jerk that I hardly noticed, then – silence. I didn't even seem to be falling; instead I seemed to be going up! I was in a cloudbank and didn't get to see the ship crash. However, I heard it. When I floated out of the cloud I looked below. Water. It was the Zuider Zee and a piece of wreckage was still burning on the surface. I looked up and counted the chutes. All I could see were seven including my own. I'll never know what happened to the other three. On the water below were objects I took to be fishing boats. The surface was smooth so I couldn't tell how far from the water I was. The leg strap from my chute was hurting me but it had just skinned my leg. Probably too loose. Suddenly the water seemed close and I tried to unfasten my chute and slip out but I was too late. I hit the water with a splash. Boy was it cold! I went under and came up blubbing. Treading water I tried to unfasten my chute but I couldn't get hold of the snaps. Then I tried to jerk the cord to inflate my Mae West. I missed. I tried again and missed.

God must have heard my silent prayer because on the next try I got it and yanked. Instantly the tiny cylinder filled with carbon dioxide and inflated one side of the Mae West and kept my head above water. I rested, then I unfastened my chute, which was tangled around one leg.

Russ had landed about 100 yards from me and he was about all in, too. One of the fishing boats had pulled alongside him and taken him on board by the time I had swum to the side of the boat. The Dutchmen on the boat hauled me aboard, a dripping cold; half-drowned man who was very thankful to be alive. Once aboard, Russ and I shook hands and almost bawled to each other. The fishermen were very kind and while we were stripping off our wet clothes they asked us "Drink?" Nothing bashful about us, we said yes, expecting maybe some schnapps, but no, it was water! We only had about half the Zuider Zee inside us and they wanted to know if we wanted water. However, they finished taking our clothes off and put us to bed. They would have been very helpful in getting us back to England, I think, but a German harbor patrol launch pulled alongside and took us on board. In the cabin was Spike. We three were the only survivors of Crew 44. Much later, I received information that the bodies of the other seven men were washed ashore in the Amsterdam area and were buried.