

MISSION TO NEUSTADT

January 5, 1945

On the fifth of January, I flew my first mission after getting out of the hospital. I had had a bad case of bronchitis and was in the hospital a week before Christmas. On this mission we went to Neustadt, Germany. It was a rather quiet mission till bombs away. At that instant the whole plane jumped as an anti-aircraft shell tore through the right wing and exploded above the plane. "Porky" Pryor, our right waist gunner, called on the interphone, stammering for the first time, and told us that there was a hole in the right wing that he could crawl through and "Porky" with no little man. I looked and, though from my position I couldn't see the hole, I could see large jagged pieces of metal sticking up from the wing. Number four engine was completely dead and fuel was streaming out of a hole in the number four tank. Quickly Flight Engineer McManus switched our fuel supply from "tank to engine to crossfeed" to "tank to engine" to prevent loss of fuel from the other three tanks. We left the formation and called for fighter escort but got no response. We steadily let down to about 5,000 feet and headed for home.

After we left the Belgian coast at Ostand, the plane began to lose altitude. We turned back and by the time we checked and found the number one engine was dead and was windmilling, we were down to about 1,000 feet. We feathered the prop on the number one engine and were able to hold our altitude. Just as we came over the city of Ghent, the two engines that were still running began to run out of gas. Hastily McManus switched the fuel supply back to "tank to engine to crossfeed" in hopes that there was still fuel left in the number one and number four tanks. The sound of those two engines roaring back to life was the sweetest music we ever heard. In the meantime, the crew had thrown out all the ammunition and everything else that was weighty but not necessary now. I applied take-off power to the two engines, lowered 10° of flaps to get more lift, and climbed to 2,000 feet. We spotted a small airstrip with a B-17 sitting at the end of it. I said to myself, "If it's big enough for him, I can make it too."

We circled the strip once and then made a low power approach. Halfway down the approach, I had to pull up over some power lines that popped up over the horizon. Nevertheless, I was able to set the plane down on the very end of the runway. Using all of our strength, my copilot, McDowell, and I were able to keep the nose wheel off the runway while we used the brakes as much as we could without touching the nose wheel to the runway until the plane slowed enough to drop the nose wheel on the runway and then bring the plane to a stop with heavy braking. We pulled off the runway and shut down the engines. McManus immediately grabbed his fuel measuring stick, climbed out on the wing, and checked each of the tanks to find out how much fuel we had left. He soon humorously announced, "I think we might have enough fuel left to clean a pair of gloves."

On examination we found the rear main spar of the wing had been sheared in two and the supercharger for the number four engine was completely shot away leaving a hole in the wing larger than a bushel basket. It was then that we noticed that the B-17 did not make it as we had previously thought. After running off the runway, it had completely wiped out its landing gear. Our ground crew chief back at the base had always jokingly remarked "If you can't bring back my plane, please bring back the clock." So before

leaving the plane, we removed the clock.

A British truck at the base took us into Ghent where we phoned the American base at Brussels. We were taken to a hotel where, after celebrating our good luck at the bar, we spent the night. In the morning an American truck picked us up and took us to B-58, a schoolhouse in Brussels that had been taken over by the Germans during their occupation and was now in the hands of the Allies. It was a pleasant place; the Germans had painted all the walls with great colorful murals. We were there for seven days awaiting transportation back to our base in England. During this time we spent a lot of time in Brussels proper attracting a lot of attention by parading into the best hotels and restaurants in our flying suits and badly in need of shaves.

When we did get back to our base we found that we had been listed in as missing in action. It turned out that it had been reported by the returning crews in the briefing that we had gone down in flames. Apparently they mistaken that the fuel vapors from our plane for smoke as we disappeared in the clouds below. Had we come back to the base any later our parents would have received telegrams. We apologized to our ground crew chief for not bringing his plane back, and presented him with the clock on January 14th as we were ready to board our new plane for our mission to Ehman, Germany. He thanked us and said that it would be one of his most cherished mementos.