

THE ORIGINAL CREW #60-14

Pilot	2nd Lt	Charles W. Smith	Smithy
Co-Pilot	2nd Lt	Merle P. Brown	Merle
Navigator	2nd Lt	Charles L. Stevenson	Steve
Bombardier	2nd Lt	Herman F. Allen	Bomby
Engineer	Sgt	Carl A. Heuser	Tiny
Radio	Sgt	Victor R. Marcotte	Vic
Waist Gunner	Sgt	Donald S. Courson	Don
Waist Gunner	Sgt	Howard C. Granger	Howard
Tail Gunner	Sgt	RB Trumble	RB
Turret Gunner	Sgt	Thomas E. Stillson	Tom

THE "BERLIN" CREW

Pilot	2nd Lt	Charles W. Smith	Smithy
Co-Pilot	2nd Lt	Merle P. Brown	Merle
Navigator	2nd Lt	Stan Buck	Stan
Bombardier	2nd Lt	Herman Allen	Bomby
Engineer	Sgt	Carl A. Heuser	Tiny
Radio	Sgt	Victor R. Marcotte	Vic
Waist Gunner	Sgt	Donald S. Courson	Don
Waist Gunner	Sgt	Joe	Joe
Tail Gunner	Sgt	RB Trumble	RB
Turret Gunner	Sgt	Thomas E. Stillson	Tom

LETTERS TO MY BROTHER LOU

Somewheres in England,
December 1, 1943

Dear Lou,

Today saw my first baptism under fire. Believe me its an experience that one can't really appreciate or fully understand until he himself sits in on the show, Words aren't mine to describe the thoughts, the feelings, the puzzlement endured under such circumstances, but I shall endeavor to convey these to you the best I know how.

The groups were alerted last night, but I hadn't planned on going out, for I was still regarded as a fledgling, so as to speak, having only just recently arrived on the field. You can well imagine my surprise this morning when the CQ came through and called my name amongst those to go. I guess I was still too sleepy to grasp the full import, for it was more or less mechanical reaction to pile out of bed, dress, and report to operations, not even considering breakfast.

I was told that one of the Bombardiers was grounded, so I was to go along with his crew. There it was ... what I had been looking forward to, training for, anticipating all these past months. Now I was to find out just how much I had digested. now I had to look grim reality in the face.

As yet my flying equipment hadn't arrived, so by dint of begging, borrowing, and stealing I managed to get outfitted, picked up my maps and forms, then was driven out to the ship.

It was a beastly morning, dark, cold, damp. I wondered how the Hell we could bomb under such conditions, but the weatherman had said it would be 3/10 undercast over the target, and that, with God at our wing tips, the powers that be must have figured would be a reasonable percentage of chance on our side. In the final analysis that's all it amounts to anyway. You figure the percentage, if a 60-40 margin is visible, that's it.

Lieut. Boswell, the Bombardier I was replacing, helped me check the bombs, the oxygen equipment, the guns, saw that all the crew was present, their equipment OK, then waited for the take off. Boswell really checked me out in great fashion, for this was my first mission, and doubtlessly without his assistance I would probably be there in the stew.

Frankly my thoughts until this moment were nil, for I was too damn busy rushing around to even begin to consider what the score was. All in all thus it was throughout the entire mission - flashes here and there, nothing more.

We hit the ramp at 0800 and at 0805 the planes began to roll. As we came down the runway I looked out the side window, and there lined along both sides of the strip were the ground crews, the men not on the mission, and all the rest who could come - waving. They were cheering too, for in the early light you could see that, though you couldn't hear them. That was a great show. Do you remember, Lou, at a football game, when the home team came on the field, how the crowds used to stand and bleat out their lungs. Well, that's how this was except the gathering wasn't near as large, but they more than made up for that in sincerity. For some this was the final send off, their last glimpse of the field, and all they held dear. For some, when this game was over there would be no hot showers, no hearty meal. Somehow there's a grim finale to death. Each ship as it came past received its share ... and so we hit the blue.

Soon as we reached 3000' I went back to the bombay, removed the pins from our "donation" for the day, gave the men a final once over, then returned to the nose. By this time we were at 10,000', so I called over the interphone for the crew to go on oxygen. They checked in all OK. We headed for our rendezvous near the channel.

It was still hazy outside, visibility damn poor. I could just make out the other ships in the squadron formation, seven of us. Levelling at 15,000' I checked the crew again, which incidently is one of the duties of the Bombardier. Call the crew and have each station check in at regular intervals so as to be sure all was well. It only takes a second for something to go haywire, and when things start popping up there, things pop plenty damn fast.

We rendezvoused. Ships ... the sky was dark with them. Above, below, on either side, about as far as the eye could reach. Hundreds of them, all there for the common cause. Each with its deadly load ... Jerry would receive a just tribute to-day ... a payment on account.

At the Channel we were at 26,000'. This was bombing altitude, so the leader leveled off. We were in the lead wing, flying high in the tail position, which was a damn good spot, for by the time Jerry brought a degree of accuracy into his flak we'd be out of reach ... at least in theory. The poor devils behind us would have the headache. It's a dog eat dog proposition, Lou. Each man is chiefly concerned with his own ship first, then the others. If the one next in line gets it - then that's tough ... they put on a good show, tried, but whatever or whoever it is decides who returns and who doesn't - well, the decision was made, and that's "30".

My first glimpse of the Fatherland was a break through the undercast soon after we reached the enemy coastline. Hell, there was nothing there but more land, a lot like that which we had just passed over in England. I felt a cold chill in my back. Not that I was scared, but this was Germany ... Jerry ... the enemy. This was war in the clouds. Looking back I reckon I was simply too busy to even think of being frightened. A sharp eye for enemy ships, testing the guns, checking the crew, and the many small things that crop up. I probably was full of goose pimples, but I don't remember.

Up until now I had read about flak, heard about it in the lecture room, seen it on the screen, but a few minutes from the Channel I saw it, visibly with the naked eye, for the first time. It looked harmless enough coming up through the clouds at 11 o'clock. Black puffs, the smoke cleared away, and once again nothing but vapor trails and a slight haze. Hell, I thought, if that's flak there should be little to worry about. Soon, too damn soon, I was to see how badly I erred.

About 30 minutes before the target, off in the distance, I saw the first of our fighter support. Those 47s looked liked angels, Lou, and I'll wager every man aboard heaved a sigh of relief, for by this time several FWs and ME109s had been sighted, and those babies meant business.

The closer we came to the target, the more pronounced were the flak bursts. Lt Kelly, our pilot, was following the squadron in evasive action, and several times we were the gremlins who weren't there.

When we reached the I.P., Mike, our navigator, told me we were about to turn, so I left my guns and prepared for the bombing run. The plexiglass in the nose, by the way, was continually frosting, so I scraped a clear spot and watched the lead ship of the squadron. We were briefed to drop on the group leader, but the visibility, due to con trails and the continued weaving of the ship made that impossible, so the next resource was our squadron leader,

The flak was coming up, fighters continually looking for a hole, the damn windows frosting - all in all it was a sweat. The bomb run ... my first release in combat ... suddenly I saw the bombs leave the lead ship, then from the others in front ... I flicked my toggle switch, glanced at the lights on the panel board, saw them flicker out, then I hit the salvo lever, and called through the interphone "Bombs Away". There they were beneath me just about to enter the undercast ... demos and incendiaries, a hot seat below, believe me.

The radio operator called the bombays were clear. Just then the copilot called an ME109 at 1 o'clock coming on high, so I jumped for the right side gun and began pumping shells. He continued to come in only a short distance, then turned off. I hardly think I touched him, but the sight of the tracers must have given him cause for thought. Self preservation is still a constant factor, even though it is a Jerry. In the excitement I evidently forgot to close the bombay doors, for the ball turret gunner called and said they were still open. I remedied this in short order, though I could still swear I hit the door switch before I went for the ME. That goes to show, perhaps, how unconscious one's reactions are to a reflex.

After we dumped our load we were on the way back, and that was cheering, for our main objective had been successfully completed. Now all that remained was to return to the field intact.

Jerry had some good fuse cutters on duty, for the flak began to pop up too close for comfort. We must have been about five minutes on our new heading when a 17 in the forward squadron on the left caught a burst of flak in it's second engine. It immediately caught on fire and soon parts of the wing and fuselage tore apart and flew off. The pilot kept in formation for about 3 minutes, evidently believing he could control the ship. Finally he gave ground. As he pulled off to the left I saw the bombays open and a man jump. Just then the plane exploded, broke at the radio compartment and pieces flew in all directions. Imagine a toy plane flying around above you, Lou, then suddenly it tears apart - that's the way it was from the nose. A cold sweat broke out all over me. For a moment I forgot everything, except for the final pieces of that plane and the chute, still unopened, disappearing into the undercast, as if a giant hand was reaching up to claim its own. Even after the last particle had gone I still stared at the place, where but seconds before a plane like ours, with ten men aboard, had been.

It must have been then the full realization hit home what total war was. It's not a pleasant thought, Lou, to sit there and know that "but for the grace of God" went you. It was only a matter of seconds, but it could have been a lifetime too.

The copilots voice over the interphone sharply brought me back to the present. Four Jerries had decided to make a pass, they were coming in at 10 o'clock. By some twist of Fate two of them collided on the way in, but the other two kept coming. It's hard to realize as I write that this was happening faster than I can put it down for the rate of closure is terrific. Before the navigator could bring his guns to bear on the FWs they had passed by and were rolling out at our tail, where the gunner managed a burst into their bellies. They had been so close, coming in just beneath our left wing, I could see the oxygen mask on the pilot's face. (I should tell you at this point the left waist gun was frozen, the ball turret guns were out due to a malfunction. Only one of the tail guns, and one of the top turret guns were operating. You can see we were returning on a prayer indeed).

We were now almost to the Coast, our Spit escort was in sight, so we began to feel reasonably safe.

At the Channel, Kelly began to let down, for our oxygen was getting low, and to add to our peace of mind, the gas was beginning to run out. About mid channel we left our group and headed for home alone, the most direct route ... the gas problem. Mike was on the ball, and without any further difficulty we landed at 1520 o'clock with about 150 gallons of gas. But the ship was OK and no casualties ... something to be thankful for.

It was quite a journey, Lou, into Happy Valley, which is the term given to the Rhur Valley where our target for today was. Twenty seven ships from the entire formation did not return. but all from our group did. Some the worse for wear, perhaps, nevertheless they all either landed at the field or somewhere in England.

Looking back, perhaps, the major incident was the ship hit by flak and its reaction. Wherever they are, those men and the others, whatever they are doing, in Germany or at His base, may they have the peace they so valiently fought for, and know the cause for which they died was right and just. That they died in line of duty, in the face of the enemy, unflinching and unafraid. They, like others, will probably receive no medals, no fanfare to recall their glory, but as long as we live, and those who come after, they will be remembered. If, in the course of events to be, that is to be my fate, I shall ask for no greater epitaph. I only wish that several personages in the States had been along, I'm sure they would change their tune in a hurry.

I flew with a damn good crew. Each man was best at his job. I can say no man alone brought us back, but each contributed his share, and that, with God at our wing tips, is in the main why I am here this evening to scribe these words.

Twenty-four more to go. Twenty-four more missions ... I do not dare attempt a thought so far ahead, all I can do is to go on each, sublime in the faith of God, and know that each of you, Dad, Mom, Dora, Ace, and yourself are with me.

Take care of yourself, Lou, and should it be that these words come to via the War Department, know that wherever I am it's

Always the Best, Brother

S/ Herman

-0-

Somewheres in England,
December 5, 1943

Hello Lou,

The CQ came through the barrack this morning at 0230, put on the lights, and read off the list, amongst the roll was "Allen", so I dressed for my second mission.

I was wiser this morning for I stopped by the mess hall for breakfast.

At 0500 the briefing started. The major introduced the target by saying it would be a "milk run". This immediately put us on the alert, for these so called "milk runs" sometimes prove to be anything but.

The target for today was the factories at the airport near La Rochelle, deep in France, southwest of Paris.

Lts. Smith, Stevenson, Sgts. Heuser, Courson, and Marcotte were the members of our crew, along with the addition of experienced men at the tail, left waist, ball turret, and pilot's seat to round it out. Lt. Reed was our pilot with Smithy flying in the right cockpit.

We were out at the ship, "The Great Patriarch", at 0700, and saw that it was in readiness for the mission - guns, oxygen, bombs, and so forth.

At 0815 we were on the strip ready to take off, with twelve 500 pounders in the bombay, each tuned for its spot below. Just think, Lou, six thousand pounds of fury unleashed.

The weather wasn't too bad considering England. Foggy in places, with haze in others, and a few clouds to iron out the visibility. We rendezvoused over the field with the remainder of the group, then headed towards the Channel and France ... we were off.

Enroute to the Coast we were joined by three wings of 17s and two of 24s. Those 24s were a welcome sight, for somehow whenever they were along Jerry makes his first bid for them. We felt we had an excellent escort. After watching their formation and flubdubbing all over the sky I could readily understand why. They were along alright ... all over the sky.

At the Channel we started to climb, and at 20,000 we were above the undercast. (I can still hear the weatherman saying "You'll have little trouble once you cross the Channel, about 2 or 3 tenths undercast". (He wasn't along to see how far off his prediction was).

Our heading was directly in the sun, and all due credit is due Lt. Reed and Smithy for doing such a damn good job of formation work. They sure had a Hell of a time.

It was a beautiful day up there at 20,000. The clouds below, stretched out like a vast lay of white sand, with its knolls and dunes scattered all around. Planes ... planes ... planes ... those in the distance appeared like giant specks on a white board.

You would have enjoyed this trip, Lou, . We were flying in the hole of the lead squadron in the lead group, so it was ringside.

Soon as we hit the French coast P 38s and P 47s joined us. They maneuvered around in the outskirts and ahead of the formation. You could see their vapor trails as they jockeyed about. They sure looked good, damn good.

The deeper we flew into enemy territory the more apparent it was our target was going to be obscured, for the clouds were bellowing heavier. Off in the distance was another cloud bank, rising aboe the ones we were going over.

We were due at our IP at 1111 o'clock, but by 1100 hours we were at 26,000 trying to climb over. Major Regan, the lead pilot, decided it was a no go, and it would be suicide to attempt a break below, so at 1110 hours the formation turned and we set a course for home.

That was a Hell of a feeling, here we had come so far, about 40 miles from our target, yet we couldn't dump our load. However it's all in the game.

Soon after the turn the tail gunner reported about 20 bursts of flak at 7 o'clock low, just above the undercast. Doubtlessly a shot by Jerry to let us know he knew we were around. At this point one of our 17s dropped from the formation, and hit for the clouds. Probably engine trouble, but they'll make out OK for France is a damn sight better spot to land than Germany.

The return was merely a ride. At the Channel we let down to 10,000, came off oxygen, and at 1400 we were back on the field.

Truly a "milk run", but there was always that possibility, and that with the flak made it a mission. Through it all there was always the constant check, the constant watch. Reading this, Lou, may make it sound rather drab and routine, but believe me it was no picnic.

I should say the entire gathering did not all turn back. At a point in southern France the force divided. The 24s went after another target, and some of the 17s did the same. Most of those found the target obscured also and returned, but five 17s did drop on Bordeaux, and others at other spots. Nine of our ships did not return. You can easily determine from this fact that conditions vary for each plane. What might have been a "milk run" for us was completely the opposite for the eleven others ... thus the way of battle.

So, Lou, my second mission. Twenty three to go. This one indeed was a far cry from the first effort, and, believe me, I won't shed a tear if the remainder are of the same caliber; however, that is a wishful hope. But God constantly at the wing tips, with the crew continually working as a unit, each succeeding return will prove itself.

Take care of yourself, Lou, and shall do the same.

Always the best,

S/ Herman

-0-

England,
December 13, 1943

Hello Lou,

Am gradually becoming an experienced combat crewman, believe me, especially after today's mission.

Went through the usual routine prior to take off ... checked the bombs, the oxygen, the ammo, the guns, the crew and so forth. At 0837 we were off and on our way. The ship, "Ration Passion" flew lead of second element, with Lt. Reed as pilot, a chaplain from 40th Wing as co-pilot, and the remainder of the crew from the old bunch - Steve, Tiny, Vic, Don, Howard, Tom, RB, and I.

The target for today was Kiel, and that in itself should have been a warning, but ignorance is bliss at times, and this was one of them, but I wised up in a hurry, a damn hurry.

We left the coast, flying low squadron in the low group of our wing, which is well termed "Purple Heart corner". Three wings, I believe, were to hit Kiel, and six wings Bremen, with two wings of B24s along as "escort". It was a well planned campaign, but in an instance the best laid plans of men and mice ... However, the Bremen contingent were over their target OK, and the majority of our division hit Kiel, but a few, like "Ration Passion" came within shouting distance, and that's all.

About 30 minutes before the target we hit flak, and Lou, that confounded flak meant business. It came up at all altitudes, all over the sky. Our evasive action was like a line through a maze of dots, when the bursts hit. We really began to know what "flak happy" means. Someone was watching out for us, for as far as I could see no ships were hit in our immediate vicinity.

There were no Jerry fighters about, probably due to the concentration at Bremen. P 38s and P 51s were very much in evidence. They make Jerry think twice any time.

There was a 10/10 undercast, which, incidently, is where the weatherman messed up again. He said the most would be 3/10. I'll bet he has a red face when the first of the month rolls around and he goes to collect his pay. The whole formation made a 360 degree turn somewheres near the IP. It was a damn good thing Jerry was not around for he would have had a picnic the way the 17s were scattered. As the 360 degree straightend out our 4th engine started to play up, a second later it started to windmill, the cowling flew off, and "poof" - there we were by our lonesome. The formation flew on. "Ration Passion" lost altitude fast. It is a funny feeling to find yourself there all alone - with the whole sky around you empty. You remember a lot of things in the flash of seconds, and suddenly to appreciate a lot more. Perhaps some of the people who figure this war will be over in a day or so should be placed in the position we were, they'd chanmge their minds mighty fast.

At 1235 I dropped the bombs. Steve figured we were somewheres near the target, but not on it. At least, I personally believe they did some good. The ship was steadily losing altitude, and about 1310 we canme out of the undercast on the deck about 25 feet above a Danish island. The name escapes me at the moment. Looking around I saw we were right over a German convoy. Simultaneously a JU 88 hopped us. It was quite a fight. All stations had a crack at the fighter. At the same time the convoy started throwing flak and lead. It was hot spot. Lt. Reed did some fast evasive action through a mist just off the water, and finally lost the JU 88. By this time an engine caught on fire, so, the pilot and co-pilot decided to turn around and land in Denmark.

As we came in sight of the Danish coast the fire went out, so we turned for the North Sea and England. Steve was really on the ball, and too much credit can't be given to him for his navigation. He gave Reed a heading of 200 degrees. We were on the deck, about 200 feet above the water. Ten minutes on this heading, the JU 88 came back in for another play. We were fast approaching a six ship Jerry convoy. The Jerry started to come in on us at our level at 3 o'clock. Just as he broke - to point his nose, Reed turned into his direction. The JU 88 continued to come. As he passed us at 12 o'clock Tiny, in the top turret, and I in the nose started pumping lead. He was only around 50-75 yards. As he came at 11 o'clock our tracers were bouncing off his ship, and black smoke started trailing him. It was a hit from both our guns. He continued on around, and Howard, at the left waist, gave him a good burst. The last we saw of the ship it was disappearing into the mist at 7 o'clock., engine burning and smoke bellowing like Hell - one JU88 less. All this time the convoy was sending 50 calibers our way, with 20mm bursts and flak to add to their fire. We were pumping lead at them in return, and I know we did land a few good bursts in their midst. It was indeed Hell for a while. Empty shells and links, powder smoke in the nose, and constant conversation on the interphone. That was a real dogfight and battle. Fortunately none of us were hit, and as far as we could determine the ship undamaged.

We soon left the convoy behind, and continued on our course. Reed was having trouble holding the small altitude we had. He called for all spare ammo and all extra equipment to be thrown out to lighten the load. Oxygen bottles, flak suits, ammo, and what not hit the drink. That helped, and skimming the waves we flew.

Thirty minutes later we intercepted another convoy. It began to throw lead our way, and we reciprocated. Reed altered course to go around it, and soon we saw it in the distance. By this time Steve was able to get a radio bearing on the English coast so we knew we were comparatively safe and headed in the right direction. Half hour later he managed a "G" fix and all breathed a sigh of relief. It was home boys, home.

It seemed a helluva long time to sight the Coast. One of the fellows came in over the interphone "they must have pulled down the balloon barrage and the Island sunk". We had damn good spirit aboard, Lou, which helped tremendously to bridge the time of flight.

Finally we came in over the Coast at 1554, and landed at 1627. Exactly an hour later than the briefed ETA.

As I sat down to mess this evening, frankly, A few hours before I never expected that. There was a time when I actually wondered when I would be writing you again - and from where.

So, Lou, my third mission ... twenty-two to go. We can only look to the next one, and each succeeding one in turn, with the sincere faith of God constantly at our wing tips, the crew continuing to function as in the past, and the knowledge that you all are in there pitching.

Take care of yourself, shall do the same, and know

Always the best,

S/ Herman

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SOMEWHERE IN ENGLAND

December 14, 1943

I WALK THE SOIL OF ENGLAND

I walk the soil of England,
With a firm and steady thread.
I walk the soil of England,
In free security, not dread.

Overhead, beneath the tinted sky
Giant birds in endless flight
Drone onwards, stacked high,
Supreme in their might.

Over there they kneel in fear,
In the church, the home, the dell;
As their muted ears hear
The relentless drone of Hell.

They have no hope, scared souls,
They have no peace or rest.
Loved ones, now naked ghouls,
Haunt them deep in their breast.

I walk the soil of England,
With a firm and steady thread.
I walk the soil of England
In free security, not dread.

-0-

England
December 30, 1943

Dear Lou,

Isn't there a saying "deep in the sleep of peace" ... then suddenly I felt a light upon my eyes and a voice saying, "Sirs, are all officers awake"? I glanced at the clock, then looked for the voice ... 0345 and the CQ. "Breakfast at 0415, briefing at 0515, the following officers ... he then read off the list ... Ship 767, Smith, Keilt, Stevenson, and Allen".

The briefing took the regular form - target, routing, weather, escort, and so forth. It was to be a long haul, deep into the Fatherland. We were flying as a "spare", to fill in the position of the first abortion in the group. A tough spot, for it meant flub dubbing behind the formation until a ship left and returned to the field due to engine or personnel failure. As a rule there were generally two or three on each trip.

For the first time we were to fly with Smithy as our pilot, and that was strictly OK. The crew was complete except for the co-pilot and ball turret who was in the hospital.

Checked the ship for its bomb load, oxygen, guns, ammo; saw that the crew was present and set. The take off was at 0830.

We rendezvoused over the field at 0939 at 16,000, then headed south for the target, stooging on the outskirts waiting for a plane. Just before we hit the channel, the ship flying in the hole of the lead squadron pulled out and turned for home. Smithy saw the opening ... we were it.

All in all it was a quiet trip - compared to some of the others. The fighter escort was excellent all the way. We hit our first flak just before the target, and waded through the stuff for about twenty - thirty minutes.

This was a Pathfinder raid - which meant we couldn't see our target, but bombed through the clouds. We dropped our bombs on the lead ship at 1207.

The weather was fair. We flew above 10/10 undercast practically all the way from the English coast and return. Temperature ranged from -30 ~C to -35~C at altitude of 24,000 feet.

Coming back our #4 engine began to act up and by the time we hit the Channel it was out. On the last leg it was a 3 engine job. Smithy played her close and at 1602 we were home.

Thus, Lou, my fourth mission racked up. Ludwigshafen was our target. Twenty-one to go, but now to sweat out my fifth.

Take care of yourself, Lou, and know that at this end all is OK. God flies at our wing tips, and the prayers of you all hold fast.

As always the best

S/ Herman

-0-

England
December 31, 1943

Hello Lou,

Seems that I was no sooner asleep when the lights came on this morning. My aching back ...this was Air Medal mission with a vengeance. Seven hours yesterday of combat, five on oxygen, and now up and at 'em again.

Breakfast at 0400, briefing at 0500. Again, Smithy and the crew, which might lead to the assumption that from here on out we fly together.

I guess Bomber Command decided to finish up 1943 in style. At briefing we learned this was to be one of the largest fleet of planes to be sent across in one mission. We were given the target, the routing, the fighter support, the weather, and the complete dope prior to take off. It was to be another long haul, just what length I really did not appreciate until night.

Checking the crew and ship as usual went off like clockwork, and at 0810 we were on the ramp ready to take off. Had a full bomb load aboard, twelve five hundred G.P. bombs, and around 3000 gallons of gas.

In the half light of early morning I watched the crowd along the runway as we roared down the strip, and so we hit the air. Once again we went along as a "spare". This, in my opinion, was not too good. However, this time, in case of no abortion we were given a definite spot to fly.

We rendezvoused at 6000 feet over the field, then headed towards France. We were just outside the formation. After we reached the channel no ship turned. Smithy took his spot with the high squadron, flying right wing with the third element.

As we crossed the Brest peninsula I looked around, and there, on all sides, behind and in front, flew the Forts. Frankly, so damn many I could't count them. It was sure a beautiful sight ... flying might all out for the purpose of a common goal. All loaded with instruments of destruction and death, if need be, to see that it was so. I have no qualms, Lou, for it is now either we or they, and to us it is definitely "them" ... there are no regrets.

Right on the southern tip of the Breast coastwe hit our first flak barrage. It was inaccurate and way off to the left. Overhead a few P47s flub dubbed around and then we hit the broad Atlantic, turned south, and on course for our next turning point.

Below it was 10/10 undercast, with the visibility at our altitude about 17,000 feet. Sure some view. The clouds were like a vast snow drift on the water, with an occasional mound to break the monotony of vision. As we flew south the undercast broke until about 6/10.

Presently Steve and I figured our position, and decided the lead navigator had messed up somewheres. The time was fast approaching to start our turns and make the bomb run. No evidence of such a move was noticed. The briefed IP time passed, still we flew on. What the Hell was going on? Gas was being burned and we only had so much.

Finally, around noon we took a heading almost due west, flew that for about twenty minutes - then flew north.

This was supposed to be a usual bomb run. Looking down and ahead, where was the ground? It was there in patches. Suddenly we broke over clear ground for about a fifty mile area with only scattered clouds. There off to the left was Bourdeaux - completely covered with a smoke screen. Our primary target was an airfield about six miles west of the city. Evidently the lead Bombardier reasoned it would be covered, so we flew on. For the life of me I don't understand his method of figuring, for from where we flew it looked plenty clear over that area. Flying north was the secondary target.

Jerry worked his flak guns overtime, and too damn close for comfort. We were glad to leave that spot.

About 1300 hours we came in sight of our secondary target, and it was really in the clear. My aching back, I thought there was flak at Bourdeaux, but here the sky was heavy with it, especially around the target ...the airfield at Cognac.

The 305th Bomb Group lead our Wing, so they made their run first, then we turned ... I called the crew and told them to be damn sure they had their flak suit on - I switched on my racks, and was all set.

The bombing run ... this is the first time I had been on a visual target. There we were 23 ships in bomb formation, spread out for the best concentration. It was a tough go to sit up there and ride through that damn flak. It burst all around. The red flash, the black smoke ..."pop", "boom", "pop" - can now really understand the expression "flak happy". Down below the target was one cloud of smoke where the bombs from the other group had it.

Suddenly a dark line from the lead ship hit the clear. I touched my toggle switch, threw the salvo knob into "salvo" ... "bombs away". Looking down ... Christ! ... bombs from all the ships seemed to hit with one helluva thud - concentration ... a direct hit.

As we left the target, I glanced out the side window, saw the flak, old spashes and new. A cold sweat broke out all over me ... "out of the Valley of Death we rode". One burst of that stuff on our ship and it would be "so long". God surely rode at our wingtips today.

France is really a scenic country, especially from the air. It looked so damn beautiful down below, it was hard to believe that war existed. But there we were - and Jerry sure knew that something hit him.

On the way back we passed by several more flak areas, but we skirted them. Jerry fighters pointed their noses several times, but I guess they saw our might and turned tail for other fields. However, there were several stagglers. The tail gunner reported over the telephone that they were being attacked, but they proved too much for Jerry and came along OK.

We hit the Atlantic again on the return, and as we passed over the Brest coast, flak again began popping. Someone messed up for it was too damn close - those red bursts were too damn accurate. Looking down I could see the flashes from the guns on the ground - fortunately it was only that one spot. We came through without a hit.

At the channel we began to let down, and by the time we were at the English coast were at 6000'.

Now our troubles really started. The weather began to close in. After going through all that Hell - now this. About 40 miles from the field it was so bad all Smithy could do was to see the ship ahead - and we all worried about our gas - which was running low. We were an hour overdue on flight time already ... darkness closing in, rain ... believe me, Lou, we all had our fingers crossed.

Finally it became so bad that we couldn't see the wing tips of our own plane. There we were - flub dubbing around at 1000', sweating out a field, any field. Suddenly, through the haze, Steve picked up a perimeter track of lights which meant a field nearby. He called up Smithy, and he followed them in. Man, that runaway looked good. It was the 305th field at Chelveston, about 14 miles from our field.

My fifth mission is now behind me ... twenty to go, with the sixth on the horizon to sweat out. There are really no words to describe what one goes through each time he hits the air, but each time it leaves its mark, its scar, and God Himself only knows the price eventually to be paid. All that matters, though, is to have that faith in Him, and the end - it will prove itself. I still remember what we once said - to the effect that as long as we do our best to the utmost of our ability that is the most that can be expected, it is our own mind. our own conscience we have to live with, and there lies the story.

Take care of yourself, shall do the same, and know,

Always the best,

S/ Herman

-0-

England,
January 7, 1944

Hello Lou,

This is going to be brief and to the point, for as result of this mission have cracked an ear drum and have to report to the hospital for a sojourn there - nothing serious.

Target - Ludwigshafen
Mission - #6
Crew - OK
Comment - M.P.'s first ride
To go - 19

As always,

S/ Herman

-0-

England,
February 11, 1944

Hello Lou,

Since January 7, a lot of water has flown beneath the bridge. As a result of my broken ear drum the flight surgeon grounded me for a month. January 11, somewhere over Germany, Steve was hit by a 30-30 caliber, and is now buried at Cambridge. Smithy and the crew put in quite a few missions, seven to be exact, so that now they are really up on me.

It was good to be back in harness. This morning the CQ pulled his usual routine at 0230 - break out at 0300, briefing at 0400. It was sure cold. The thermometer played tag at 0°F, a few clouds, and a full moon.

I was the only one of the crew scheduled to fly today - with Kelly in the lead position of the squadron.

Went through the usual procedure of preflight, and by 0730 we were airborne ...headed for the Fatherland. It was still fairly dark as we rendezvoused, but slowly the sun rose, and above the undercast it was really the beginning of a beautiful day.

This was but a small foray in relation to others I've flown - two other wings - at the coast we joined up, and headed for Frankfurt. By this time we had been on oxygen for about an hour, and the effects were already beginning to tell.

Occasionally as we crossed the Channel we could see the water through breaks in the undercast. At the enemy coast I called the radio operator for pictures. The clouds were now about 6/10-8/10, and here and there the navigator and I could pick up a landmark. Snow lay thick in the fields below, and it was really chilly where we flew at 26,000' - 48 degrees C below.

Somewheres after the IP the lead navigator must have encountered a little trouble, for frankly, I do not believe he knew exactly where he was - at anyrates all along the route we passed only spotted flak bursts until Frankfurt - and Lou, those lads down there were really sharp today. It was barrage type mostly - and really covered the damn sky. The wing in front of us passed over the target without dropping their load, so we followed suit - still don't know the exact reason.

We turned off Frankfurt and took the course for home. I looked back - and it was hard to realize we had just flown through that black cloud without being hit.

About twenty minutes later I noticed the lead ship was opening his doors, so while opening mine I looked ahead and there saw the secondary target - a German town. We came in on the bomb run, and about a minute before the bombs were away a dense blackness hit the front of us - at first I thought I was seeing things or having spots. Christ! the flak we had just passed was child's play compared to this what we were about to go through. There was no escape ... no avenue ... those bastards down below were tracking us, barrages and every damn thing they could muster. Scared - thats putting it mildly, but I grabbed the salvo handle, kept an eye on the lead ship ... and prayed. God was at our wing tips I know - for no mortal could fly through that Hell alone.

It was "bombs away". I leaned over the sight to watch the drop, when suddenly, above the roar of the engines, I heard a sickening "pop". I jerked my head up, glanced around at the navigator, and asked over the phone "What the Hell"? It was a long ten seconds as we sweated out a flak hit - to know whether or not it was serious. Life is sweet. Nothing happened so I guessed it was a glancing hit ... and so it proved later.

Well Lou, we came through that Valley of Hell, and once again turned on the homeward course.

The fighter support was excellent - above, below, and all around - P 47s, 38s, and 51s. Saw one Jerry from a distance, looked like an ME 210. At the coast we hit another flak area to our right - skirted it - and at mid channel started to let down. That was sure a relief - six hours of oxygen is no fun.

Arrived back at the base at 1526.

And so, Lou - I look back on mission seven, and forward to number eight. Believe me, I know only too well where the expression "flak happy" came from - cannot help but wonder ...

Take care of yourself, Lou, shall do the same.

Best always,

S/ Herman

-0-

England,
February 26, 1944

Hello Lou,

These past four raids have all been of the same caliber, so feel justified in writing of them in the same light ... tough, rough, long in hours, and touching on the very brim of Hell.

Up until now I thought I knew what the score was, but frankly I found out how much I erred.

Give the Jerry credit, he's endowed with guts. On each of these missions he came at us full head on, not once or twice, but quded up after each pass and came through again. Forts were hit by the score and dropping down in flames, in bits like flies. It's a funny yet fascinating feeling to watch them. First they are there, flying like a giant eagle beside you, then a "20" or a burst of flak finds its mark - and another ship fills in the empty position. The Leipzig mission hardened me, but by the time we were through Schweinfurt it meant merely a call over the interphone to the navigator to make a note - if time could be taken out between the fighter passes to do so.

We had good fighter escort, but if a Jerry makes up his mind he is coming through, then it is pretty near impossible to stop him. FW 190s, ME 109s, ME 210s, JU 88 ... Christ, the Lutwaffee sprouted fangs. Must have been a desperate attempt to bolster German morale, for it was practically the pilots own ticket in blood. True, many of them weaved through the formation, but just as many didn't. An FW 190 found himself square in my sights at Schweinfurt, headed on at 12 o'clock level ...net result one confirmed Jerry to my credit.

Was one tired lad this week. I didn't think it so much the ride as it is the length of time on oxygen, the strain of continually being on the alert, and the ever present fear of being afraid.

Over the route home from Bernberg the lead navigator messed up and took us directly over a concentrated flak area near Happy Valley. Sincerely I thought that was it. I couldn't possibly see how any ship could ride through that and come out whole. Somehow we did, though the Lady was a sieve. God must have been there, Lou, at our wing tips. Fact is, I know He was. Then again at Schweinfurt we had an engine knocked out directly over the target. Confusion for a moment, but Smithy had her, we pulled out of the formation, dropped our bombs, fell in with another Group and managed the trip home. Frankly, a trip to Kiel would now seem like a milk run.

I could write a volume on these missions, yet not express the mark they left. Words are inadequate. My score now is eleven, fourteen more to sweat out, for the present the twelfth and each other in turn. All that is left now is to take every possible precaution against human fault, and place a supreme trust in God, to know that He will be out there at the wing tip each time to see us through. Destiny will write its own history.

Take care of yourself, Lou, and know its always

The best,

S/ Herman

-0-