

Christmas Day 1944

A Day To Remember

By Richard L. Greiner

(Editor's note: Greiner was a 1943 graduate of Ottawa High School and a 1953 graduate of Ottawa University. He currently (2011) lives in Lee's Summit, Missouri)

December 25, 1944 started out at 4:00 in the morning with a pounding on the makeshift door of our tent. Our names were called out along with a statement that it was 4:00 a.m. and that briefing would be at 5:15 a.m. I rolled over in my sack and told my four other friends that I thought that the mission would be "scrubbed" today since it was Christmas Day and the weather was so bad. In the Air Force it is well known that you get two good meals a year – one on Thanksgiving and one on Christmas. I said "I think I will just stay here and save all the trouble of getting ready to go and then having the mission scrubbed." My fellow airmen then jerked me out of the sack and said "You are going." I then got dressed in a hurry because it was really cold out of the sack. During our walk to the mess hall for breakfast, I pointed out that we had ten-tenth cloud coverage. You could see about eight feet any way around you, and nothing beyond that. I again stated that I knew the mission would be scrubbed!

As we ate our breakfast of powdered eggs, bacon and coffee we discussed the makeup of our assigned crew that we had found out about the night before. None of us were happy about the assignment. This mission would be our fifteenth and we were considered to be an experienced crew. We had been assigned three crewmen flying their first mission and a very good First Pilot. Lt. Meyers had been a commercial pilot prior to joining the Air Force. He had many more flight hours than any other pilot in our squadron. However he was looked upon as a "hard luck pilot." It seemed that about every time he flew a mission something happened. He had ditched in the Adriatic three times and had returned to base several times with dead or wounded aboard. In fact on his last mission he and his crew had to ditch their plane in the Adriatic Sea and they spent three days in a small raft before being rescued. He darn near died from pneumonia. He had just returned from rest camp and been placed on active duty. We were not a happy crew.

As we walked over to our briefing for today's mission, I again felt and told the guys that this mission would be scrubbed. They did not respond. We arrived at our briefing area, which was in a large cave, and sat down on the "board" seats. Soon the curtain was pulled that covered

the large mission map. "Target for today," the operations officer announced, "is Brux, Czechoslovakia."

If the six of us had any hope that today might be a "milk run" it was now gone. At this time the Germans were being beat by the Russians in the East and the Allied Army was pressing hard from the West. Germany had pulled practically all their anti-aircraft guns into the three or four areas that were most important to them. One of the areas was the oil refineries at Brux, Czechoslovakia, our target for today. There was one loud groan from the audience. We all know the flak would be intense and accurate. Two things were in our favor—first we would be flying at an altitude of thirty thousand feet and the weather officer said that there should be ten-tenth cloud coverage over the target. At thirty thousand feet we would have clear sky with ten-tenth cloud coverage below us and between us and the target.

Outside the cave, trucks were lined up to take us to the storage building where our B-15 bags were stored. The bags contained our oxygen mask, parachute, electric flying suit and our fleece lined pants, jacket and boots, and other articles that might be useful. We climbed aboard a truck and were soon outside the storage building. As the other guys were jumping off the truck, I announced that I was not going to waste my time getting my bag because then in an hour or so when the mission was scrubbed, I would have to drag it back to the storage area. Soon the guys were throwing their bags into the truck and they jumped on board. The truck started to move out when my friend yelled at the driver to stop. The driver stopped, and Bill Carruthers jumped off the truck and ran into the building and soon returned carrying my B-15 bag. He had realized that I actually had not gotten my bag. The truck driver then drove us out to our assigned B-17, sitting on the tarmac. We loaded our bags on board and began checking out the plane. Soon our officers arrived and when we were all introduced to each other we chatted for a while. Walt Stone was our crew navigator, but we actually had not met the pilot, co-pilot or the bombardier. Also we met the waist gunner who was flying his very first mission with us. It wasn't long before the engines were being started up, and it was not long before we were in line for the takeoff. Right after take-off I announced that I was not even going to suit up because even though the tower had not fired a red flare before takeoff time, there was still time left before formation of the group. As I laid down on the radio room floor, I told Jim Miller our radio-man to let me know when the mission was scrubbed. As we were climbing for altitude over the Adriatic Sea, I did climb down into the ball turret to test fire the two fifty-caliber guns and see that the turret and gun sight were operating as they should. Our ground gun maintenance crew was excellent. At ten thousand feet I realized that we probably were on our way to Brux, Czechoslovakia.

It is mandatory that all crew members go on oxygen when the airplane reaches ten thousand feet altitude. All crew members must stay on oxygen until the plane is again flying at ten thousand feet. I quickly put on my electric flying suit which included heated socks and gloves, then I put on my thick fleece lined pants, jacket and boots. Making sure my parachute was placed right by the turret door on the floor above the turret, I grabbed my thick gloves and oxygen mask and climbed down into the ball turret. I plugged in my oxygen mask and hooked up the heated suit. I knew we were on our way! I thought about how fortunate that Bill Carruthers had stopped that truck driver and got my B-15 bag for me. I dreaded to think about what trouble I could be in, had we come this far without me having all the lifesaving equipment with me. Of course I guess they could have flown on and let me freeze to death, but most likely we would return to base and everyone would have lost a mission. Heaven only knows what could have happened to me. I think my flying days would have been over for sure.

At twenty-five thousand feet all planes started to locate their squadrons and get set in their seven plane formations. Then the four squadrons would form their group formations. My job was to keep everyone informed about anything important happening beneath the plane. This is important especially if the formation is having trouble keeping the planes flying real close to each other. Of course it's nice to have firepower from the ball turret if enemy fighters try to come at you from below.

We were at thirty thousand feet and as the weather man had said, it was clear, bright and beautiful. The ten-tenth cloud coverage was thick and below us. In fact we could only see the highest tips of the Alps Mountains as we flew over them. It was a beautiful sight. When you are flying up high with sights like this one cannot help realize there is God somewhere up there. Everything is so white and clean and beautiful. I am sure there were many prayers being said about this time. In just a few minutes it would be time to make a turn and shortly thereafter we would be on our bomb run over the oil refineries at Brux, Czechoslovakia.

We were now at the IP (Initial Point) where we make a quick turn and begin our bomb run. I had been looking backwards up to now in case German fighters might show up, but since we had not seen any and they never bother bombers on their bomb run (they could be shot down by their own flak) I decided to see what was happening up front. As I turned around, my heart skipped a couple of beats. There was ten-tenth cloud coverage everywhere except for a big circle of wide open clear sky right over Brux and the oil refineries we were to bomb. Right away I saw two planes go down from the group ahead of us! The German gunners were just waiting for us to cross over into the clear sky and they were right on target. I sat there watching our approach to the area where I had seen the two planes in the group ahead of us go down and thinking—I bet we get it today—right then we did get hit and hit bad! Two engines had to be

feathered as the plane started down in a steep dive. Our plane went from thirty thousand feet to around five thousand feet before it was miraculously pulled out of the dive. We quickly talked things over and all stations checked in. Only the tail gunner was wounded. He said he was all right, he still had four fingers left on his hand. We had lost a tremendous amount of gas, as it streamed over our wings as we dove toward the ground. Oil also had streamed all over my ball turret window. I could not see out very well. However, the wind stream now was clearing the oil from the window and in about five minutes I could see out of it.

We were on our own now. We decided we had two options. One, we could probably fly back towards our base in Italy—however our navigator, Walt Stone, told us we probably would end up ditching the plane in the Adriatic Sea. In fact we did not think we had enough gas to even get that far. (The gas tanks had finally sealed themselves.) We then discussed flying East until we were behind the Russian battle lines, and land the plane close to Russian troops. Lt. Meyers, the pilot, stated that he had experience in floating in a small raft in the middle of the Adriatic. He said it was not much fun and that he would vote for trying to reach behind Russian lines. The waist gunner, flying his first mission, S/Sgt. Joseph Waladkewics, spoke up and said if we went behind the Russian lines he knew the Russian language if that would be of any help. That decided it—behind Russian lines we would go. After we set our course due east, we realized we had another problem. We knew exactly where we were but we did not know where the Russian battle lines were. Even at our morning briefing our Intelligence Officer could not be sure of where they were.

After flying for a half hour or so, one of the crew yelled over the intercom “bandits at three o’clock”—I swirled around to that position. They were there, all six of them, and they were fighter planes. None of us could make out what they were—friend or enemy! We talked it over—six of them, one of us. It was a no win situation if they are German. We would not have much of a chance. We decided to show them we would not fight by dropping our landing gear, locking all our guns in a stowed position and rocking our wings. About then they started peeling off in a fighter attack manner. It was pure stress on our crew for a minute. Then we all realized they were not coming down behind us on a regular pursuit curve, they were coming across our nose! Then we saw the big red star on their wings and realized they were Russian. The pilots actually waved as they all crossed our nose. About then someone spotted six fighters flying at nine o’clock off our other wing. I spun around to that position and sure enough—six fighters starting their pursuit curve. Thank God it was same song, second verse. They were Russian Yaks and they came across our nose from the left side. They also waved at us as they passed by.

About that time I spotted white smoke coming up from the ground and I called Lt. Meyers on the intercom and told him there was white smoke at two o'clock. I also stated that where there was smoke, there had to be fire and where there was fire there was a pretty good chance people were there. We decided to drop down and look it over. When we dropped to three thousand feet, I could see aircraft everywhere. They were all under camouflage netting. They were all Russian. We flew over the smoke. It appeared to be at the end of a dirt runway, and there were people standing by the smoke area waving at us. We decided to land. The runway really was not long enough for us, but the ground was frozen everywhere so we landed. After we stopped we turned around and taxied back toward the smoke area. When we arrived we pulled off the runway and shut down our engines. We hoped for the best. After we had secured everything and were ready to get out, we looked out the window and there stood a Mongolian guard with a machine gun pointed right at our rear door where we were about to get out. One of our guys said, "Waladkewics, since you are the only one that speaks Russian, you go out there and tell them we are friendly Americans." Much to our surprise, he walked back to the door, slowly opened it and stepped outside. He had his hands in the air. About that time a Russian jeep type car came rushing up to the back of our plane. A Russian Colonel walked towards our back door, and when he was close enough Waladkewics said something to the Colonel. The Colonel responded and then gave Waladkewics a big bear hug. This sure made the rest of us feel better, and we started getting out of the plane. (The Mongolian guard now had his gun pointing at the ground.) The Russian Colonel asked Waladkewics if all the crew spoke Russian. Waladkewics told him that he was the only one that spoke that language. The Russian said "That is alright, we can all speak in German." Waladkewics turned around and asked if any of us could speak any German. We all shook our heads. I wish I had a picture of the expression on the Colonel's face. It was one of utter disbelief. He said, "You fight these people and you cannot speak their language? Not even your officers?" (We found out later that he spoke seven languages). The Colonel then asked Waladkewics if we had any wounded on board. He replied that we had one, and turned and motioned for Herb Wendt, our tail gunner, to come forward. The Colonel then put Wendt in his car and told the driver to get Wendt to their hospital. It turned out that we had landed on the runway of the Sturmovik fighter planes, which had been first six planes to cross our nose. They were trying to turn us towards their field. We, of course, had not figured that out. They were now returning and landing. Their landing skills could use improvement. It seemed to us two or three bounces were considered good. No perfect three-point landings did we see. The pilots all came over to welcome us. They were really thrilled to have American airmen at their base. Later in the day as I was thinking about all that had happened since I had been awakened early in the morning, it dawned on me that God really does plan ahead. We asked what the name of the nearest town was, and we were told "Karacsony." It is the Hungarian word for Christmas.