

# 14

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(Stories 31,32,33,34)

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# OPTION # 2

(O.K. to Check-out but not to be copied)

# 33

## My Final Mission

The date is February 14, 1945. If all goes well, this will be the last time I will have to board a B-17 Flying Fortress for the purpose of blowing hell out of some part of Germany.

Thank God I don't have to pull thirty-five missions as do most of the new recruits coming to the station as replacements. Having been a lead crew most of the time, I got by with just twenty-eight. In the beginning it was only twenty-five missions for a free ticket home but when they changed it to thirty, I already had over half mine done so they compromised and set mine at twenty-eight.

These were some of the thoughts running through my mind on that Valentines day. Unlike my first twenty missions, I have flown the last seven with different enlisted men each time. My first mission with the new pilot, had me in the ball turret. Russ Spear, who was the ball turret man on my regular crew liked that position but to me it was the worst spot in the whole plane. For one thing, I was a little too tall and with all the bulky heavy wool flying clothing, I just didn't fit in it as well as someone a few pounds lighter and an inch or two shorter.

Curt Cochran, who was on Lt. Hough's crew originally, was flying his final mission that day. He had the tail gun position which I much preferred over the ball. The pilot told me I could have the tail gun position for the remainder of my missions if I wanted, and you can be sure I jumped at the chance. I still preferred the waist guns, but anything would be better than the ball turret.

I am ashamed to admit I can't recall the pilot's name. Isn't that incomprehensible? There was nothing like the camaraderie we enjoyed with my original crew developing even before we went overseas. This is one of the reasons I sat down so long before finishing my required missions. After the close relationship we had, it was not easy to go out and fly with just anybody. An explanation may be in order as to why I hadn't flown since August 12th. At that time 8th Air Force Headquarters decided to pull one waist gunner off each crew. On our crew it was me. This made sense, because one man could easily handle both guns but more importantly, when a bomber went down, only nine men were lost instead of ten.

If the operations officer hadn't noticed that I had not flown for almost four months, I may never have finished. Since I missed the first one he assigned me with a new pilot he retaliated by busting me to Buck Private. I was quick to point out that I could not be forced to fly as a buck private. He said, "I know that, but if you don't start flying again, you will be the sorriest Buck Private in the European Theater of Operations." I was inclined to think finishing was the best way to go.

My new pilot was a 1st Lt. who had been an infantry officer fighting the Japanese somewhere in the South Pacific before coming back to the United States to take pilot training. He arrived at the 398th in early January 1945 and had not flown many missions when I was placed on his

crew. (Please note, since I made contact with this pilot years later, I was wrong in some of my assumptions about his previous duties, but at the time, I was going by little tidbits I heard.) It's called "scuttlebutt."

This new pilot's crews were usually made up of men who suffered the results of the nine man crew ruling but some were new recruits from the states. It was a wise move because *flak* had become the worst enemy after our fighter escorts were able to follow us all the way to the targets in Germany.

The last two days in a row we had been alerted for a mission, but weather kept us on the ground. I wondered what this day would bring. It was Valentine's Day, so I was hoping for another stand down. I'd like that especially since it would be nice to get into town on the first liberty run. But, I would just have to wait and see what happens.

Well, no matter what the weather does, a nice breakfast in the Gunner's Mess is always better than the fare at the Consolidated Mess on non-mission days. Those round eggs are so much better than the square ones and this morning proved to be true to form. There are those that may wonder what was wrong with powdered eggs, and I would be the first to say, "Nothing, if they are prepared properly," but when you're serving hundreds of men, you just can't take time to give them the TLC required to bring the best out of them.

At the briefing we learned the target would be Dresden, Germany. It looked like it would be a long one. If the weather allows, I hoped we'd get off on time so as to be back on base in time to catch that early liberty run into Baldock. If not, it meant having to call a taxi from Royston and then take the train into town. Each added conveyance would eat into the few hours we were allowed away from base, to say nothing of the added expense for taxi and train fare. Although it wasn't too bad if you could get two or three others to share the expense of the taxi both ways; and usually there were other G.I.'s who wanted to get to town for one reason or another.

In my case, this being my last mission, it would be difficult to know how many more passes to town I would be allowed. Partly, because it would depend on how fast my orders were cut for transfer to the states. I knew there would be a very limited time to say the least, and making plans with Molly for coming to the states with our baby that would be born in September was uppermost in my mind.

"Start engines" time was on schedule and soon the planes began their takeoff rolls. It would seem the 8th Air Force was bound and determined to send a special Valentine present to the Germans that day. The weatherman had given the go ahead without delay.

I crawled back into the tail well before we reached the altitude where oxygen would be needed. Settling in, I wondered what the day would bring forth. In the tail gun position you can become mesmerized when the plane is making vapor trails. You feel like you're in a bob sled traveling at a high rate of speed and any slight movement of the tail makes you think you are about to slide up and out of that well frozen track. It is one hell of a sensation to say the least.

The bob sled affect probably kept me from worrying too much about myself, although I was naturally a little apprehensive since the odds were finally down to one on one that I would make it through this tour of duty. If another tour was needed somewhere else, it was far from my mind this day because finishing this one was about as high as our altitude in my thoughts at the time.

I couldn't help but think about Joe Kiska, one of my hut mates who was the first engineer on Taylor's crew. Like me, he was flying his last mission with a different plane commander than the one he had trained and come to England and with whom he had flown most of his missions.

As the Air Group his plane was to form with had not been found as they were coming up through the dense cloud cover over the English Channel, speculation had it that all the carburetors on all engines froze up at the same time. The plane dove into the Channel and Kiska's body was never found. You may recall the story of the crash written up in the 1992 October issue of the Flak News. Lt. Doer was the pilot and ironically, it was to have been his final mission also. For Kiska and Doer and four others of the crew, the English Channel is their burial ground.

It was this sort of thing that made most of us think, "When it's your turn to go, there's not much you can do about it." The part that was intriguing is how someone up above would place these people together.

It goes without saying, my thoughts, as I mentioned before, were full of wonderment, hope and prayer too. All of you who had completed that last mission, know the anxiety I was feeling because you've already been there, done that.

I'm not sure how it happened but we found out later we had bombed Prague instead of the intended target. It's funny, but I don't remember a thing about being over the target. The flak you see is either lighter or heavier than it was on some other raid. Soon, all the missions seem to be lumped into one, making it difficult to determine if this one was worse than the last one or another from an earlier date.

When we were new at the bombing business it was easier to make comparisons and I do remember a couple of raids on Hamburg, Germany that bring back some vivid memories. One was when the pilot had asked for a direct heading to Sweden, thinking we had better head for a neutral country rather than try to make it back to England. The date was 20 June 1944. This is the story Pete Mullin should write about, because had he heard the pilot right, we'd have sat the war out in a neutral country and I would have a second language to my credit. As it was, he thought the pilot had asked for a direct heading to England. We already had one engine feathered and when we began being fired upon from numerous anti-aircraft guns, the pilot asked Pete what area we would be over that had that kind of fire power. That was when Woodson, the pilot found out the actual destination we were heading for. By then it was too late to change course, but we were soon over the North Sea, although we now had two engines feathered and finding it difficult to maintain a given altitude.

By the time we reached the shores of England, we were skimming across the country side at less than fifteen hundred feet altitude and as we neared our air base at Nuthampstead, Dixon fired an emergency flare in the air and we landed without going through the regular landing pattern.

There was another mission to Berlin that I recall having been quite scary, in fact it is similar to one that Lt. Marc Woods, a navigator in one of our other squadrons describes in his diary but he claims it was on June 21, 1944. It was a retaliatory raid on downtown Berlin in answer to a demand Eisenhower had made of Hitler in regards to stopping the use of V-1 pilotless planes bombing London. I was quite sure I had been on that raid, but if so, it would have had to be on May 24th, not June 21st as stated in Marc Wood's diary.

Over the target it reminded me of one of those blustery days we used to have in the Midwest when papers, leaves and bunches of loose straw would drift around in the the sky after being picked up by a strong wind. Only today, it was pieces of fighters and bombers and the pieces were much larger.

Hitler even had his fighters flying through their own flak. I recall Dixon, in the top turret, hollering over the intercom that an in-line engine without a prop had just missed going through the nose of our plane by several feet. He later said, "It was as if it were on a sky hoist, getting ready to be installed. Not likely though, at plus twenty thousand feet. It was many years later, I read this account of a similar mission by navigator Woods. He kept an accurate account of each of his missions. I will include a copy of his diary for these particular missions at the end of this story.

Getting back to the mission at hand. I'm not sure what the pilot had in mind but he came over the intercom asking, "Have any of you ever landed in France?" Naturally, none of us had. He claimed our fuel situation was low enough that a landing at B-52, a sub depot on the French coast, would be within the realm of a safety precaution. Here again, after talking to this pilot nearly fifty years later, I found out the real reason we landed there was definitely a lack of sufficient fuel to make it across the channel at the rate the engines were burning petrol.

The adventure of landing in France was received with much more enthusiasm by some of the enlisted crew, than it was for me. I would rather have taken my chances and crossed the channel. So, there we were, in the little village of Merville. The English had spent a few months there prior to the U.S. troops, but the Germans had been there for several years until shortly after D-Day. Their occupation of the area was certainly noticeable in many ways.

The pilot had radioed ahead to our group leader of our intentions to land for fuel, explaining that we would be on our way again once that was accomplished. That message created a bad situation for me, I found out upon my return, because the squadron administrative staff began processing my orders for return to the United States after they determined we had landed in friendly territory.

It wasn't long after the refueling that we learned weather had set in back at our base and we were told to stay put until further notice. The weatherman didn't believe in Valentines I guess. My last and final mission had turned out very well, up until now, but this state of affairs was very disappointing.

Anyone who was ever a crew member on a "Flying Fortress" knows the extreme loyalty one has for the plane. The ability of the B-17 Bomber to take massive damage and still bring the crew home was legendary. We found out the hard way that the B-24 crew member felt the same way about his plane. As we were deplaning after landing at this sub depot, one of our newest replacements on the crew, yelled across the ramp way to some of the crew getting off another big bomber, "How do you like traveling in that 'Flyin' Coffin?" Needless to say, we would have had a fight on our hands if a quick acting officer hadn't intervened in the nick of time. Yes, those lads were every bit as proud of their B-24 Liberator as we were our Flying Fortress.

We were steered toward a consolidated mess hall where we dined on whatever the menu offered that afternoon. I don't remember anything about the food, but I do remember seeing my first Albino Negro. Not just one, but two were serving behind the counter in the chow line. I'll never forget the orange hair and the pinkish eyes. Their skin was kind of pinkish too with dark brown blotches. They gave me the "What the hell are you staring at" expression, but I couldn't keep from gawking at them.

After our meal, we decided to see what the little village by the sea had to offer in the way of night life. Our plane commander had seen to it we were issued some French currency, I don't remember how much, but we felt it would take care of anything we might want to purchase. We were right too! The Germans had literally taken all the best wines, cognacs and liqueurs with them as they retreated. This did not deter the French proprietors from trying to pawn off some cheap concoctions of what they called "spirits" on unsuspecting air crew members.

They also left behind several female collaborators who were easy to spot and probably a few who weren't so conspicuous. The unlucky ones were taken to the town square where they were shorn of all their hair and then their heads were shaved. They were then stripped of all clothing and made to stand there in the nude so the town's people could taunt and sneer at them.

In one of the bars we visited, there were several of the collaborators, which I presume proves "misery loves company." Their hair had grown out just enough to where they looked rather "chic," I thought. It did become a very popular style in the States sometime later, you will recall. They were very nice to the American G.I., but I am sure it was only because the French would have nothing to do with them.

Some of the bars sold drinks that were no more than colored water, Hoping, I suppose, the innocent soldier wouldn't know any better. We caught on fast though and would walk out without paying. The proprietor would holler, but we would play dumb and just say, "Merci, Merci, Merci".

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By the time we reported back to billeting it was dark. This did not help matters in trying to locate the large Seminary we were told we'd be bunking in for the night. It was one of the largest buildings in the village, so that was some help. When we found the entry, we saw what looked like a great long hallway. It was so dimly lit you could barely make out the images of bodies lying on mattresses lined up on either side of the narrow hall. We were issued a mattress and blanket and told to go toward the end of the hallway until we found a vacant spot. Even in the cold and dusty surroundings we fell asleep almost immediately.

When I awoke in the morning, sunlight was pouring through the high windows on the one side of the long hallway. There were bodies lined up all along the corridor and some even further beyond us who arrived later in the night. It must have been a stopover for more than just airmen and I think the military population was made up of more than just Americans. It is possible, I suppose that some of the sleepers may not have even been military personnel. One could not tell by seeing a face only.

Every time someone would move, you could see the dust particles rise and fall in the rays of sunshine. As one of my buddies raised up to ask what time it was, I began laughing and he asked why. I said, "Your face is as black as the ace of spades." He laughed and said, "Well, so is yours."

We usually wouldn't shave before going on a mission because wearing the oxygen mask would have a tendency to gall freshly shaved skin, especially in the throat area. One of my buddies and I thought this would be a good time to have the luxury of a shave by a professional barber. In this way, we would get our faces cleaned at the same time.

We finally found a shop where the owner was a young woman and her assistant was her thirteen year old son. I was quick to grab the chair of the supposedly more experienced woman, leaving my buddy in the hands of the young lad.

When they finished, we noticed they had not cleaned our faces at all. It left us with what looked like a white mask. Besides that, instead of shaving lotion being splashed on our faces they rubbed an alum bar over the shaved area which made it darned near impossible to even dicker for a damp wash cloth. It would have been in vain anyway because soap was scarce, in fact, practically nonexistent.

The young lady who was the proprietor of the tonsorial establishment could care less how we felt or looked. As I think back, she seemed to have a chip on her shoulder. Probably for all those years of domination by the Germans and then the scarcity of everything since they left. Well, we finally had to wash our faces at the latrine near the dining hall. Soap was even handed out for your special use and retrieved afterwards because some unscrupulous GIs would steal it to use as trading material, we were told.

Bad weather persisted back at our home base so we were forced to spend another night in Merville. All the glamour of visiting France had quickly vanished before the first night was over, and none of us were looking forward to another night at the Seminary. Just about any place would be better than that, so we thought.

We spent another day moseying around the area and stopping at the mess hall to grab something to eat whenever they allowed it. There were signs posted all over, about not picking up any shells laying around to keep as souvenirs. There were plenty to see, shells of all kinds in fact. Some looked like 20 millimeter and others were larger, like the 88s that were being shot up at us. The warnings were enough to keep me from trying to bring any back on the plane. It would have been a hell of a situation, to finish off one's missions only to blow himself up with what one might think would make a good souvenir of the war.

The very young children were always hanging around town begging. They had the slang down pat like, "got any gum chum?" "Any candy, Andy?" "How about a smoke bloke?" Some of the young boys were even offering their sister's services for a price. It was a pitiful sight and you couldn't help but feel sorry for some of the little four and five year old children who copy-catted the older children.

That second night, one of the other crew members and I opted to sleep in the plane rather than the Seminary. It was every bit as comfortable as far as I was concerned and a heck of a lot cleaner. Finally the next morning after an early breakfast, we were given the OK to take off for our home base. What a relief. I don't think anyone was sorry to be leaving France.

The trip back to Nuthampstead was a short one once we were in the air and it was much less eventful than when we were returning from a raid on the same day.

We did however, have to go through the normal debriefing but some of the goodies were missing, for example, the 100 proof bonded bourbon usually issued during the "tell all" session. Even the Red Cross ladies weren't around to offer us coffee and doughnuts. As a matter of fact, I don't believe there were any higher ups that stopped by to tell us how happy they were to see us back. I guess that was expecting too much. There had probably been a mission called for the day and those poor souls were still out there in the wild blue yonder and thoughts and worry for them would be much more important.

We still had to take our machine guns to the armament shack and clean them. Even though I had made Corporal just before flying that last mission, I was still too broke to have one of the armament men clean my guns, as I had done on some of my earlier missions.

When I got back to the hut I was at least given a heroes welcome by some of the new crew members, most of whom I hardly knew or even tried to know. There was also a message on my bunk to report to the CQ in the Orderly room. This was what I had been worrying about ever since our landing in France. It had happened as I thought it might, my orders were cut and I was to leave for Chorley, England the following day. Tonight would be the last time I would have liberty to get into Baldock. The 398th Bomb Group would become nothing more than a memory. A quite vivid memory that would live within me, throughout my life.

When I arrived in Baldock along with the rest of the GIs on the liberty run, I jumped off the truck and hustled the few blocks over to Molly's house.

The distance seemed so much shorter than usual, but it was probably because time was passing so fast and I had so little of it.

I knocked on the door and waited until someone opened it. It was Molly, but she didn't invite me in nor did she give me the hug and a kiss I had become accustomed to receiving. She finally invited me in but demanded to know what I had been doing for two nights over in France. I started to explain, when she smiled and threw her arms around me and gave me the sweet kiss I had expected. One of my friends had made a point to let her know what had happened on our flight, so she knew we were not downed or missing, which could have been the case.

But now, there were just a few short hours to talk over our plans and to make the promises to one another of what our intentions were, before the big six by sixes would be queuing up in the town square to take us back to the air base. At first, mother Doris, Rosemary and Sandy became a part of the well wishes and the goodbyes, but then they left Molly and I alone so that we could express our love and make our vows to one another.

It was such a happy reunion, but still so sad. We could have sat there holding one another for the rest of our lives, to be sure, but duty called and the liberty run waits for no man. When I finally had to leave, it was the most excruciating pain in my heart I had ever experienced.

The next morning, which was much more gloomy for some reason, than others I had experienced in jolly old England, I was taken to Royston where I would board a train that would eventually get me to the north of England to a town called Chorley. When I found it on the map, I could see it was a little north and somewhat west of Liverpool.

After arriving in Chorley and being sent to the large deportation base, I found that I would be there for at least five to seven days. I made a quick call to Molly at the first opportunity to tell her of the situation. This was a mistake, because she decided to come to Chorley, even if we would only have another day or two together. I said it was a mistake, but a wonderful mistake, because I was able to get a 24 hour pass and Molly and I were able to spend at least that one day together. The separation was not any easier the second time, in fact, much more heart rendering than when I said goodbye in Baldock.

A few days after our last rendezvous, I was on another train, heading for Southampton where I would be boarding a ship for the return trip to the states and a new assignment. A return to England for another tour of duty would have suited me fine, but by the time I had gone through R&R in Florida, had my 30 day furlough, and was reassigned to another base, the war was reaching it's final stages.

So, the last mission to Prague, Czechoslovakia was definitely "My Final Mission."

As fate or circumstances would have it, forty-seven years passed before I ever saw England again but that is another story to be told.

Thomas E. Dougherty - 8th Air Force, First Combat Division, First combat unit,  
398th Bomb Group  
602nd Squadron  
From April 1944 to 1945, March.