

Memmingen Mission of July 18, 1944

By: Mike Whye, July 18, 2024

Posted on Facebook: 483rd Bombardment Group Heavy

By the time the men of the 483rd Bomb Group climbed into their B-17s 80 years ago today at a base named Sterparone after a farm that had been there before the Americans built the base, the Italian sun had been up for nearly an hour-and-a-half. The temperature was rising too, possibly to top out at 95 Fahrenheit, or 30-something on that Centigrade scale that none of the Americans cared to understand.

In the slanted sunlight, after doing walk-around inspections of their planes, the pilots entered their cockpits and, at 7 o'clock, started their engines as others in the planes closed their hatches. At first the sounds of the engines were slight until more and finally all coughed to life, spewing blue-grey clouds of exhaust and increasing the din to a thunderstorm.

Releasing his brakes, Captain Louis "Ted" Seith, advanced his throttles and the propellers of the four engines bit more into the humid air, briefly creating white spirals behind them as the plane rolled out of its parking space onto a taxiway. Deftly working the brakes that squealed every time he used them and the throttles, he rolled toward the end of the runway and, with a brief hesitation to lock his tail wheel into a straight forward position when on the steel matting, aimed it down the runway with one smooth move. Pushing the throttles forward, he urged the big bomber into the air toward the east. Besides his regular crew, he carried two more men. Col. Cyril Carmichael, the group's operations officer, was along as an observer. Also, Col. Willard Sperry, deputy commander of the 483rd and, in essence, mission commander, had replaced the tail gunner so he could observe the group in action from there.

Behind Seith at 30-second intervals, 27 more B-17s took off and through great wheeling patterns in the air, maneuvered into the formations they had practiced for months when in Florida and then used for every mission once in Italy. So far, the 483rd had flown combat 50 missions although not every man nor plane flew every mission. With the wear and tear on the planes and the men, that was Impossible.

The 483rd's planes were a mix. A few sported the camouflage that had been used for years on B-17s, olive drab upper surfaces and medium gray lower ones. One, 32044, called Good Deal, was the last camouflaged B-17 made by Boeing at its Seattle plant. The rest were unpainted metal surfaces. All sported a Y on their vertical and horizontal stabilizers, near which were five-pointed stars....the icons of the 483. Their rudders and elevators were painted red. Some had names and artworks, usually women, painted on the sides of their noses.

This morning, they would link up with three other B-17 bomb groups to attack an airfield near the southern German city of Memmingen. Each group had 28 bombers, arranged in four squadrons each. The 483rd's squadrons were the 815th, 816th, 817th and 840th. As they flew north on this mission, the 840th would fly in the lead position with Seith at its point. In what was called a box formation, designed so that the bombers' machine guns could provide maximum overlapping firepower against German interceptors, the 815th flew in the number two position, slightly behind the 840th and off to its right. The 817th flew in the number 3

position, just behind and to the left of the 840th. A bit further to the rear and in line with the 840th was the 816th squadron.

The airfield at Memmingen was important, the pilots, navigators and bombardiers had been told in the pre-dawn briefing, because German twin-engine fighters were assembled and repaired there. It had never been attacked. The briefing officers had also said the crews were to expect up to 125 German single-engine fighters and 115 twin-engine fighters to protect the field against the oncoming 112 American bombers.

However, to ward off the Germans, four U.S. fighter groups would escort the bombers to and from targets. Only if the German fighters could penetrate the American fighter screen did the bomber crews need to worry about protecting themselves.

The B-17s were called Flying Fortresses because of their defensive weapons, a total of 11 50-caliber machine guns. Three turrets, at the chin, above and behind the cockpit and on the lower side of the fuselage, had two machine guns each. The tail gunner's position at the base of the tall rudder, held two more. Two positions at the waist held one on each side as did the side windows in the nose compartment and the window above the radio room. Only the pilots had no access to machine guns. The B-17s' real purpose was to drop bombs, however, and each carried 12 500-pound bombs.

From the beginning, the plan created by the higher-ups in the 15th AF began to slip. The four bomb groups were to fly together to the target. However, different take-off times allowed two to proceed together as scheduled to fly up the Adriatic Sea, but some miles behind them was a third and, all began to run into clouds that could obscure the target.

The fourth group, the 483rd, flew up the Italian peninsula where the weather was clear. Finally, near the Italian town of Rimini, the 483rd turned to join the three other B-17 groups over the Adriatic but it was miles behind them.

When the U.S. fighters that were to accompany the four bomb groups to Memmingen showed up to rendezvous with them, they found only the two lead groups of bombers. The third and fourth (the 483rd) were strung out too far behind the first two for the fighters to feel they could adequately protect them all.

To sweep the sky ahead of enemy fighters, some of the U.S. fighters dashed beyond the bombers where they found 15-30 enemy fighters had risen from their airfield near Udine, Italy. The P-51s engaged those, keeping them away from the oncoming bombers. However, the combat depleted several of the American fighters' fuel and, after fighting off the Axis aircraft and downing at least ten of them, several P-51s had to turn for their bases rather than accompany the bombers any further.

Then the headquarters of the 15thAF sent a one-word radio message: SHAMPOO. That was the code word for the bombers to abort the mission. Even though the reason was oncoming bad weather, the message didn't explain why, just return. So, the first two bomb groups circled to return to their bases in Italy. The third group received an order to attack an alternate target so it also turned away from the flight path to Memmingen.

"SHAMPOO" was also received in Ted Seith's B-17 at the head of the 483rd. He conferred with and Sperry and Carmichael. Seith called for a verification of the code word and never received an answer. Sperry decided to ignore the recall.

That left the 483rd to approach Memmingen as the sole bomber group. As they passed over the north coastline of the Adriatic and neared Innsbruck, Austria, Robert Orton's B-17, named *Yvonne*, started losing oil in the hub of its number 2 engine's propeller. That wasn't enough to forego the mission but then engine three began spurting oil. The pilots feathered its propeller, and the bombardier salvoed the bombs in a safe configuration. Next, engine two began to fail totally and shook the plane. As the crew dumped everything they could to lighten the plane, it lost altitude and, as following orders, the pilots maintained radio silence and left the lead squadron for the flight south.

Then, Millard Pedigo's B-17 began to lose power too. In order to lighten their load so they could stay with the formation, they dropped a few of their bombs, but that it wasn't enough. With two engines acting up, Pedigo knew they could not make Memmingen nor return to Steparone. So, while maintaining radio silence as always as the order, he slid his plane away from the others of the 817th Squadron and turned for neutral Switzerland where they landed safely and were interned for the rest of the war. While there, one of the Swiss authorities told the crew that sand had been found in their numbers 3 and 4 engines, indicating sabotage.

The P-51s that were still with the 483rd then departed as planned when they and the bombers approached the town of Kempton, about 20 miles south of Memmingen, which was serving as what the bomber crews called their initial point. It was there that they were to begin their bomb run to Memmingen.

As planned, the bombers then shifted out of their initial box formation so that the squadrons fell in line behind each other. This was so they would drop a line of bombs on the target. Leading the way in this trail formation was the 840th, then the 815th, next the 817th, and finally at the end of them all, was the 816th. At this point, they were all on their bomb run and had to fly a straight line to Memmingen without juking so the bombardiers would be able to aim precisely at their targets. Flying at 23,500 feet above sea level meant the crews had to wear oxygen masks for without a mask, a man could perish in mere moments. This meant they couldn't remove their masks to talk aloud but had to use throat microphones that picked up the vibrations of their larynxes so they could talk to each other over the intercom in each plane.

Watching the 483rd change into the trail formation were the German fighters already in the air between Kempton and Memmingen. They had amassed to attack four groups of 112 B-17s that were to attack Memmingen but now they saw only one group of 26 B-17s....the 483rd.....and no American fighters. It was an opportunity like the Germans had rarely seen before.

As the 483rd pilots flew north, some looked to the east and saw formations of German fighters, 75 to 200 as some later reported, on a near-parallel course but heading in the opposition direction. Then the German fighters turned to start circling behind the last of the bombers, those in the 816th squadron. The fighters separated into small formations of four to seven planes each where a lead pilot was followed in a stair-step fashion by his fellow fighter pilots.

The Germany fighters were Focke-Wulf 190s, which, because of the heavy armament they carried, were known bomber killers and Messerschmitt Me-109s which had lighter armament but could still do a lot of damage.

The faster German fighters could have simply over-run the slower bombers. Instead, their pilots throttled back and some dropped their flaps to slow down some and take their time to aim at the 483rd's bombers. They opened fire with machine guns, cannon and in some cases, unguided rockets which streaked through the bombers but still hit some.

Approaching the rear of the bombers as the Germans did lessened the ability of all the bombers to bring many of their guns to bear on the oncoming fighters. Indeed, in many cases, only the tail gunners could fire at the Germans.

Drifting close to the bombers, the fighters started hosing them with machine gun bullets and cannon shells. The most they had to worry about were the tail gunners of the bombers. So, the Germans concentrated their fire on those positions. They then walked their ammunition up the B17s' fuselages and into the wings to destroy the engines, maim the crews and set fire to the fuel tanks which they did with explosive effect.

The bullets ripped through metal and men and kept going through everything they met or ricocheted onto damage something else. The cannon shells penetrated the thin aluminum skin of the B-17s, about the thickness of a dime, and then exploded, spewing shrapnel everywhere, doing more damage. Hydraulic fluids shot out of punctured pressurized lines to act like flame throwers when electric sparks hit them, and the ruptured oxygen tanks further fanned the flames into infernos.

Hans Gussarson flew the B-17 at the end of the entire 483rd formation and went down immediately. Somehow engineer and top turret gunner Owen Hurst bailed out. He saw Gussarson bail out too, but none of the other nine men on the crew survived as the plane broke apart.

Within a few seconds, to Gussarson's left, Richard Comb's B-17 also fell to the Germans and only two of its ten men survived. At the same time, on the right, Howard Smithers' B-17 caught fire but nine of the men successfully bailed out. Another man may have parachuted but he was found dead on the ground.

In less than a minute, all of the 816th's planes were falling. Two gunners died manning their guns in the waist of the plane flown by John Hommel. William Leukering, the radio operator, was seen helping the radar navigator to leave the plane when it blew up, dooming them. Five men died in that plane and the other six became prisoners.

Major Hildreth (Major was his first name although his rank was a first lieutenant) saw his four engines shut down and the intercom went dead. When the tail broke away, tail gunner Paul Kettle fell out of his position and, despite not wearing his parachute, somehow snapped it on and had to then unfurl it by hand when the ripcord failed. Yet everyone reached the ground, four with wounds. As the men fell, they saw the other planes of their squadron falling in flames. Everyone reached the ground okay although some had wounds. But the horrors were not over. In some cases, they were forced by the Germans to pick up the pieces of the dead fellow airmen.

When top turret gunner Charles Erickson left his gun turret in Eugene Jackson's bomber, he saw pilots Jackson and Frank Lonc slumped over the controls. Dropping down into the nose compartment, he found its plexiglass nose missing, along with the bombardier and navigator although their parachutes were still in the cabin. Grabbing one, Erickson then went out the open nose and was the only man on that crew to live.

After finishing off the seven planes of the 816th, the Germans pummeled the seven in the next squadron, the 817th and destroyed five.

Of James Haley's crew, at the rear of the squadron, with two engines out and four men dead in the mid-section, the tail broke off, taking tail gunner John Hunley to his fate. Andrew Green, radio operator, opened the window atop his compartment and left the plane that way. Fred Hicks, navigator, was another who put on his parachute as he fell.

Haley's right wing was on fire as he turned 180 degrees and pulled higher so he wouldn't hit any bombers behind him. Nine of his were able to bail out, but ball turret gunner Jack Burns was killed. After landing, gunner Ed Lafferty somehow got to within 5 kilometers of Switzerland before being captured. So did radio operator Carl Kleinknecht.

Stanton Rickey's plane started going down with both wings on fire and began spinning. Bombardier John Galt nailed three enemy aircraft as the plexiglass nose ahead of him disintegrated in enemy fire before he finally left the B-17. Navigator Fred Hicks got two more German fighters and then put on his parachute while falling out of the plane. Engineer Angelo Mazzacone was seen to bail out through the open bomb bay but did not survive. Co-pilot Eugene Hoss was wounded but lived. Four of the crew in the mid-section of their plane died when the tail separated as did tail gunner John Huntley. As Rickey hung in his parachute, he saw his plane hit the ground and explode violently, no doubt from the bombs it still carried. For six days, Rickey evaded capture, attempted to steal a boat and a bike at a town bordering Switzerland but was captured with a short distance to go.

Pilot Don Maclin died at his controls. His copilot Don Monson was seen bailing but never seen alive again. Four other crewmen were captured and three more died. Gunner Travis Keeling had to have a leg amputated and was repatriated back to America.

In earlier missions, tail gunner Pat Dadson of the James Clark crew had shot down five enemy airplanes, making him an ace, but was blown out of his position without a parachute and died. The other ten in the crew survived. Harold Cunningham, the ball turret gunner, evaded capture for nine days before capture.

The crew of the Karl Hattenhauer shot down six enemy fighters and returned to Steparone. One gunner, Fred Vaughn, said that one bomber crew with its left wing on fire stuck to their guns until the end, firing as their plane was burning and disintegrating.

Thirteen more fighters were shot down by the Hugh Rowe crew, one of the two 817th planes to return home. Navigator Jim Kody saw a Nazi pilot bailing out past his window during the fight. To engineer Robert Ashdown, the sky looked full of paratroopers, so many airmen were bailing out. A 20mm shell exploded in the radio room, wounding Elmer Winter in the arm and lip.

In Matthew Smith's Virgil's Virgins, a wing caught fire and the plane rolled inverted. Still, everyone but gunner Horace Davenport bailed out and were captured. Armorer William Marlin was severely wounded in his arms and legs. German doctors later removed more than 200 pieces of shrapnel from his body.

Next up for the Germans were the bombers of the 815th squadron, of which they sent two spiraling to earth. In *Good Deal* at the front of the 815th, Joe Stein's gunners shot down five German fighters. Vince Peperone saw when he hit a German fighter that it flipped over onto its back and the pilot bailed out.

However, the Germans blew off part of Russell Ward's left wing and shot out his left two engines. With the rudder and ailerons shot away, he sounded the bailout bell. Waist gunner James Durham dragged wounded fellow gunner Tommy Alfano to the waist door and pushed him out to ultimately live. Then Durham, though wounded himself, tried to help ball turret gunner Robert Jamieson, who had a head wound and no oxygen, out too but failed and finally left the plane to join the other eight who had escaped the burning plane. For co-pilot Michael Higgs, this was his first and only mission with the 483rd before he came a POW.

During the Germans' first pass at William Vandendries' B-17, they hit the nose compartment seriously wounding his navigator Jerome Wojciechowski in the legs, right arm and face, costing him his right eye but still, he returned to his gun and shot down an Me-109. Another cannon shell hit the nose and wounded bombardier Herbert Rosoff. More shells hit the left wing, setting it on fire. One hit in the radio room, creating a fire there too. The one that hit the cockpit shattered the instrument panel, setting fire to it. Meanwhile, Vandendries helped Wojciechowski out the nose hatch. Nothing deemed to stop top turret gunner Merle Hancock who, though wounded and burned by the fire in the cockpit, shot down three Messerschmitts before Vandendries helped him away from his station and out a hatch. Four of the crew died and six including Vandendries became prisoners.

The Germans fighters kept moving forward, bringing their guns and rockets upon the bombers of the 840th, the lead squadron. There, Col. Sperry, in his tail gunner position, who had watched most of his command fall in flames and pieces, managed to destroy one enemy fighter and damage another. Everywhere he and others looked, B-17s and German fighters were falling and fluttering away in flames with chunks of metal tumbling and spiraling on their way down. The Americans hung in white parachutes, the German pilots underneath dark ones. Some perished when their chutes caught fire, and they plummeted more than four miles to earth. Some Americans said they saw German pilots machine gunning Americans hanging under their chutes. While the 840th's planes were damaged, none were shot down and they claimed 8 more enemy aircraft.

Still, the remaining 12 bombers of the 483rd pressed on despite the fighter attacks and dropped their bombs. After "bombs away," Seith slowed the lead squadron some so what was left of the trailing squadrons could catch up to mutually assist each other with their machine guns. One man in the 840th wrote, "It became apparent that the 483rd Group, barring some miracle happening soon, was going to be obliterated."

As the bombers planes closed their bomb bay doors and turned right, the miracle came in the form of the P-38s of the First Fighter Group. Although not assigned to escort any B-17s, they had missed a rendezvous with a group of B-24s and happened upon the mayhem devouring the 483rd. Without hesitation, they tore into the German fighters. With their twin-tail, twin engine design, the P-38s had a distinctive silhouette that must have looked like angels to the beleaguered men of the 483rd when they arrived 20 minutes after the German onslaught began.

The surviving B-17s reformed as they flew back to Steparone, bothered no more by German fighters or at all by flak from the cities they bypassed. Because the bombers maintained radio silence as always, the men who gathered at the base to watch them land three hours later had no idea of the carnage over Memmingen and could only gasp at the sight that just 12 of their 28 B-17s were returning. One shot off red flares to indicate it carried wounded so it was given priority to land before the others. One of the planes that landed showed damage from 20mm cannon shells that exploded in both wings, in the chin turret, near the radio room and in the nose. Its rudder, elevators and a landing strut were also damaged.

The men staggered from their planes, numbed by what they had been through. As usual, they were given shots of whiskey before their debriefings. The debriefing officers, joined by others crowding around to hear, could hardly believe what they were hearing.

Then the survivors climbed into trucks to be driven back to their tents. Robert Corenthal, co-pilot on Stein's *Good Deal*, was known to be a teetotaler but when he returned to his tent, he fished a tent-mate's bottle of whiskey from its hiding place and drank it until he passed out.

Post-mission reports on the bomb damage at Memmingen showed about 50 German aircraft on the ground had been destroyed along with three hangars, two workshops, a ready room and a barracks. Although unknown until the war ended, the two prototypes of the Me-264 bomber were destroyed in one of the hangars. Similar in appearance but smaller than the U.S. B-29, the four-engine Me-264 was designed to bomb New York City and other cities along the eastern U.S. seaboard. About 170 people died at the airfield and another 140 were wounded.

Although initial claims by the bomber's gunners were higher, records show they destroyed at least 28 German fighters. The American fighters that came upon the scene were credited with another 41 victories and lost two of their own.

Among the 483rd's bomber crews, 67 perished in the attack by the German fighters, and another 77 became prisoners after reaching the ground in their parachutes.

Some historians have called this the greatest aerial battle of the 15th Air Force.

Shortly after the mission, engineer Robert Ashdown wrote, "This will be a day I will never forget."

That evening, Major Fred Ascani, commander of the 816th Squadron, began penning 69 letters of condolences to the relatives of his squadron's men who were listed as missing in action that day.

The next morning, July 19, 1944, a C-47 transport landed at Sterparone and out stepped Robert Orton and his crew. They had left the 483rd's formation before reaching Memmingen because of engine trouble. Turning south, and throwing out everything they could, they ran into flak near two cities in northern Italy before spotting what looked a short runway alongside the Adriatic near the town of Ancona. They knew it was on the Allied side of a battle line that ran across Italy and called for landing instructions. The reply was in a language none of the men understood. Still, the men decided to land there anyway; it was that or crash. It was an airstrip for Spitfires flown by the Free Polish and South American Air Forces. Orton put the B-17 down but since it was not airworthy anymore that day, they stayed overnight until flown the next day to Sterparone in a C-47. Their *Yvonne* had to receive two new engines before it could fly home. Until they returned, the men had been regarded MIA over Memmingen.

Similarly, diplomatic communications reached the 483rd a few days later, telling the unit that Millard Pedigo's crew was safely interned in Switzerland and not missing in action.

Debate continues about Sperry's comments soon after the mission that he never heard the recall message but then some claimed he later admitted he had heard it but chose to ignore it.

Last year, 2023, the remains of William Leukering, radio operator on John Hommels' crew which was one of the first to fall at Memmingen, were identified and subsequently sent home. Today, July 18, 2024, Leukering is finally being laid to rest in his hometown of Metropolis, Illinois.

END

Picture: 232044, *Good Deal*, flown by Joe Stein, was one of the few B-17s of the 483rd to return from the mission to Memmingen on July 18, 1944. [not included here]

