

War Era Story Project 2012

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WWII combat in Europe

I flew 43 combat missions in WWII as a radio-gunner in B-25s. One of my most memorable missions was one on which I almost bailed out. It was over the city of Trent. Hitler had invaded and occupied Italy completely. Trent was a huge city, centrally located and ideal for putting trains together to send all over Europe, and the Brenner Pass was the only way to get by land in or out of Italy. So the 12th American Air Force had to keep the Brenner Pass closed at all times. It was located on Corsica, a French island off Italy's west coast.

In February, 1945, our intelligence had spotted 400 to 500 box cars in the Trent marshaling yards waiting to be made up into trains to supply the German troops. It was one of our first missions flying together as a crew of six. I was talking to our bombardier on the intercom. "Are we on the bomb run yet," I asked?

"We just got on it," he replied.

"WOW! Look at all the FLAK up ahead! And we are going right into it," the bombardier said.

We all tightened up! Then a voice came over the intercom, "Right engine is on fire! Right engine is on fire!" I took off my flak suit, my flak helmet, my 45 and headed for the escape hatch. I had the red handle in my hand, ready to pull it. Then the voice came on again, "Ok, he's going down, he's going down!"

"Who's going down?" we thought.

I looked out the right window and nothing was wrong with the right engine. Here, it was our tail gunner who flies backwards and was looking at 7L on fire and going into a tail spin. Most of us watched 7L going down, and the moment it hit the ground the entire wing burst into flames because the fuel tanks are in the wings. We saw no parachutes from 7L. We found out later, though, that the tail gunner of 7L had his parachute on upside down, so that's why we didn't see any chutes open. He got a hold of some parachute silk & kept pulling out more and more silk as he fell and got the chute open in time and landed safely. But we didn't know it until after the war when he was released from a German prison camp.

Incidentally, the mission was a high success; there were only eight box cars left. Oh, the voice on the intercom was that of our excitable tail gunner. We told him, "George, if you ever do that again, you are liable to turn around and find you're all alone on the plane."

The B-25 was a medium bomber and had a crew of six: pilot, co-pilot, bombardier (who was also the navigator), engineer-gunner, radio-gunner and tail-gunner.

On my very first mission, a German fighter's bullets struck an oxygen tank on one of the B-25's and set off the 4,000 lbs. of bombs it was carrying. There wasn't a piece of that plane or its crew any bigger than your hand left. Our commanding general wisely ordered all oxygen tanks removed. The tech order called for oxygen at 10,000 ft. and up. We often flew at 14,000-15,000 ft. You moved a little slower, but we got our work done O.K.