

THE FIRST AIR BATTLE

This chapter is titled, "The First Air Battle", in recognition of a change in tactics. In the past, our aircraft went out as single units or with loose coordination between units. On May 14, 1943, all Air Force units in England carried out a coordinated attack. Well over 200 planes went forth in a four hour period to attack four targets. Three of the targets were in the area lying between France and the Lowlands. Their intent was to draw German aircraft out of the Kiel area. The main thrust was to Kiel, Germany, the third most important target on the Air Command list. We lost eleven bombers. We destroyed 67 enemy aircraft.

It was the first American multiple operation which was intended to deliver a rapid succession of attacks that would disperse the enemy strength and confuse their defense system. Its success could be measured in the bombing results. Strike photographs showed Ijmuiden fair hits, Antwerp good hits, Courtrai good hits and the Kiel raiders scored excellent hits. Even the German radio acknowledged that the port city of Kiel had suffered great damage.

The Battle Plan For The Kiel Raid:

Approximately 100 Flying Fortresses, carrying high explosive bombs, were to lead approximately 20 Liberators, carrying incendiaries, in an un-escorted high altitude attack on the machine shops and support facilities for the submarine pens and shipbuilding installations in Kiel, Germany.

The striking force, after assembly over England, was to drop to wave top level (to avoid German radar) and, while crossing the North Sea, "home in" on radio Kiel. They were to start their climb to bombing altitude just off the Frisian Islands and reach 25,000 feet at the initial point. They were to then turn and start their bombing run on the target to the south. After the strike, they were to turn to the west and start their descent.

Errors in the Battle Plan:

The plan did not take into consideration the different flying characteristics of the Fortress and the Liberator. At low altitude, a Liberator was much faster than a

Fortress. Thus, the following Liberators had to fly a series of "S" maneuvers in order to maintain position behind the Fortress formation. These maneuvers wasted much precious gasoline. On the other hand, at 25,000 feet the Fortress was much faster than the Liberator.

In addition, the Liberators were carrying clusters of incendiary bombs that would drift off target if released at the same point as the B-17's high explosive bombs. Thus, the B-24's had to continue on their bomb run a few minutes longer than the B-17's.

As a result of these errors, from just before the initial point and in the target area, the Liberators found themselves being left without supporting fire power from the Fortresses. In order to avoid the full blunt of the enemy aircraft attack (approximately 120 individual aircraft made passes at the Liberator formation) the decision was made by the Liberator Commander, Col. Leon W. Johnson, to drop below the flying Fortresses and gain their fire support from above.

On the morning of May 14th the 506th put up six ships which joined with 15 other ships to fly a six hour and 15 minute combat mission to Kiel, Germany. Swanson, Graham, Stevens, Bunker, and Slough reached the target area and dropped their bombs. Strong also took off that morning, but aborted when he encountered engine difficulty.

The Liberators were carrying incendiary bombs for the first time. We had about 25 tons of them.

Approximately 140 enemy aircraft rose to challenge the attacking Fortresses and Liberators. The Liberators destroyed 23 enemy aircraft and probably destroyed another 13. The 44th received a Distinguished Unit Citation for this raid (the first awarded to an Eighth Air Force Unit).

Six Liberators from the 44th failed to return. Captain Swanson of the 506th Squadron was one of those. He was last seen, after bombing the target, surrounded with enemy fighters and struggling to keep control of aircraft #295, J, Wicked Witch.

With John W. Swanson (POW) were Lts. Douglas B. Myers (POW), Richard L. Schiefelbusch (POW), and Sidney W. Banks (POW). Also with him were Sgts. William J. Mears (KIA), Frederick T. Wolf (KIA), George E. Christensen (KIA), Joseph B. Duncan (KIA), and Stanley W. Glemboski (KIA).

In a letter to Will Lundy, Douglas B. Myers, copilot said:

I believe we had flak damage to the inner starboard engine (#2) which resulted in fire and loss of power. We remained in formation, as best we could, to the target and salvoed our load. We were not able to remain in formation after turning west and when alone were attacked by fighters....We took some machine-gun fire in the nose and flight deck areas and cannon hits in the waist area. The controls became unresponsive and we were not able to maintain altitude. Because of the fighter attacks and the enlarging fire, it was determined to abandon our craft.

Sgts. Mears and Wolfe, respectively the top turret gunner and radio operator, were on the flight deck. One of them entered the bomb bay and removed the empty cartridge casings so that he could open the bomb bay doors. Neither of them was wounded at the time that they jumped. I have no other knowledge concerning the gunners in the waist and tail area, but have reasoned that they could have been wounded by cannon fire. I do not know if they were able to or did leave the ship.

In a letter to Will Lundy, Doctor Richard L. Schiefelbusch gave this account of events aboard *Wicked Witch*:

After bombing, the Group swung out over the Baltic in preparation to head back to England. Our plane, of course, was somewhat out of formation. We were hit by fighters that queued up ahead of our bombers and came in at us head-on. Lts. Myers and Swanson told me that one engine was on fire and the instrument panel had also been hit.

"Sid" Banks (bombardier) and I were in the nose of the plane when we heard the order to bail out. We did by going out through the nose door hatch. On the way down I saw two chutes, one on each side of me. The one between me and the coast line was Banks. I never knew who the other one was. I came down in the Baltic about 10 miles from shore. Later I found out that both Myers (copilot) and Swanson (pilot and last one out) came down on land.

I have always assumed that the five who died got out first, but because the plane was over the sea and heading back toward land, those out first had the least chance of being picked up. I estimate that I was picked up about 30 minutes later by a motorized fishing boat. The fishermen

were probably volunteer air/sea rescuers who were informal members of the rescue service along the coast line. I suppose they spotted chutes and came out to find all the survivors they could.

The only crew member I ever saw again (in addition to Myers, Banks and Swanson) was S/Sgt. Stanley W. Glemboski, tail gunner. They must have fished him out of the Baltic. He was simply a body placed in the truck that hauled us to prison from the fishing village. I am sure that there were only five enlisted men on our crew.

That day, Norm Kiefer remembers that he flew with Lt. Graham as radio operator on aircraft #283, Z, *Old Crow*:

Sgt. Edward E. Coldiron, from Anderson's crew, flew as my replacement at waist gun. We had Dale W. Maury, from Rebich's crew, as tail gunner. Finally, there was Sgt. Irvin C. Smith, from Slough's crew, flying as hatch gunner. This was his first combat experience.

My first memory of that day was as we flew at wave top level across the North Sea. I was standing between the pilot and the copilot. In this position I could look forward and along the leading edge of the wings. There spread across the sea was the greatest armada of American aircraft that I had ever seen. We had to be invincible! All of my battle experience up to this point had consisted of much smaller formations.

My next "snapshot" memory was at bombs away. This was the first time that we had carried bundles of stick incendiary bombs. As they left the bomb bay the bundle straps fell loose and each stick dropped free. It looked as if the ships in front had been hit and their bottoms were breaking up and falling through space.

After bombs away, it was my job to go into the bomb bay to be certain that all bombs were gone and that the bomb bay doors were closed. Our bombs were gone, but the doors would not close all the way. At this point, I heard the call, "twelve o'clock high!" I came up out of the bomb bay. As I closed the flight deck door I heard, "Get him Mike, I can't reach him!" Then from the tail came, "Two at six o'clock level!" Then back to the front, "You got him! God! He's going to ram us!"

Suddenly, I found myself plastered to the top of the ship

and couldn't move. "Pappy" Graham had thrown the ship into a steep dive in order to avoid the head-on ram. Just as suddenly I was slammed to the floor as I heard Graham say, "Help me pull it out! Help me!" Then I was hit with something heavy. The supporting latches on the top gun turret seat had torn loose from the force of the pullout and what hit me was Mike Davis, the top gunner. Both Mike and I started to scramble for the lone snap-on parachute which skidded across the floor. I don't remember whether Mike or I won, but by then we were flying level again. It was quite a while before my heart stopped pounding so hard that I thought that it would come right out of my chest.

The right inboard engine was belching smoke and flame. Graham feathered the engine (blades turned so the propeller would not rotate and cause a drag on our air speed) and they hit the fire extinguisher. After the fire was out Graham called for a station check. Each position reported, "Okay.". However, some were not too convincing. I reached for a walk-around oxygen bottle and told "Pappy" that I was going back for a look. As I emerged from the rear bomb bay door, I looked upon a confusion of spent shell casings and equipment including ammunition belts and boxes that had been thrown helter-skelter during the dive and subsequent pullout. Coldiron was sitting on a box holding his side. Kerns and Smith were straightening out ammunition belts and laying them back in the racks. I thought, "If we are attacked now we can't defend ourselves."

I asked Coldiron, "What's the matter?" He said, "I think I have been hit." I took his hand away from his side and saw a large hole in his flying jacket. Putting his hand back, I told him to lie down on the floor and took out my knife. I told Smith to take over Coldiron's gun. I then cut away Coldiron's jacket and shirt. I found a slightly larger than 50-cent piece of metal lying on, but not through his undershirt. I handed it to him saying, "Here is a souvenir." I then went back to the front of the ship to tell "Pappy" what had happened.

Up front there was concern since another engine was acting up. I listened to a few minutes discussion as to whether or not we should prepare to ditch by sending a message to air/sea rescue. It was decided that we wouldn't until the last minute. So far, we seemed to be all right and were not being followed. There was nothing to be gained by giving away our position too soon. I told them that I was

going to the back of the ship again.

This time as I came out of the bomb bay, I saw Coldiron once again sitting on an ammunition box. He was holding his leg. He said, "I've been hit in the leg." Once again I took his hand away and found a piece of metal lodged in his shin bone. Once again, "Smitty, take Coldiron's gun". Smitty said, "It's no good! It's been hit." I said, "I don't care, stand in that window! Don't let them see the gun unmanned."

I then laid Coldiron down, cut away his clothing and sprinkled a package of "sulfa" on the wound. I looked up to see Smitty watching me. "Get on that gun", I said.

As I got up Kerns tapped me and said, "Look at my back. It stings." His flying jacket had a number of small holes. The tail gunner called, "Hey Norm, are you there?". I ran my hand up Kerns' back and showed him "no blood". "Yea Wog (Dale Maury), what you want?" "Send Smitty back here, I think I've been hit." I said, "Okay Smitty, take off".

Maury came limping down from the tail. His flying boot was badly torn. I took off his boot and his shoe was torn. I took off his shoe and his stocking was burned as well as his little toe and the side of his foot. A shell had passed that close, but the skin was not broken. He put his boot back on and he limped back to the tail.

I went back to the front of the ship and stayed there for the rest of the trip. It was uneventful. At Shipdham, I fired a flare as a signal that we had wounded aboard and we went straight in. This was Sortie #79. The only other memory I have of this trip, and I don't know where it falls in the sequence of events, was seeing an isolated B-17 being shot down. It was like watching a movie in the theater.

While in the landing pattern at Shipdham, it was obvious that Ruth Less had sustained considerable damage, including possible flat tires. Personnel in the control tower were fearful that the plane would crash on landing. The tower already had many ships in distress and with wounded aboard. Rather than risk another crash landing, Lt. Frank D. Slough was ordered to fly his ship to Belfast, Ireland. There he landed without mishap and his ship was repaired.

Jimmy Caillier remembers:

We had 120 holes in our aircraft. The astrodome over the navigator's table was shot out. They replaced it with a flat piece of glass. One night, while we were getting the ship patched up in Ireland, Bob Griffin, our tail gunner, used the thunder mug under the bed and didn't put it back. Herman Seigfeld, got up later in the night and got his foot caught when he stepped out of bed.

The newspaper industry recognized that what happened at Kiel that day was important. The Stars and Stripes carried a headline that read:

KIEL RAID "GREATEST AIR BATTLE"

The accompanying article indicated that the headline was a quote from Major General Ira C. Eaker. The article told that the formation was attacked by "droves of enemy fighters; Fw-190's, Me-109's and 110's, even Ju-88's and black painted night fighters." References to the bombing force throughout the article were entirely about B-17's.

In another paper the headline read:

Air Crews Tell Of Fierce Fighting

The article referred to the medium bombers that were out that day. It did quote one of our pilots: "The bombing was damned good, commented 2/nd Lt. Frank D. Slough, of Cleveland, Ohio, formerly with the RCAF. We must have blown Kiel off the map." No mention was made that he was in a Liberator.

Another newspaper stated:

Went Unescorted

Unescorted heavy bombers carried the U.S. attack to the naval base and shipbuilding yards at Kiel in Germany, itself, where all through the war have been concentrated perhaps the largest number of anti-aircraft emplacements in Axis held territory.

The day's work cost 11 U.S. bombers and four of the escorting fighters. No medium bombers were lost, it was announced." The article continued with generalized information about the battle, but no mention was made

about Liberators.

What we lacked in words, we made up for in a picture. The only published picture of that Kiel raid, that I have seen, was a strike picture taken from a Flying Fort. It has six Liberators circled and the text states; "Six Eighth Air Force Liberators go in for the bombing run over the smoking shipbuilding yards at Kiel, Germany, during the heavy daylight attack May 14. This picture was taken midway through the attack and as the raid developed the entire target area was obscured by smoke." I guess that one picture was worth a thousand words.

Mark Morris wrote in his diary:

May 14--I was assigned to a crew whose pilot is Lt. Swanson. They made a mission to Kiel, Germany. I was quartered in the ground crews' quarters and was not called by C.Q. Their ship did not return." (This would seem to account for the comment by Schiefelbusch that there were only five enlisted men on our crew. When Mark did not turn up, Swanson must have decided to go without a hatch gunner.) (Years later Mark related that the next time that he went to the Orderly Room to get a pass he was refused. His pass was pulled since he had been shot down.)

Captain Swanson flew that day with the crew and ship that was regularly assigned to Lt. McAtee. Norm Kiefer recalls that just a few days before the raid, the radio operator, Frederick Wolf, had received word that he was the father of a newborn boy.

Ray Marner mentioned the raid in his diary.

Kiel was one of the best raids we have ever had. More planes were used than ever before. We sent out 19 planes. We lost 4 ships, one from the 506th. I worked for Captain Swanson in operations. One of the ships crash landed on the field. Another couldn't land so they all bailed out over the field. Chamberlain was hit by flak and received the Purple Heart.

The next day, the Old Crow ground crew traced the path of one armor piercing 20-mm cannon shell. It came in through the tail and touched Maury's foot, clipped the oxygen hose of Smitty, pierced the armor plating shield at the waist gun (this was what was lodged in Coldiron's side), and then

shattered Coldiron's machine gun (a piece of it went in Coldiron's leg and other pieces peppered Kern's flying jacket).

My flight record indicates we flew the *Old Crow* to Langford Lodge to have battle damage repaired on May 17. Lockheed Overseas Aircraft Corporation maintained facilities just outside Belfast, Ireland. There they handle major repair jobs.

Just prior to this flight, the people of Dublin, Ireland, had received quite a scare. The German Air Force had been using the Dublin radio station for navigational purposes for some time. They could pretty well tell where they were over England by tuning in their directional radios to the Dublin station. A few days before the Germans had gotten pretty close to Ireland.

This scare had an immediate effect on us as we flew across the Irish Sea toward Belfast. We were flying with minimum crew and, except for the turrets, no guns. In the distance someone noticed a single engine fighter that seemed to be headed toward us. It approached from the side, then fell back and turned on to our course. That's when we manned the turrets.

The fighter slowly approached us keeping well to the left on the pilots side. At no time did it bring its guns to bear on us. When it was close enough, we saw that it was a Spitfire. Then it was alongside of us and the Spitfire pilot waved. We waved back. He wiggled his wings and peeled off. I guess that we had passed inspection.

We returned to Shipdham the following afternoon.

On May 16th Ray Marner wrote:

All our ships left to go somewhere on a mission that will last a few days. Maybe after a convoy or the invasion. I think they went to Africa. Nick's (Popovich) crew went. Also Rudy and Barber as armorers.

The reference to Nick agrees with Hobson's recollection. They both flew with Lt. Rebich. Lts. Bunker, McAtee and Slough also went. That morning they packed their combat gear and departed for Davidstowe Moore in southern England. They were accompanied by 16 other aircraft from the 44th.

On the morning of May 17, they departed England on a course that was ordinarily taken by aircraft flying to North Africa. When they were well beyond the range of the German radar that was situated on the Brest Peninsula, they tuned into Bordeaux radio and turned toward the Bay of Biscay. They were flying very low in order to stay below the radar screen. A few miles off the coast they started to climb. They were almost at Bordeaux when the radio stopped its transmission.

As a result of the surprise, there was no fighter opposition that day. Neither was there any problem with flak. The bombing was near perfect. The targets were the locks controlling the water level at one submarine repair facility and an aircraft factory. The locks were hit and water was observed rushing in. Later it was reported that a number of German submarines had been placed out of operation.

On May 18th Ray Warner reported:

Our planes came back tonight. They were down in southern England and raided Bordeaux, France from there. It was a very successful raid. The whole Group went without losing a plane. All bombs were on the target. It was the longest raid ever pulled by the Air Force and the first raid from the ETO by all B-24 planes. The 93rd Group and our Group participated.

An American newspaper reported the raid as follows:

200 BUILDINGS DESTROYED

Stockholm, quoting "reliable informants," disclosed that American Fortresses immobilized a number of submarines in their pens at Bordeaux on their last heavy raid by jamming the concrete and steel locks of the pens with high explosives. Several U-Boats were damaged or destroyed, 200 buildings levelled and 200 persons killed.... The remainder of the article dealt with the bombing efforts of the RAF".

The Bordeaux raid was such a success that our Air Force Command decided to try a repeat performance. On May 28th, five 506th ships, including Lts. Graham, Rebich, Bunce, McAtee and Bunker left Shipdham for St. Evals. There they joined 16 other aircraft from the 44th and a number from the 93rd. On the morning of May 29, they again departed on the transport route to Africa. This time they tuned their directional radios in to the La Pallice frequency.

The author recalls while flying at wave top level over the Bay of Biscay, we suddenly approached a fishing boat. Or, was it? It could be a German "Q Boat" that would radio our position and direction. Some of our gunners opened fire and the boat was sunk. Intelligence later claimed that it was a "Q Boat"

The attacking force continued on course and started to climb a few miles off La Pallice. Once again the radio transmissions ceased and we went on in. Light inaccurate flak drifted toward us just before bombs away. This was not the success story of a few days before, but the bombing results were good.

The *Flint Journal* carried banner headlines for this day:

USAAF BATTERS U-BOAT BASE IN FRANCE

LIBS AND FORTS STAGE THEIR BIGGEST RAID

Blows at St. Nazaire, La Pallice, Rennes End
Heaviest Month for 8th Air Force

The three targets of the record breaking bomber force which took off from Eighth Air Force stations Saturday were the U-boat bases of La Pallice and St. Nazaire, on the Bay of Biscay, and Rennes, communications center through which funnel much of the supplies bound for the submarine bases and yards on the Biscay coast.

Fortresses went to St. Nazaire and Rennes and the Liberators bombed the U-boat yards and slips at La Pallice. Crews reported good visibility and direct hits on all three target areas.

The B-24's found only light flak and virtually no enemy fighters over La Pallice. The Lib.'s were without fighter escort. La Pallice got its last U.S. raid last Nov. 18." The remainder of the article summarized the Eighth Air Force efforts for the month.

When our aircraft returned to St. Evals we found a large contingent of United States paratroopers had arrived during the day. They were standing and watching the aircraft land and the crews climb out of the ships. As I trudged with my gear toward a waiting truck, I heard one of them say, "Boy, they sure look tough." I thought, "I'm not tough. I'm just

tired." Thus ended Sortie #82.

Mark Morris remembers that on this, his first raid:

I discovered during taxiing that there was no way to fasten the ammunition chute to the left waist gun and no way to attach the ammunition belt. Armament had screwed up. A right waist main body had been mounted on a left mount. The previous gun had been damaged at Kiel. Needless to say, I was flabbergasted. I had no training on a B-24, but had installed the gun into the body in the dark. Anyhow, I didn't know prior to then where the ammunition box was mounted. I never was a fast learner, but starting that day I learned more about a caliber-50 than the armament crews. Some "wisenhimer" thought we were just looking for an excuse to abort and there was some broad hints to that effect. Anyway, no choice, but to drag the ammo out of the box and make very short belts to be held up with one hand when needed.

Our aircraft returned to Shipdham on May 30 and once again had not sustained any damage.

Earnest Cutshall doesn't remember which raid it was, but about this time:

We were on a raid and Vaden called on the intercom indicating that he had a problem with his gun. A spring had come out of the gun when he lifted the cover and he didn't know where it came from. He wanted to know what to do. Earnest didn't think that while you are over enemy territory you should be running around wondering what to do. He told him to put the cover back and try firing the gun. Vaden did and then called back to report that the gun worked better that it had before.

The following are extracts from letters that I wrote to my wife during the month of May:

"Dobbins is gone. We only know that he is missing in action."..."Gee it seems funny, but in all the towns around here the places of amusement close around 9:30 in the evening. When you come outside it is still broad daylight. Yes, we go to bed late and are still going to bed with the chickens."..."You will have to pardon the interruption. Our copilot just came in and started to horse around. Gee, there has been one big change in that man. Seven months ago, when he joined the crew, he had

some big ideas about the enlisted men. Now he realizes that he has to depend on us and you couldn't ask for a better fellow."... "I got a letter from a personnel office yesterday. They said that they would give every consideration to my wife in a war production job if she would file an application."... "Another thing, missing in action does not mean for you to give up hope. That is when you can start to hope for the best."... "Do you know where I am as I write this? I am in back of our hut sitting on an old broken bed. The day has been one of the best. Off in the distance I can hear a cuckoo bird and over in a freshly dragged field the gulls are shrieking as they feed. A big yellow bumblebee just buzzed by like a vengeful P-47. The boys in a hut across the way are doing a pretty good job of making good old American music with an accordion and a guitar. Songs that you and I have danced to many times."

In a recent letter, Loy Neeper recalled that Coldiron had a great talent for music. He played the fiddle with the small band at the barracks. He wanted to sell his fiddle to go to town with a few dollars in his pocket. I paid him for it as a means of keeping it available. I left it laying when I returned to the States. Later, he brought a horn of some kind and made some weird sounds for a while. However, before long he was playing it like a pro. (The author remembers that Danny Kennon also had musical talents. Danny played a mandolin.)