

My most difficult mission

MISSION TO OSCHERSLEBEN

by Lester Schrenk

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My name is Lester Schrenk, I flew with the Eighth Air Force, 92nd bomb group, 327 Bomb Squadron. I was flying combat missions from late December 1943 to Feb. 22nd 1944, during which time I flew as aerial engineer- ball turret gunner on 10 bombing missions, before we were shot down.

The worst bombing mission I had during this period was on January 11, 1944. This was the bombing mission to Oschersleben, Germany. The target was to bomb a fighter assembly factory of A. O. Flugzeugwerke A/G. The reason this bombing mission was so bad, was that after we were airborne the weather turned unfavorable. The other bombing groups were called back, but our group did not receive the call back message. So, unbeknown to us, our group went on alone to bomb the target.

During this stage of the war, Germany had air superiority, and our fighter escort, was still short-range and could only accompany us part way. Consequently, the whole German Luftwaffe bore down on us, as soon as our escort had to leave. Many of our bombers were shot down. Then, shortly before bombing the target there was a terrific loud explosion, and our entire aircraft was flipped upside-down. The entire rear half of engine No. 2 was blown off, and the propeller would not feather. This produced wild vibrations, to the point where one wondered if the wing would be ripped off. We continued on to bomb the target, and shortly thereafter there was another loud explosion, although this one was not quite as severe. I didn't think too much more about it until we reached the channel, whereupon the pilot called me to come up to the cockpit to give him a hand. Both the pilot and co-pilot were gripping the control column, and struggling to keep the plane from nosediving. They both had sweat running down their forehead, even though the temperature was well below zero. They had been wrestling with the control column ever since the second explosion. The pilot ask me and the other engineer to relieve them, as the force on the control column was very great. The other engineer and I took over, during which time the pilots had time to recover. We found out later that the second explosion had ripped a hole, about three feet across, and had severed several of the control cables, and that caused some of the metal on the control surfaces to be bent so as to cause the aircraft to be in a diving mode.

We did not make it back to base that night as it was getting dark and fog was closing in. The pilot saw an airfield below, and said we would attempt a landing there. What we didn't know, was that the airfield was under construction. The pilot made a near-perfect landing, even with the damaged control surface, one engine out, and with a whirling, vibrating, unfeathered propeller.

We nearly collided with a pile of stumps that were on the runway, due to the fact that the runway was not completed. But at least we were safe on the ground. When we looked at the damage, there were 2 gaping holes, both were large enough to easily crawl through, also the whole aircraft was riddled with all sizes of holes.

Unfortunately, my pilot Lieut. Wm.Lavies, was killed when we were shot down on Feb. 22nd 1944 on our 10th Bombing mission. We were shot down by a JU88 Twin engine fighter on a bombing mission to Aalborg, Denmark. We were captured immediately and became prisoners-of-war for the next 15 months.

Although combat was very hard, the real trouble began upon being captured. For those who have never been a prisoner-of-war, they have no idea what it may be like. I will leave those conditions to another story. I have often been asked if I shot down any enemy aircraft. The real truth is that I really don't know. You must remember, that on each bomber there were a total of thirteen guns, manned by 8 gunners. In each squadron there were anywhere from 20 to 27 aircraft that were shooting at the same attacking aircraft. When the Germans attacked in force, the attacking aircraft were only a few hundred yards apart. Consequently when you were shooting at an aircraft there was another one following closely behind. You would shoot a short burst and immediately swing your guns towards the second aircraft. You absolutely did not have time to see what happened to the aircraft you had just been shooting at. Also with that many guns shooting at the same aircraft, how can it be determined who shot the fatal blow. Also, the German pilots flew right through their own flak bursts. I saw any number of German planes shot down by their own flak. The air would be black with bursts of flak, also falling aircraft, both theirs and ours, parts of planes as well as bodies, thrown out without parachutes. ETC. As I have stated I have shot at any number of German aircraft but have no idea, if I have completely missed or scored on any of them.

It would be the same as if a duck was fired upon by about 200 hunters, as a duck falls to the ground each hunter would claim it to be his duck. So be it.

We found out later that our bomb wing had lost 42 heavy bombers that day, all were B-17s.