

One Day in the Lives of the Diamond Backs

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The day for the men of the 416th Bomb Squadron stationed in Foggia, Italy started early on August 27th, 1944. They arose at 3:30, quickly dressed and made their way to the mess hall for breakfast. After breakfast the men returned to their tents and put on their electric flying suits, made up their cots and each placed a letter at the foot of their bed addressed to their parents. The bomber crews then made their way to the ready room. This was a large Quonset hut where the squadron crews would be briefed on that day's mission. At briefing

the crew would not only learn where they are going but also information necessary for its completion. This briefing was almost always conducted by the squadron commander's adjutant in the presence of the squadron commander. This mission was to be a maximum effort meaning that all available planes would be used. On this day the 416th was able to send fourteen B17 bombers. The target was to be the southern oil refinery at Blechammer, Germany. The briefing lasted about an hour and was concluded by the words of the squadron commander, Captain William Alsobrook, "Good luck, good hunting, and good bye."



The crews filed out of the briefing room to waiting jeeps and trucks that took them out to the airfield where the planes were kept on individual hard stands or revetments. Upon arriving at the plane the pilots and crew would go over their preflight inspections and duties. The bombardier was met at the plane with the famed Norden bombsight. The co-pilot on this mission with Miss Behavin was charged with seventeen morphine syrettes for possible combat injuries and \$35,000 in United States gold certificates in case they had to bail out in hostile territory and buy or bribe their way to safety. The co-pilot, incidentally, was flying his second combat mission; the rest of the crew was flying its 18th. It was standard practice to introduce new pilots to combat with an experienced crew. After the crew completed its preflight duties, they put on their leather fleece-lined jackets, pants and boots; over this they wore their May West life preservers and parachute harness. The emotional stress was high, especially for those who had experience in combat. It wasn't uncommon to see men vomiting outside the plane prior to takeoff. The pilot taxied his plane using the wash of the propellers on the number one and number four engines to steer the plane to the end of the runway. The runway was a 1500 foot steel mat strip. At the end of the runway the pilot would lock the tail wheel and wait for instructions from the control tower.

The pilot heard over the radio in a clearly English accent, "Sand Fly Tower to 6407 you're clear to take off." Immediately the pilot pushed the throttles to full power and released the brake. The flight engineer called out the air speed at 10 mile-an-hour increments as the co-pilot watched the oil temperature and pressure gauges. At 120 miles an hour the pilot would drop the flaps pulling the plane off the ground with very little runway left to spare. The heavily laden plane sluggishly took flight, straining as the nineteen fuel tanks splashed 100 octane fuel out the vent holes to bring 8000 pounds of fragmentation bombs (twelve 500 lb and two 1000 lb) 650 miles to Germany. When the planes of the 416th Bomb Squadron were assembled in flight they proceeded toward the target, meeting up with other planes from the 99th Bomb Group over the Adriatic Sea, increasing their altitude as they went. At 10,000 feet the crew went on oxygen. The higher the planes flew the colder they became; temperatures of sixty to seventy below were common inside these unheated aircraft.

The flight plan was relatively straightforward. The formations would continue to assemble over the Adriatic Sea picking up their fighter escort at the southern border of Austria. On this mission the fighter group that would accompany the 416th would be North American P-51 Mustangs from the 325th Fighter Group. These planes were affectionately known by the bomber crews as the "Checker Tails." The planes' route would straddle the borders of Austria and Hungary, careful to avoid the defenses of cities such as Wiener Neustadt and Vienna. The altitude of the formations at this time was approximately 25,000 feet or nearly five miles, and they maintained this altitude while crossing the Czechoslovakian border west of Bratislava.

The B-17s started to see and engage German fighters upon entering Austrian air space. The formations would close up to as little as 20 feet between aircraft in order to concentrate their firepower onto the enemy fighters. The idea was to create a wall of lead to protect the planes within its parameters. The sound of the Browning 50 caliber machine guns was deafening and the pilots could tell which guns were firing and in which direction by the forces exerted on the plane. The spent shells falling from the upper local turret were also a distraction as they rained down directly behind the pilots. The pilots had no defensive weapons to fight back with. The machine guns were manned by the others in the crew. During this battle engagement, the bombardier grabbed a portable oxygen bottle and slipped it into a pocket in the lower leg of his flight suit with the hose placed into his mouth and proceeded to the bomb bay. He worked his way down a narrow catwalk four inches in width pulling the arming wires from the front of the bombs. Once the arming wires were pulled the bombs were live; in the event of having to turn back or scrub the mission, the bombs would not be taken back to the base. The normal procedure for this contingency would be to drop the bombs in the Adriatic Sea.

The bombardier having armed his bombs would return to his station at the front of the plane and begin his calculations for the bomb run. To do this he had to abandon his defensive duties which were to fire the twin fifties in the chin turret. This left the plane in a vulnerable position. The two guns in the chin turret were the only guns that could be aimed at a direct head on assault. When the navigator and pilots arrive at a predetermined point in their flight called the initial point, the pilot would relinquish control of the aircraft over to the bombardier. The bombardier would then be controlling the flight of the plane at this point, using the dials on the Norden bombsight in order to do this. The pilots sat in their seats with their hands off the controls waiting for the bombardier to call "Bombs away" and then again take control of the airplane and take evasive action and head for home.

During this point of the bomb run, the pilot saw the end stages of a classic Luftwaffe tactic that capitalized on the vulnerabilities of Miss Behavin as the bombardier piloted the plane. A Focke Wulf 190 flew 1000 yards above and approximately two miles ahead of the attacking formation before diving and turning back in a direct frontal attack on the bomber. The closing speed would be about 500 miles an hour. The pilot saw that it was an FW190 at approximately 1500 yards directly ahead of him. The attacking FW190 fired a few bursts of its 20mm cannons and the pilot estimated eight to ten shots directed at the front of his plane. Then it happened. The pilot remembers a bright red flash filling his field of vision and directly in front of the co-pilot. The windshield had a perfectly round hole exactly 20 mm in diameter. Sitting directly to the right of the pilot, the co-pilot's nearly decapitated body convulsed in angry protest at the loss of his soul. In a few seconds, the body of the co-pilot lay still. Lieutenant Leonard Wiede was nineteen years old.

The crew at this point was unaware of the death of one of their own. Almost in a cosmic tribute to the death of Leonard Wiede, everything had an eerie stillness. The chatter of the machine guns had quieted

down and the only sound was that of the drone of the engines. This could only mean one thing; the ground defenses were about to be deployed. The ground defenses consisted of heavy artillery called flak. Most of the flak they encountered on this mission was a twenty-three pound exploding shell fired from the ground by an 88mm antiaircraft gun. Without wasting time the pilot called to the radio operator, "Pete, I need your help up here." Peter Enfield, a kid from Everett, Washington was horrified by what he saw in the cockpit. The pilot instructed him to remove Weide's body to the radio room and to return to the cockpit. Enfield tugged on the pant leg of James Tossi, the flight engineer, who was manning the upper local turret and together they pulled Wiede's body out of the cockpit and placed him in the radio room. During these moments the plane was being buffeted by 88mm flak exploding all around it. The concussion of these explosions would move the plane, and shells that were particularly close tore holes through the fuselage. The frequency of these explosions reminded the pilot of popping corn.

While the pilot, radio operator, and flight engineer were dealing with the emergency in the cockpit, the bombardier was flying the plane from the initial point to his aiming point, making calculations as he went. When the bombardier reached his aiming point, he flipped a toggle switch that released the bombs and called to the pilot "Bombs away." The pilot could feel the release of nearly four tons of explosives because of the instantaneous lift of the airplane. When the pilot heard "Bombs away", he immediately took evasive action. The pilot began a predetermined turn to the right in order to move away from the concentrated flak area. During this turn, the pilot felt his right foot jar as a piece of German steel deflected off the right rudder peddle piercing him in the lower abdomen, just missing his femoral artery, and resting in his right hip.





The pilot didn't immediately notice that he had been wounded. When the radio operator returned to the cockpit, the pilot instructed him to scrape the frozen blood of the co-pilot off the dials of the engine instruments, and to call off oil pressure and temperature readings, fuel reserves and the like. The plane had limited or superficial damage. The pilot began to have a warm sensation in his right hip. He reached down and felt his clothing was wet. The blood that covered his olive-drab flight suit looked black. It wasn't until he raised his hand could he see that it was his blood soaking through his

flight suit. He told the radio operator to retrieve the morphine syrettes from the body of the co-pilot and take the vacant co-pilot's seat. A quick assessment of the situation was done by the pilot. Since the plane was operating well and they were able to keep up with the formation, he decided that he and the crew would continue to fly the plane until he either passed out or bled out.

The return flight to Foggia would take approximately five hours. When the pilot's pain proved intolerable, the radio operator would give him just a little push from a morphine syrette to relieve the pain but not so much that the pilot would become disoriented and unable to fly. The radio operator gave the pilot three such injections on the return flight home. The return flight proved uneventful. There weren't any other attacks from enemy fighters and the bombers stayed clear of the antiaircraft guns.



At approximately six o'clock in the afternoon Miss Behavin and the remaining planes of the 416th Bomb Squadron began their approach to their airfield outside of Foggia. The flight engineer took the Veri pistol or flare gun and shot a red flare out of a hole directly behind the pilots' seats. This was specifically designed to notify the ground crews and Sand Fly Tower that they had wounded aboard. They received a reply by radio to come right in. The pilot suffering from excruciating pain, loss of blood

and shock landed his plane perfectly. On this day he wouldn't have to bring his plane back to its revetment.

The plane was met by an ambulance crew and the flight surgeon. The uninjured crew were given their mandatory two ounces of brandy and taken to the ready room for interrogation. The pilot was carried out of the rear escape hatch, given a bag of plasma, and loaded on a C-47 cargo plane and flown with the other wounded men of the 416th to the surgical hospital in the Adriatic port city of Bari. The pilot spent the next month recovering from his wounds. The body of Leonard Wiede was recovered by Graves Registration and the letter on his cot was mailed to his parents. There were a lot of letters mailed that day. Of the fourteen planes that started out for Blechammer, only five returned.

The pilot was awarded the Purple Heart, Distinguished Flying Cross and the Bronze Star for his actions that day sixty-five years ago. Many of you might be impressed or even astounded by this story, and it is impressive. The thing that amazes me the most is that this story is typical. Missions like this occurred by the thousands, and what is most impressive is that they went back! The pilot was flying combat missions one month later and completed by war's end thirty-eight total combat missions.

Many of you will in time forget this story. In fact, it has already started to fade from your memory. But there is one individual in this room to whom these images I have described are as clear and vivid as if they occurred yesterday. I would like to introduce a close personal friend of mine and the twenty-year-old pilot from this story, Major Robert Zenz, United States Army, 99th Bomb Group, 416th Bomb Squadron, retired.

