

Jim Colvert

Flying the Old Marauder over Nazi Germany

When my class (44-D) graduated from the USAAF Advanced Flying School at Altus, Oklahoma, on April 15, 1944, most of us applied for combat transition training on the Martin B-26 Marauder. This twin-engine bomber was a glamorous machine, a formidable weapon of war famous in the 1940s as “a pilot’s airplane,” efficient but demanding, unforgiving, deliciously dangerous—just the thing for confident young men in their waning adolescence who wanted to help bring Hitler down with as much style as possible.

With a top speed of more than 300 mph (the book claimed 323) the B-26 could sometimes evade, in theory at least, even the best enemy fighters like the spectacular German Messerschmitt-109 and Focke Wulf-190 and later versions of the Japanese Mitsubishi Zero. It carried an enormous bomb load for its size, and it bristled with defensive armament, normally twelve .50 caliber machine guns strategically located in the nose, in fuselage pods, and in the dorsal and tail gun turrets. But the important thing to us lads barely out of our teens was its formidable challenge to our flying skills. Pilots who flew the Marauder were special—or so we thought—and special was what we wanted to be.

A couple of hours after the graduation ceremony (where proud mothers or sweethearts pinned on our shiny new shavetail bars and silver wings), I got orders assigning me to the Specialty Twin-Engine Pilot School at Laughlin Field, Del Rio, Texas, for transition training on the B-26. I was elated. It was just what I’d hoped for, and I counted myself among the luckiest of the lucky.

I was allowed fifteen days en route, a welcome break from the grinding, seven-day week routine of flight training that had

begun at Old Kelly Field, San Antonio, Texas, in the spring of 1943. I went off happily to Texarkana, Texas, where my family lived at the time, renewed old acquaintances, haunted the local



In June, 1945, the author (center) was assigned to the 391st Bomb Group, based then at Cambrai, France, as a transatlantic ferry pilot, shown here with his ferry crew, Captain C.O. Reeves, navigator, and Master Sergeant George Herschel, flight engineer. The picture was made in August, shortly before their scheduled departure for Savannah, Georgia, via Morocco and the South Atlantic. The night before the takeoff the mission was cancelled, and the author was reassigned to the 344th Bomb Group at Charleroi, Belgium, as an instructor-pilot.

officers' club, made plans with Mary Westerfield to get married at the first opportunity, and tried the patience of any number of people who were not especially interested in hearing about either the virtues or the thrilling vices of the Martin Marauder. I spent a day in Dallas visiting former teachers and friends at Southern Methodist University, where I had been a junior when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, and toward the end of April boarded the train for Del Rio and the beginning of my adventures with the infamous Martin B-26.

in what he had to say. He told us bluntly that he did not like being a Martin B-26 instructor. He said he had nothing against the airplane which, if handled right, was better than its reputation. But if it wasn't handled right, he said, it would kill us—and worse than that, if he happened to be aboard, it

A few days later I joined a group of six new pilots in one of the ready rooms on the Laughlin flight line for our first meeting with our flight instructor. First Lieutenant Henry Pugh, a slender, slightly stoop-shouldered young man (only three or four years older than his trainees) was short and to the point

would kill him too. He said that he had no intention of getting himself killed in Del Rio, Texas, and that if he didn't get heads-up work in the cockpit at all times he would—and could—have us shipped off to Kansas or South Dakota as copilots on some inglorious old flying boxcar in the Air Transport Command.

He took us down to the flight line to give us our first close-up look at a Martin Marauder. We had seen them in the air, of course, speedy, graceful, gratifyingly noisy, but under the rules of war-time security, few people besides those who flew them or worked on them had ever seen them on the ground. It was bigger than I expected, and definitely less graceful on the ground than in the air. Leaning slightly nose low on its tricycle-type landing gear, it had a tense, menacing look, like a prehistoric bird of prey crouched for a sudden leap into flight. Two massive eighteen-cylinder, 2000 horsepower radial engines seemed to occupy most of its surprisingly small wings. Its thirteen-foot, four-bladed propellers looked too big for the airplane, and the heavy wheels and landing gear struts looked as if they belonged on an earth-moving machine.

We climbed into the cockpit through the open bomb bay doors, sat in the pilot and copilot seats, and looked with troubled hearts at a formidable array of instruments, levers, gauges, and gangs and banks of switches, some with arcane captions like "Hydraulic Bleeder," "Supercharger High Blower Warning," and "Propeller Warning." It was a far cry from the little twin-engine Cessnas (AT-17s, or "twin-breasted cubs," as we called them) we had flown in advanced flying school at Altus. In the officers' quarters that night one of Pugh's new students worried and complained. "I think he's afraid of it," he said, "and he's the only guy I've run into since I got here who seems to have any sense at all. What the hell's so bad about being a gooney-bird copilot in ATC anyway?"

The next day Pugh took us out for our "orientation" flights. When my time came he put me in the copilot's seat, handed me the checklists and said, "Follow along." On his signal a crewman standing by on the ramp started the putt-putt, a rackety little two-cylinder auxiliary generator that supplied power for cranking the heavy engines. I tried to follow Pugh's starting moves against the unfamiliar checklist: brakes locked, landing-gear safety locks check, master switch on, left mag switch on, engine prime, energizer toggle switch engaged. The energizer

flywheel in the left engine nacelle started with a low whirring sound that rose as it gained speed to a shrill whine. When it reached the tortured pitch Pugh seemed to be listening for, he triggered the engage switch. The keening of the flywheel abruptly became a labored grunt as the starter dragged the heavy engine into a slow, jerking turn. Pugh shoved the left mixture control full open and then, to avoid flooding the carburetor, to full closed. The exhaust stack coughed a puff of oily smoke, the engine fired briefly, died, coughed again, and then came furiously alive, with a deep, pounding rumble that vibrated through the whole airplane.

He started the right engine, set both throttles for 1000 rpm, and while we waited for the engine oil and cylinder head temperatures to come up, showed me how to disengage the landing gear control lock, how to “milk up” the wing flaps after takeoff, and how to switch off the fuel booster pumps after the initial climbout.



The author and his armorer-gunner, Staff Sergeant James Callery, by their Douglas A-26 Invader just before takeoff for an attack on the Falkenberg railroad junction. The date was April, 1945. It was their nineteenth combat mission.

We got taxi clearance from the tower, and on Pugh's signal the lineman pulled the wheel chocks, checked the wing tips for clearance, and gave the roll-ahead signal. Pugh advanced the

throttles slightly, and we trundled out and turned into the taxiway. The ride along the twisting taxi route to the runway was unexpectedly soft and stable, like that of a heavy luxury car. For such an ominous-looking beast, it seemed almost docile as it responded smoothly and instantly to Pugh's skillful touch on the throttles and brakes.

We parked in the runup area, and I held the checklist again as Pugh began the pre-takeoff runup drill: magneto checks at 2000 rpm; propeller governor checks at 2250 rpm (the propellers hissing viciously as the governors forced them into high pitch); propeller feathering check; propeller control switch in automatic; carburetor heat check; fuel, engine oil, and hydraulic fluid pressures check; engine cowl flaps full open; oil cooler flaps half open; supercharger in low blower; engine instruments check; generator amp and voltage check; wing flaps one quarter down; aileron, rudder, and stabilizer trim set, gyroscopic flight instruments checked and set; vacuum pump pressure check; accumulator air pressure check; hatches and bomb bay doors closed and locked. Pugh went through this ritual smoothly, without hesitation, and said over the engine noise, "Next time, you do it. Sit in the cockpit with one of the others and practice until you can touch everything blindfolded."

The tower cleared us for takeoff, and Pugh swung into the runway. With the nose wheel on the white center line, he brought the airplane to a full stop, and holding it with the toe brakes, slowly started the throttles forward. The engines responded with a bellow, and the airplane strained forward, shaking as the propeller blasts swept over the tail surfaces. When the gauges showed three-quarter power, Pugh abruptly released the brakes and smoothly pushed the throttles forward to full takeoff power. The roaring airplane leaped forward, its sudden acceleration momentarily pushing us against the backs of our seats, and in seconds, the runway was streaming to the rear in a blur of speed. As the airspeed indicator needle passed 105 mph, Pugh raised the nosewheel slightly; at 115 he pulled us off the runway with a backward tug on the control yoke and started a flat climb, still accelerating rapidly. As the ground fell away below us, he gave the landing-gear-up signal, and I unlocked the safety mechanism and raised the control lever. He touched the toe brakes to stop the spinning wheels as they rose, groaning and thumping, into the engine nacelles. We were

rapidly picking up speed, and when the airspeed indicator showed 140, Pugh steepened the climb, eased the throttles back a bit, and reduced the propeller speeds. On his signal, I stepped up the wing flaps and turned off the fuel booster pumps. He stabilized the climb at 190 mph and trimmed the flight controls. We had crossed the Rio Grande in the first part of the climbout. Pugh shouted that we were over Mexico, and grinning said something about violating Mexican neutrality. We made a wide, sweeping turn back toward Del Rio, and when we were in level flight at 4000 feet, cruising at 245 mph, Pugh turned the controls over to me. I cautiously experimented, rolling gently right and left and raising and lowering the nose. The Marauder was pleasantly responsive and stable; from what I'd heard, I expected something quirky, skittish, perverse; now, callow youth that I was, I wondered whether it really deserved its reputation for treachery and its unflattering nicknames, "The Flying Coffin" and "The Widow Maker."

After a while Pugh took over, and we began a descent toward the distant base. We circled at 1800 feet, throttles back, slowing as Pugh trimmed the controls, advanced the mixture controls to auto-rich, turned on the fuel booster pumps, and advanced the propeller controls to the high RPM position. At 180 mph he lowered the landing gear, and when the wheels dropped rumbling out of the engine nacelles and clunked into place, three small green lights on the panel glowed to confirm that the wheels were down and securely locked. "Three in the green," Pugh said aloud. The tower cleared us, and circling broadly, we swept around and lined up with the distant runway. At 170 Pugh put the wing flaps half down and adjusted the engine cowl and oil-cooler flaps. At 150 he eased the throttles back again and lowered the nose slightly, descending toward the runway, carefully maintaining 150 mph.

From the beginning of the approach, I thought we might be too high to get into proper position for a landing. As we got closer to the runway threshold, I knew for a dead certainty that we were badly overshooting, that my B-26 instructor had grievously botched the approach, and that unless he abandoned it and came around for another try, we would overfly the runway and hit the ground somewhere south of the Rio Grande in the mesquite bushes of the Coahuila desert.

Expecting him to push the throttles open and call for gear and flap retraction for the go-around, I was astonished when he pushed the wing flaps control into the full down position. The effect was dramatic. As the flaps whirred down, the airplane smoothly pitched down into a diving attitude, and we were looking almost directly down into the runway threshold 250 feet below us. Pugh, eyes on the runway, shouted, "Note that we don't land this airplane. We just drop full flaps on a short final and let her FALL in."

At 70 feet or so, still holding 150 mph, he started the roundout, raising the nose smoothly to break our descent and position the airplane for touchdown. The runway numbers whipped under us and we went skimming over the white center line at 120. Pugh eased the throttles to full closed, and as he steadily increased pressure on the elevator, the main wheels touched the runway with a loud chirking sound. At 70, he lowered the nose wheel to the runway, applied brakes, and rolled into a runway turnoff. Taxiing in, he asked, "Well, what do you think?"

"It's great," I said. "It feels really fine, very straightforward, not nearly as mean to handle as I expected."

"Sure," Pugh said. "It's fine most of the time, as long as you're paying attention to what you're doing and doing it right. But just fall into some goddam knuckleheaded trance during an approach or takeoff or roll into a sloppy steep bank and see what happens then. I guarantee you it'll take the first chance it gets TO BITE YOUR HEAD CLEAN OFF."

"Bite your head clean off" was Pugh's favorite expression, and we heard it a lot during the next nine hectic, seven-day weeks of almost constant flying. Unlike my vivid memory of my first flight, most of the other events at Laughlin that summer dissolved long ago out of particularity into a blur of impressions. There were days and nights in the cockpit, and in the relentless routine of takeoffs, navigation missions, instrument approaches (using the quaint and difficult old low-frequency radio range "beam" to bring us blind down to the runway), we developed a real sense of the meaning of Pugh's "bite your head clean off" warnings. If an engine failed at any speed under 135 mph after takeoff, the airplane became uncontrollable. If the pilot tried to continue the flight, the instinctive reaction, the unbalanced thrust of the good engine would override the flight controls, roll

the airplane upside down, and fling it into the ground. Pugh's grim message was that the only thing to be done if an engine failed under 135 mph was to shut down the good engine instantly and execute a controlled crash straight ahead. If this happened during a night takeoff, he said, it might be a good idea, if we had time, to turn on the landing lights. "If you don't like what you see, turn 'em off."

We learned that flying on one engine in the Marauder was a formidable challenge even under the best circumstances, demanding quick and correct pilot reaction at the moment of engine failure and a good knowledge of the airplane's critical speed and turning limitations under various conditions of loading and altitude. We learned that the electrically-driven propeller governors sometimes caused accidents, often because the pilot, having fallen into "some goddam knuckleheaded trance," neglected to double-check the propeller controls settings or failed to put the generators on line before takeoff. Propeller failures occurring immediately after takeoff were usually disastrous, and Pugh was unfailingly unpleasant when we did something to invite them. He drilled us relentlessly, and if he detected the slightest sign of inattention or carelessness, he would suddenly kill one of the engines (only if we were well above 135 mph, of course!) and send us scrambling through the engine-failure drill. He made single-engine flight at altitude a part of our daily routine, and perhaps two or three times a week he would kill an engine as we circled into the traffic pattern and observe anxiously as we executed a single-engine landing, an uncomfortably tricky maneuver in the B-26.

Pugh's instruction gave us a healthy respect for the Marauder, even made us fearful of it at first; but as our skills developed, our confidence in it rose steadily, and when we finished our training in late June, we (the four students who survived the course) were passionately convinced that it was the greatest of the great warplanes. The next thing now was to learn how to fly it in combat, and we waited impatiently for our assignments to the Combat Replacement Training Unit at Barksdale Field, Louisiana, where we would be assigned crews and complete the final 10-week phase of our training.

I arrived at Barksdale in July after the usual delays and confusions that accompany military station changes, and found my crew already assembled and waiting. My copilot, fresh from

advanced twin-engine school at Altus (three classes behind me) and eager for his first look at the B-26, was Second Lieutenant Arthur Griffith, a genial redhead from New Jersey. My bombardier/navigator was a volatile, noisy, prankish nineteen-year-old Californian, Flight Officer Joseph Cerniglia. Our technician/gunners were Corporals James Callery, armorer, Charles Day, flight engineer, and Frederick Ellis, radio operator. We were on standby for several days before finally beginning our crew training, and I took the opportunity to introduce Grif to the airplane. I took him out for his first ride. "It's great," he said as we were taxiing in. "That full-flap short final is wild, but it handles fine, a lot better than I expected."

"Sure," I said. "It's fine most of the time, as long as you're paying attention to what you're doing and doing it right. But just fall into some goddam knuckleheaded trance during an approach or takeoff or roll into a sloppy steep bank and see what happens then. I guarantee you it'll take the first chance it gets TO BITE YOUR HEAD CLEAN OFF."

I was lucky enough to wangle a week's leave, and Mary and I grabbed the opportunity to get married. When we returned from our two-day war-time honeymoon, we set up in an apartment near Barksdale, and I began the killing routine of combat crew training.

From this distance in time, our training in tactical combat at Barksdale, like my transition training at Laughlin, is a blurred impression of grueling, seemingly interminable, hours in the cockpit, in the primitive (pre-computer) simulators we had then, and in endless ground school classes. My "Pilot's Qualification Record," which has survived from those long-ago days, shows that we covered twenty-two subjects in ground training: engineering, navigation, bomb trainer (with the exotic Norden bombsight), bombing tactics, and so on, including such useless things as skeet-range firing and camouflage techniques (I've forgotten the theory that put these



The author, 1944, shortly before joining the 386th Bomb Group at Beaumont-sur-Oise, France.

odd subjects in the curriculum). We flew for hours in tight formation, hearts in our mouths as we frantically fought to hold our positions on our leader's wing in the violent twisting and turning of evasive action maneuvers. We flew simulated over-water missions out into the Gulf of Mexico, gunnery missions on which Day, Ellis, and Callery blasted away with their fifty calibers at towed sleeve targets, night dead-reckoning navigation missions (we never flew a night mission in combat) during which Joe Cerniglia, hunched in the Plexiglas nose, kept our ears ringing with boasts about the accuracy of his checkpoint estimates ("Anniston, 11 seconds early, so fire me").

Then one day in early November it ended. We were certified after a flurry of final check flights as a combat crew, and suddenly—for once without the standard delays and confusion of a station change—found ourselves staging at Hunter Field, Savannah, Georgia, for shipment overseas. Mary and Marge Leonard, another pilot's wife, drove someone's convertible to Savannah in expectation of the usual delay, but within days of their arrival, we were off to New Jersey.

We sailed on the *Queen Elizabeth* from New York within the week, and zigzagging across the Atlantic, constantly changing course to evade German submarines, we dropped anchor five days later in the Firth of Clyde. There was a long, miserable, all-night train ride from Scotland to a combat crew replacement depot near Stone, England, where we waited, bags half packed, for our next move toward war.

On December 16, we huddled all day around the radio, listening in dismay to reports of the stunning German breakthrough in the Ardennes. The base intelligence officer called a meeting to explain what had happened and to inform us that the enemy's devastating offensive almost guaranteed that the war would go on for another two or three years.

Several days later, five B-26 crews, mine among them, unloaded our gear at a nearby airbase, and crunching our way through a foot of glazed snow, boarded one of ATC's inglorious old flying boxcars and lifted off in a gray mist for France. Our C-47 transport droned out to the coast north of London, turned southeast over the frigid looking Channel, crossed the coast of France near Calais, and less than an hour later was 25 miles north of Paris, circling the Marauder airbase at Beaumont-sur-Oise, or A-60, as our coded orders called it. The C-47 deposited

us and our baggage on the cold, windy runway (there was only one) and clattered back into the gloomy overcast.

While we waited for someone to come out and pick us up, we stamped around in the unbelievable cold and contemplated a dismal scene. In the gray winter air, the distant tarpaper shacks, maintenance sheds, and Quonset huts looked like piles of damp cardboard. Olive-drab B-26s parked on the hardstands along the taxiways looked more like sick turkeys than prehistoric birds of prey. Behind them in a field of dirty snow were rows of rumped tents—one of which, as I thought sadly, I would be calling home for a while. “Hot damn,” Cerniglia said gleefully. “This is GREAT. Just the way I *dreamed* it would be. Just *look* at that. A dream come true.”

Army trucks finally came out and drove us to the group briefing shack, where we heard words of caution from our Group Commander, Colonel Thomas Corbin. He told us that if we had any notions about the war being nearly over to get rid of them. The enemy’s Ardennes offensive proved that we still had a long way to go to victory in Europe. He said that this shattering blow against the Allies almost guaranteed that the war would go on for another two or three years, and that we ought to get set for a good long stay in the 386th Bomb Group.

A master sergeant consulted a clipboard and read off our squadron assignments. Ours was the 554th, a mile or so across the field. When we finally unloaded at Operations, it was nearly dark, and colder—much colder. We checked in with the Officer of the Day, and an airman guided us to our assigned tents—Grif and Cerniglia to one, me to one next to it. The temperature, our guide said, was five degrees and dropping.

In my assigned tent were three officers huddled around a glowing coal stove frying eggs. One was a tall, sad-looking young man who introduced himself oddly: “Charles Cavanaugh, captain by rank.” The others were his copilot, First Lieutenant Lloyd Hill, and the squadron’s lead navigator, Captain Al Major. (A month or so later he was promoted to major, and thus became Major Major, anticipating the Major Major of *Catch-22* fame.) Cavanaugh generously offered me an egg (a scarce and cherished item, stringently rationed when available), and as he was frying it, he looked up suddenly and asked, “If you could turn around right now and walk through that door and go home, would you do it?” I hesitated, wondering what he meant,

and decided that it was his way of asking how I felt about finally making it to combat. I was not as thrilled about it as I had once been; I liked the flying part of the war, but my enthusiasm for the shooting part waned progressively as I got closer and closer to it. I wanted to do my part in what I knew had to be done, but still. . . .

“Well,” I said, “I guess so. Maybe so, if I could.”

“Well, you can’t, so forget it,” Cavanaugh said curtly. I put this Captain Cavanaugh down as strange one. Later Hill told me that he sometimes showed mild symptoms of combat stress, or as Hill put it, he was “a touch flak happy.” He had flown over sixty combat missions. He had been with the group since before D-Day, when it was still based in England, and had flown several missions against occupied France in the furious air attacks on German coastal defenses that preceded the Invasion. When he logged his sixty-seventh mission in early March, he got orders relieving him of his combat assignment, and the very next day he turned right around, walked through the door, and went home.

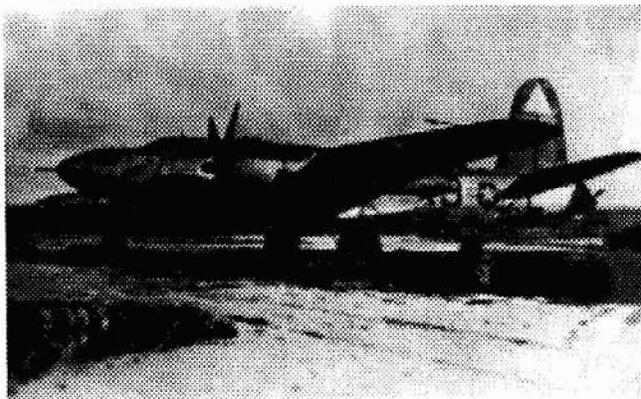
A-60 had been a German fighter base during the Nazi occupation. When their group pulled out, sometime during the battle for France, they blew up the runway and buildings. An army construction battalion patched the runway and closed some of the gaping holes in the few buildings that still had walls and roofs. The 554th had two of these prizes, which we used as our headquarters and operations offices. Headquarters was a narrow, three-story stone building facing a rubble-strewn open space that had once been a courtyard. Through a large hole in the front wall, we could see part of the sagging staircase that led up to the squadron commander’s office on the second floor. A single surviving room on the third floor had been outfitted as an officer’s club, with two or three tables and some makeshift chairs and stools. The bar was a propped-up ME-109 wing someone retrieved from a crashed Messerschmitt in a nearby field. Behind the bar in rough wooden crates was a huge cache of champagne, courtesy of the Nazis. The story was that they left it behind when they abandoned the base during the battle for Paris in the summer of 1944. When we bellied up to the bar and ordered champagne, we got a whole bottle. We drank it straight out of the bottle, like beer.

The stairs going down to the second floor led to the open hole in the wall. A big sign had been nailed up above this dangerous

opening: "Pull Up Your Flaps and Go Around"—a warning that probably saved many a heavily overloaded pilot from stumbling through the hole and crashing, bottle in hand, in the rubble ten or twelve feet below.

In the middle of the tent area was a tall pole bearing two loud speakers connected to a radio and a public address system in the operations office. We used the British term for this rig, the "tannoy." Via the tannoy, the BBC brought us the popular music of the day ("Old Black Magic," "What Is this Thing Called Love," "String of Pearls") puzzling (or exasperating) English humor, and a constant stream of reports on the progress of the war. We were out of action during most of the heaviest fighting in the Lowlands that January; sleet and snow and thick, lowering clouds and fogs kept us on the ground, huddled and dejected in our freezing tents, listening to the tannoy, writing letters, waiting for the weather to break.

It broke in late January, and I flew my first combat mission, as copilot, as per established procedure, on January 22. My pilot was Lieutenant Lucius Hebert, whom I met for the first time at the predawn mission briefing. He was a pale, taciturn Lousianian, a veteran of some thirty combat missions. He was not especially friendly, probably because he wasn't too happy about having a greenhorn in the right seat of his airplane on a combat mission. The mission sheet I made that morning no longer exists, and I have forgotten, oddly, most of the details of this important moment in my life, but my flight log reminds me that the target was the railroad bridge at Sinzig, a village on the



*A B-26 Marauder of the 391st Bomb Group,
Cambrai, France.*

Rhine about halfway between Bonn and Koblenz; that the mission was three hours and fifty minutes long; and that ten minutes of that time were flown at night, which means, I suppose, that the mission was delayed, probably by weather, until mid-afternoon and that we did not make it back to Beaumont until after dark.

But what I do remember, I remember vividly. I remember that as we were buckling in, Hebert said, "We'll get flak, and I'm supposed to tell you to keep an eye on me. So I'll tell you. If I get hit, try to keep me off the control yoke." Those words, spoken reluctantly and self-consciously, violently shifted my perspective; they brought sharply home the not yet fully acknowledged fact this was not just another training flight around the old home base. This was the real thing. Within the next hour and a half, clever Germans with radar-controlled anti-aircraft guns or vicious, cannon-laden fighters would very likely be doing their level best to kill me.

I remember that at one point on our way to the target Hebert's bombardier keyed his mike and reported that we had crossed the bomb line. I remember how tense and far away his voice sounded when moments later he called the position of the first flak bursts, and I remember especially the leap of my heart when the sky ahead and to our right suddenly and silently blossomed with black puffs of 88-millimeter flak bursts. I remember how Hebert labored at the controls executing the sudden wrenching turns of our evasive maneuvers and his intense concentration holding steady on the bomb run, tightly locked on the wing of the flight leader until we finally released our bombs over the Sinzig bridge and dived away from the target toward France.



A week later, with *Officers' Quarters, Beaumont-sur-Oise, 1945.* another break in the weather, my crew was assigned its first mission, one of the seven we flew together before we split up in March, when the 386th switched to a new airplane, the single-pilot, single-gunner Douglas A-26 Invader. I still have the

yellowing, brittle mission sheet I carefully filled out in the early morning hours of January 29, 1945. These fading notes on communications, aircraft assignments, checkpoints, and en route times, along with my flight log and inferences that can be drawn from typical World War II air combat experience, vividly and clearly restore to memory the sights, sounds, and emotions of that momentous event.

On mission days, an airman from Squadron Operations awakened the combat crews at 0430. Lying under a pile of blankets, wearing my fleece-lined flying boots against the bitter cold, already fully awake, I watched the slashing beam of his flashlight as he crunched through the frozen snow from tent to tent, knocking lightly and calling names in a discreet murmur. Ten minutes after his call at my door, I joined Grif and Joe in the mess tent, where we breakfasted under naked light bulbs on tepid oatmeal with powdered milk, scrambled powdered eggs, thick chunks of cold French bread, margarine, jelly, and coffee. A wide, red-lettered plank sign over the door lifted our spirits as we went out: "Smile. You Never Had It So Good."

At 0515 pilots, navigators, and bombardiers assembled in the rubbled courtyard with our flying gear and waited for trucks that would take us across the field to the group briefing shack. There, waiting for the briefing team, we sat on wooden benches before a curtained and guarded wall-sized map that held the secrets we wanted to know—where we were going and how much trouble we were going to have getting there and back.

The briefing staff arrived from Group Operations. A lieutenant colonel pulled the curtain, and tapping a spot on the map with his pointer, named the target: the Bendorf railroad bridge on the Rhine between Neuwied and Koblenz. He said it was an important target. The Germans were moving hundreds of tons of supplies over the bridge daily, supplies that enabled them to inflict heavy casualties on Allied troops retaking the Lowlands the enemy had overrun after their spectacular Ardennes breakout in December.

Another briefing officer traced the devious route we would fly to avoid the heaviest known anti-aircraft concentrations. We noted on our mission sheets the checkpoints, magnetic headings, and estimated flying time for each leg of the flight. We checked our assigned positions in the formation, and I found my name and aircraft number in slot six of the third flight of low box, on

Lieutenant George Lee's right wing. Lieutenant Donald Amiot was in the number five slot on Lee's left wing. (Oddly, I didn't record the names of our flight leader and his wingmen.)

The group intelligence officer pointed out places along our route where we would be most vulnerable to anti-aircraft fire and enemy fighters; he indicated the bomb line, the line beyond which there were no friendly ground forces to worry about in case we had to salvo (jettison) our bombs for some reason en route. The group meteorologist reported the en route ceilings and visibilities our F-51 weather rec planes had scouted earlier and gave us the forecast for ceiling and visibility over the target at drop time. The armament officer told us about the bomb types, fusing, interval settings, and drop speed. The communications officer gave us the call signs for emergency radio contacts and the code names of the alternate airfields we could use for emergency landings. We got our engine-start time, taxi time, and first-man-off time and "hacked" our watches on a countdown so that we all carried the same time to the second. The briefing was over around 0615. Our engine-start time was 0725, which gave us a long hour for checking and double checking the airplane, stowing equipment, and getting into our heavy flying gear. Grif, Joe, and Sergeant Ellis (our technicians/gunners had been promoted shortly after we joined the group) returned to operations to pick up our standard combat supplies: "flak-suits"—long, blacksmith-like canvas aprons ribbed with steel bars to protect us (theoretically) against stray shrapnel and spent machine-gun bullets—individual "escape kits" containing maps, money, dry rations, and first-aid items to help us evade capture (theoretically) if we were shot down; morphine and syringes for the airplane medical kit (items kept under lock in the operations office between missions); and a box of candy bars—Baby Ruths, Butterfingers, Three Musketeers—which we would consume ravenously on our way home to boost our sagging blood-sugar levels. Sergeants Callery and Day went with me directly to the airplane to start the inspection routines. The maintenance crew had already checked the engines, aircraft, and equipment and the ordinance crew had already loaded and checked the bombs and machine-gun belts. But our interest in these matters being naturally more personal than theirs, we checked again. We were fearfully aware that the malfunction of almost anything over enemy territory

could be disastrous. We went over the airplane and equipment thoroughly and methodically, looking at everything, testing everything that could be tested. Shortly after Grif, Joe, and Ellis arrived with the supplies and equipment, yellow flares from the tower signaled that the mission had been delayed. (We didn't use the radio before missions, for obvious reasons, and we had to keep a close eye on the tower for colored signal flares.) Joe groaned and gave us a speech about how the waiting was worse than the flying, and why didn't they, etc., etc. So, all checks done, all equipment in place, we waited in the cold and watched the tower, lounging and speculating about the mission, discussing rumors. (Koblenz is within strike range of 600 ME-109s and FW-190s; intelligence officers are keeping quiet about it, but there are certain signs that any day now the German Air Force will launch an all-out FW-190 attack on the 386th, as it had done with devastating results on another Marauder group several weeks earlier. Otto Skorzeny, the ferocious Nazi commando, is now behind our lines with crack sabotage and death squad operators who speak perfect American and British English.)

We finally got 1130 as our new engine-start time, and a little after 1100 we began the strenuous business of loading up. We buckled the shoulder and chest straps of our seat-type parachutes,



The author in the cockpit of a Martin B-26. The photo was made after the 386th switched from the Marauder to the Douglas A-26 Invader in the winter of 1944-45. The "Eunuch" was the only B-26 the Group kept after the conversion.

put on the massive flak suits, and squeezed clumsily through the hatches and open bomb bay doors to our stations in the airplane.

At 1130 we got the engine-start flare, and I signaled the putt-putt operator, started the engines, and Grif and I ran through the pretakeoff checks.

At 1135 another flare marked taxi-time, and Marauders along the taxiway began rolling slowly, massive and snarling, out of their hardstands into their assigned places in the lineup. I pulled in behind Amiot as he passed my hardstand, and we crept slowly in trail toward the takeoff end of the runway. Flights from the other three squadrons found their places in the roaring, crawling line, and soon the whole airfield perimeter was ringed with clattering airplanes.

I could see up ahead that the mission leader, Captain Lee Myers of the 553rd, was parked in takeoff position on the right side of the runway and that his number two wingman was pulling into position on his left. Behind them, just off the runway, Myer's right wingman was poised to move into his leader's place when he started his takeoff run. Each of the thirty-odd airplanes in the long curving line would arrive in the right order for assembling in boxes and flights in the joinup maneuvering.

On the first-man off signal, Myers leaped forward and bolted down the runway. His number-three wingman pulled immediately into the slot he vacated. The number-two wingman, his engines screaming at high power, bolted after the leader, and the number-four wingman moved into the vacated spot. Myers would fly straight for so many predetermined minutes and then turn back toward the base to pick up his flight. All five would be airborne and turning to intercept him as he loafed by at 190 mph to gather them in.

Every takeoff in a combat-loaded B-26 was a particular thrill. We were always creakily heavy, and the too-short runway at Beaumont, built for fighters, not bombers, seemed to get shorter by the day. I sometimes pictured the smoking hole a B-26 might make if it lost an engine right after liftoff and slammed into the ground at 115 or 120 mph loaded with 850 gallons of gasoline, 4,000 pounds of highly volatile demolition bombs, and 2,000 rounds of .50 caliber machine gun ammunition. Getting the heavily loaded airplane off the runway and nursing it to a safe climb speed was one of the most hazardous operations of a combat mission.

Lee's number-four man was on the takeoff roll, Amiot was in position running up, and I pulled into the just-vacated slot to his right. A bluish haze of oil smoke hung over the runway and oily streaks left by thundering exhaust stacks hung wispily in the air beyond. Grif checked the cockpit once more, and when Amiot rolled, I started the throttles forward, holding the straining airplane and counting the seconds as Amiot raced down the runway.

When he reached the three-quarter point, I released the brakes and we shot forward. Grif called the speeds as we accelerated, measuring them against our progress down the runway: 85, 90, 100. At 105 I raised the nose wheel slightly. The end of the runway was rushing toward us, and I was tensely feeling the elevator for takeoff lift. At about 120, I found it and hauled the Marauder off seconds before the end of the runway flashed under us. Grif promptly lifted the gear and we skimmed the crusted snow in a shallow climb, sweating out minimum single-engine control speed. At



B-26s of the 386th bombing a rail junction during the Normandy landing, June 1944. The wing stripes identify them as Invasion support aircraft.

140, we relaxed a bit; we had single-engine control speed at 135 plus 5, or, as we used to say, "135 plus 5 for the wife and kids."

I started a steeper climb, accelerating more slowly now, and Grif milked up the flaps and shut off the fuel boost pumps, monitoring the fuel pressure gauges as he did so for abnormal drops in pressure. The first three airplanes of our flight appeared in the distance headed toward us; Amiot was half a mile ahead of us, turning and climbing to intercept. I started my turn, climbing well at 190, and when Amiot slipped under Lee and popped up on his left wing, I was already sliding into place on Lee's right. Lee's copilot looked back at us and mimed a look of terror as I tightened in.

The three six-plane flights of high box had been circling slowly, waiting for us to complete our joinup, and we intercepted it as it made its last sweep around the field. Low box, fully



A stricken B-26 goes down over Germany.

formed now, fell into line a half mile behind and 500 feet below as we turned northeast toward Germany, climbing steadily at 215 mph. Twenty minutes later we were over Marle, a village about seventy-five miles northeast that marked the end of our first leg.

As the crow flies, the Bendorf bridge was only about 280 miles from our base at Beaumont, but we never flew as the crow flies. We assumed the Germans

were tracking us on radar, and our aim, besides dodging anti-aircraft defenses, was to keep them guessing right up to the last minute about what we were going to strike and the direction we were going to strike it from. We approached crablike, working toward the bridge obliquely until we were close in. Then we would turn suddenly toward it for the short bomb run.

At Marle, cruising level at 255 mph at 12,000, we turned due south, almost reversing course; eight minutes later over Reims we turned again, toward Thionville, ninety-seven miles due east. Twenty minutes out of Reims, Joe reported from his station in the nose that we were crossing the bomb line.

We were getting close to vital communications facilities along the Rhine which enemy fighters might be prowling around to defend, and I cautioned the gunners to keep a sharp lookout, even though I knew that my warning was superfluous. They had been tensely scanning the sky for "bandits" almost from the moment we left Beaumont.

At Thionville we turned northeast again on a mag heading of 42 degrees toward Bremm. Over this village fifteen minutes later, we swung into another feinting turn southeast toward Simmern. At Simmern we abruptly reversed course and swept toward the dread Initial Point (I. P.), the point from which we

would start the final bomb run, the most dangerous leg of the mission.

Our tactics required us to stop all evasive action at the I.P. While the lead bombardiers of high and low box set up and stabilized their bombsights, we flew straight and level toward the target, regardless of what the enemy might be doing to us. We could not change altitude, turn away from flak barrages, or turn to try to meet enemy fighters with our forward-firing machine guns. We simply flew straight and level and endured whatever happened. To turn away from enemy action on the bomb run was counted as desertion under fire. The time from the I.P. to the target was always short, seldom more than four minutes, but it was by far the longest and most dangerous leg of the mission.

Three minutes to the I.P., seven minutes from the target (Joe kept us informed), we started tightening the formation for maximum concentration of the bomb pattern. My eyes were locked on Lee's right wing, which was so close now that I could see a loose rivet on the fuselage vibrating in the air stream.

Day was on the intercom from the tailgun turret with words we had been dreading to hear: "Flak at five o'clock low, 400 yards, six bursts, 88s." This, as we knew, was most probably just a feeler barrage for tracking and ranging, a promise of what was to come. Several oily black puffs appeared silently (we usually couldn't hear the shells bursting over the engine and slipstream noise) to the right below high box, and then two or three level and close on our right. A faint, dry spattering sound told us that shrapnel fragments had hit the airplane, and Grif looked carefully along the wings and around the engine nacelles for signs of hits. Neither Grif, Joe, nor the gunners could see any, but we worried about damaged oil or hydraulic lines, and Grif kept a close eye on the pressure gauges.

We were almost on the I.P., too close to take evasive action. We flew past it away from the target for a moment, one last feint, and then rolled rapidly toward it in a steep left bank. I pushed the throttles up to keep from falling behind on the whiplashing outside of the turn, and then pulled them almost closed as we rolled violently out the turn.

We were now over the I.P. on a heading of 335 degrees. We were on the bomb run. The Bendorf railroad bridge was four minutes dead ahead.

Grif and I, as per procedure, set the engines to combat power—props to 2400 rpm, manifold pressure to 40 inches, mixture controls to full rich, boost pumps on, oil-cooler and engine-cowl flaps full open.

Our props were slightly out of sync. They made a beating, surging sound that we would have normally found intolerable, but Grif didn't bother to adjust them. Just now neither of us could have cared less about the aesthetics of airmanship. At this moment the Marauder was not so much an airplane to be flown lovingly and joyfully; it was simply a deadly weapon of war.

Lee's bomb bay doors started unfolding, and Joe, his electronic voice tense and excited, reported that he was opening ours. The hissing slipstream grew louder as the doors swung down and out, and in my mind's eye I could see the four exposed, yellow-ringed 1000-pound demolition bombs, poised on their gleaming shackles for their long plunge to the Bendorf bridge.

Our briefed drop speed was 265 mph, and the target five miles ahead now was a little over a minute away, locked presumably under the cross-hairs of the lead bombardier's Norden bombsights. At this point the sights would be running on automatic; the bombardier, monitoring the target image in his eyepiece, would be a passive observer, waiting for the Norden to trigger the shackles and send the bombs plunging on their way.

I reset the airplane trim to compensate for the destabilizing effect of the open bomb bay and moved in another foot on Lee's wing. A field of flak bursts suddenly materialized dead ahead, and we sailed through patches of black smoke drifting in eddies and swirls. The pungent odor of burned cordite hung heavy in the cockpit.

Joe reported from the bombardier's panel that we were thirty seconds from the drop and that he was arming the bombs. That half a minute was an eternity. We waited and waited, and finally Lee's bombs, falling in a jagged string, were out. They seemed to fall hesitantly for an instant, and then smoothly accelerate downward and backward and out of sight, speeding like bullets toward the Bendorf bridge 13,000 feet below.

Joe thumbed his bomb release switch on Lee's drop, and the airplane, suddenly two tons lighter, ballooned upward. I damped the ballooning and got ready for the violent turn I

knew was coming; Joe reported all bombs away and the doors closed just as the flight leader rolled into a diving right turn. I was suddenly below him, looking up at him along my sharply raised left wing, throttles almost closed. We rolled out level, then sharply left, diving, and headed toward Freilingen, still at combat power to get us out of the Koblenz defense area as quickly as possible. Gradually the flak diminished to random bursts, too low or too high or too wide to matter much.

Just south of Neuwied, we swept into a broad left turn toward home, still descending, eyes constantly roving for fighters. I had never been attacked by fighters, of course, but Cavanaugh had described the terror of the Messerschmitts and Focke Wulfes eloquently and vividly. My mind swarmed with images of dark, silent, shark-like ME-109s sliding toward us in graceful pursuit curves, their wings alight with the red flicker of their hammering 20 millimeter cannons.

We loosened the formation slightly, glad to be out of the flak and free of the killing labor and tension of the bomb run. We breathed more easily. Laacherlak, west of Neuwied, slid by our right wing blue and serene in the distance, but no one commented.

I called Callery and Day, who had had the clearest view of the target area after the drop, and asked if we had got the bridge. They were sure we had, very definitely sure. "It was a shack, sir," Day said confidently. "Sure," Grif said into his mike, grinning across at me. He was thinking that bomb strikes, as we had been taught, almost always look good from altitude. Boiling smoke, fire, and lifting debris often created false impressions of awesome destruction. We wouldn't know for sure how much damage we had done until we saw the strike photos the F-51 reconnaissance planes would take in their blazing low-level camera runs over the target area later in the afternoon.

We crossed the bomb line north of Luxembourg at 7000, still slowly descending, loosening the formation to get out of our uncomfortable flak aprons and use the relief tubes. (The stress of a bomb run lays a heavy burden on kidneys.) Grif folded his rudder pedals to let Joe through the bulkhead hatch into the cockpit. Joe, in a festive mood, passed out candy bars, and we bolted them like starving wolves. Spirits rose. We took cautious liberties with radio discipline and ventured a broadcast jest or two. Myers, the mission leader, indulged us.

Myers, code named Crackling Green, was soon talking cryptically to the tower at Beaumont-sur-Oise. Grif was flying now, and when the base appeared on the horizon he began to close up a bit on Lee's wing. Our squadron commander, Lieutenant Colonel Peter B. Greene, Cavanaugh told us, was always in his jeep by the tower to check on the quality of his squadron's formation flying as it passed over the field returning



The author and a Focke Wulf 190 a German pilot surrendered to the 386th BG in the spring of 1945. The pilot flew over low and slow with his gear down, frantically wagging his wings. He landed and sat in the cockpit with his hands in the air until the OD and a squad of guards arrived to take him prisoner. The airplane was factory-new.

from a combat mission. Woe to the pilot who was not tight enough to suit him. "Lieutenant," he said to me once, "if I ever see you out of formation in one of my flights again, I'll hang you from the highest tree in France."

We dropped out of our slots into the traffic pattern on the appropriate circuit, and I set up the cockpit as Grif maneuvered into the approach, trailing a mile or so behind Amiot. He signaled for full flaps near the runway threshold, and as the nose rolled downward in that wild B-26 way, I thought of something Pugh used to say. I leaned toward Grif and shouted, "How deep are you going to bury us this time?"

The runway threshold whipped under us and Grif, easing off the throttles, held the nose up until the wheels touched on the

certain and solid earth with a cheerful chirk-chirk that sounded like a welcome home to safety.

It was a good sound, a very good sound indeed. ■

1st. Box	2nd. Box	1st. Box	2nd. Box
Booster C/S	CRANKING - GANN		
Fighters	RISAN (B)		
9th AF Control	PARADE (D)		
Weather Group	BRE-JER 695-704		
Weather Code	ARTV		
Index	17A V.R.C.		
	1KA B.D.		
Send. Beacon	LORAN BEACON - 695 ASJ		
Colors of Day	A.A.B. R.Y.		
Challenge	D O		
Answer	L O		
13th Airframe	LORAN - ATLAS		
R/T Call Sign	PARADE		
Alt. Airframe	FLASPARS		
R/T Call Sign	COMRADE		
Flaming Service:			
Channel	Outfit	Call Sign	
C	1970	RIPANO	
D	920	PARADE	

Loc
Army 400
Colonel 273-J

START	1145	TAXI	1135	1ST. HAS OFF	
PROG.				FILE	E.T.A.
BASE	MALE	65	19	1226	
MALE	REIMS	174	8	1234	
REIMS	THIENVILLE	97	19	1252	
THIENVILLE	BREMAI	42	14	1308	
BREMAI	SIMMER	124	4	1312	
SIMMER	I.P.	68	4	1316	
I.P.	TARE	336	4	1320	
TARE	FREILIMON	62	4	1324	
FREILIMON	LACHENGLAK	85	6	1330	
LACHENGLAK	BASE	86	6	1332	

2ND HAS
MISSION
BENDORF BRIDGE
JAN 29 1945
WASSUR
SOFT 275 MFR

ALT SET
70: 30.00
RAT: 30.18

Pilot briefing forms for the Bendorf Bridge mission. The author made these notes in the early morning of January 29, 1945, for his first combat mission as pilot-in-command.