Raid on Regensburg

BY ROGER MCCOLLESTER

In 1944, I was a 21-year-old kid and a long way from my hometown of Southport, Connecticut. The U.S. government had invested a ton of money, and one and a half years in training, and now entrusted me with a 10-man crew and a battle-ready B-24 Liberator that, in 1944 dollars, had cost $210,943 to build and equip. From the day I enlisted as an aviation cadet, until I found myself flying combat missions out of Italy, my life passed in a whirl, and I was dragged ever further from my youth. It seemed as if one moment I was trying to make gas money so that I could borrow my father's car for a date, and the next, I was pushing the throttles forward on more than 5,000 horsepower and was enveloped in a daily "game" of kill or be killed.

I was just one of the hundreds of thousands of airmen who knew we were part of a huge effort. As is the case in warfare, however, individual vision seldom sees the big picture. Our world was one small cockpit, and we could see only as far as our own squadron. I imagine it was the same for the ground pounders, but their cockpits were foxholes and their horizon was their rifle company.

It was hard for us to completely understand the enormity of what we were involved

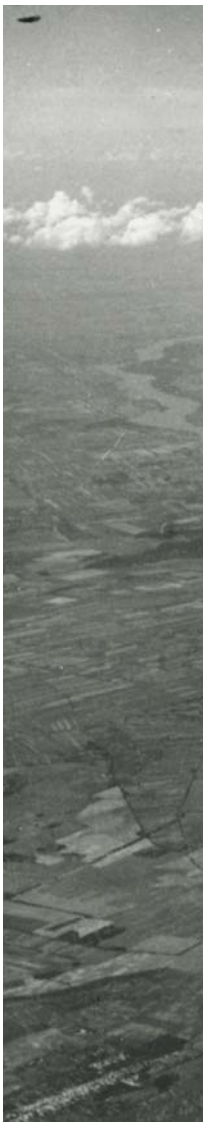
My crew—back row (left to right): John Stack, waist gunner; Walter Harris, top turret/engineer; Bernard DiBattista, navigator; Ev Johnson, copilot; John Hannon, waist gunner; front row (left to right): Francis Hynes, ball-turret gunner; Troy Sprott, tail-turret gunner; Olin Hotchkiss, bombardier; Roger McCollester, pilot; and Slim Hughes, radio operator (photo courtesy of author).

On February 25, 1944, the 451st BG was sent to Regensburg, Germany, to bomb the Prufening Aircraft Factory. One of several major plants that manufactured the Bf 109, it was just outside the city. The Group was awarded its first Distinguished Unit Citation for this raid (photo courtesy of the 451st BG via Bob Karstensen).

in. Heavy strategic bomb groups were poised in the north and south of Europe, like pit bulls eager to get at their prey. Hundreds of airfields in Britain and Italy were rapidly being supplied to equip the largest armed armada the world had seen before or has seen since. The goal was to smash Germany's ability to supply its war effort by obliterating oil refineries and major manufacturing and shipping centers.

One of the Allied Forces' prime targets was Regensburg, Germany. Regensburg and its environs

Our guts constricted with fear when we saw the target. The red string ran from our Italian bases to the Prufening Aircraft Factory, one of several major plants manufacturing the Bf 109—and it was just outside Regensburg.



were among the most strategically important areas in the entire Third Reich. It was a major manufacturing center of all types of military equipment, including ball bearings, fighter and bomber aircraft, tanks, trucks and artillery. In addition, the area harbored one of the largest synthetic-petroleum plants in Europe, and it was also a major railroad hub, with marshaling yards that were among the largest in Europe.

In addition to its large cadre of skilled labor, Regensburg was also a major center of higher learning and culture, especially in the performing arts. From every perspective, Regensburg and its suburbs were important to the Reich's war effort and, for this reason, the city was heavily defended with fighters and heavy antiaircraft batteries.

It was amazing how quickly we learned Germany's geography. A few months earlier, although I knew where Germany was, I had never heard of Regensburg. After a few weeks, however, I knew the names and locations of most of Germany's major towns and many of its smaller ones. That knowledge was part and parcel of being a round-trip tourist who couldn't stop to see the sights.

While we slept

The maintenance and ordnance boys almost never knew where the squadron would be headed. All they knew was that they would have to spend the night before every mission working their butts off. While they slaved, those who would fly the mission were also blissfully unaware of the next day's target. The 724th Bomb Squadron engineering officer and his men fueled and serviced the 20 aircraft of our squadron that were all parked in revetments on either side of the perimeter taxiway. This was a huge job that had to be done very carefully because they dealt with tens of thousands of gallons of high-octane aircraft fuel. Every aspect of each airplane had to be attended to, including the oil tanks for each engine; there were four on each aircraft so, 80 engines in the squadron had to be topped off.

Once the aircraft had been serviced, the squadron armament officer and his detail took over. With heavy-duty prime movers and bomb trailers, they began the delicate process of loading the aircraft bomb bays with 12, 500-pound general-purpose (GP) bombs that carried instantaneous fuses that would explode on impact. Of course, these bombs weren't armed when they were loaded into the aircraft; once we were airborne and on the climb out to bombing altitude, the bombardier would arm them.

While the bombs were being loaded, other crews would thread the required thousands of rounds of .50-caliber ammunition into the gun turrets. It was backbreaking work for the ground personnel teams. They worked feverishly all night, right up until the aircrews boarded their aircraft, which was usually around 0430 hours, one hour before start engine time.

Time to wake up

On February 25 at 2:30 a.m., the duty officer stuck his head into our tent and yelled to wake us up.

"McCollester, we're ordered out on a maximum effort today; breakfast will be at 0300 hours; briefing in the War Room at 0400 hours."

"OK; thanks, but no thanks, Charlie. Can't we just sack out for another hour or so?"

"Come on, Mac; up and at 'em!"

We all grumbled quietly as we struggled out of our cots in the dark. I looked over at my copilot, "Ev" Johnson. Lt. Evert M. Johnson was from West Hartford, Connecticut; prior to joining the Army Air Force, he majored in engineering at the University of New Hampshire. Our bombardier was Olin E. "Hotch" Hotchkiss from Oneonta, New York, and he was a teaching major at an upstate New York college. Navigator Bernard "Dibi" DiBattista from Cranford, New Jersey, was a graduate of Fordham College and Fordham Law School and was a practicing attorney before his National Guard unit was called to active duty in early 1941; he later transferred to the Army Air Force and graduated from navigation school. Our radio operator, and the oldest man on our crew, was Harold F. "Slim" Hughes, age 33. The engineer and top-turret gunner was Walter A. "Georgia" Harris, from Atlanta, Georgia, and he had the most pronounced Southern accent that I had ever heard. Our two waist gunners, John M. Hannon from Indianapolis, Indiana, and John

Just before Christmas 1943, our crew arrived in Tunisia to begin a month-long rigorous formation and combat training. Our B-24,* Mac's Flophouse*, saw us through many a mission but was lost in combat on May 10, 1944, when flown by another crew while we were on a well-deserved break (photo courtesy of author).

On August. 9, 1944, **Fertile Myrtle**, *a B-24 from my 724th BS, flies away from the Alma Fuzito oil refinery in Hungary. Oil refineries were among our most important targets (courtesy of the 451st BG via Bob Karstensen).*

L. Stack, from Phoenix, Arizona, the ball-turret gunner, Francis D. Hynes, from Portland, Oregon, and our tail-turret gunner, Troy O. Sprott, from Corsicana, Texas, completed our 10-man crew.

Group commander

Our group, the 451st, was to be the second group over the target. Our group commander, Col. Robert E.L. Eaton, would sit in the command seat in the lead aircraft of our lead squadron, which happened to be the 726th. Eaton had graduated from the Point and was an exemplary officer; in fact, I owe my life to him. He alone, with his firm discipline, his no-nonsense critiques and especially his insistence on close-formation training, allowed our group to incur relatively light casualties.

Col. Eaton's concept of tight formations coincided with the ideas of Gen. Ira C. Eaker of the 8th Air Force and Gen. Curtis LeMay, also of the 8th, and both close friends of his. The concentrated firepower of an attack unit's .50-caliber machine guns—10 to each aircraft; 200 for the 20 bombers of an attack unit—was a huge factor in keeping us alive. In a normal mission, we were certain that we were attacked less often than other groups because our very close formation made it obvious to the Luftwaffe ground controllers that our machine-gun coverage would be extremely dense and hard to penetrate safely. Therefore, they would instead vector their fighters toward the looser formations. On this occasion, we would be more vulnerable to attack because we would be the second group in the 15th Air Force to approach the enemy targets. In total, 76 bombers were going to the target.

The target for today is ....

As we milled around in the briefing room and found seats to drop into, we tried to ignore the curtain that hung over the blackboard at the front of the room. It covered the target for the day, and I'm sure that we were each silently praying for a milk run. Some targets were so heavily defended that we sometimes had nightmares about them. Others, by comparison, were walks in the park. The only clue we had that this would be a serious mission was that it had been described as a "maximum effort;" the high command only did that when they had someplace important they wanted removed from the map. If our commanders thought it was important, so would the German commanders, so a milk run was definitely out of the question.

The briefing officer pulled aside the curtain and 320 guys involuntarily sucked in a breath and quietly muttered "Oh, my God!" Our guts constricted with fear when we saw the target. The red string ran from our Italian bases to the

Enemy flak was always among our biggest fears. On a mission to Vienna, **Burma Bound** *was hit by flak bursts that wounded pilot Capt. George Tudor and copilot Squadron Commander, David Gould. Despite his severe hand wound, Capt. Tudor made an emergency landing on the Isle of Vis with the help of the crew, who used parachutes as air brakes during the rollout (courtesy of the 451st BG via Bob Karstensen).*

Prufening Aircraft Factory, one of several major plants manufacturing the Bf 109—and it was just outside Regensburg. Regensburg! Just hearing the name told us we were virtually guaranteed a very tough mission with a high likelihood of heavy casualties.

Briefing officers must have been carefully selected for their ability to deliver bad news in exactly the same tone of voice as they used when delivering good news. On this occasion, the briefing officer calmly told us we could expect to be met by at least 200 109s and 190s; they would be vectored in from bases all over southern Germany, and from what had formerly been known as Austria, but which Hitler had claimed and then renamed Ostmark. He tried to make us feel better by telling us that there would be 10 U.S. fighter squadrons and that 200 P-38s and P-47s would join our bomber stream over the Adriatic on the climb-out to altitude. On the one hand, we were happy to hear about the help, but on the other, we knew those fighters would have to leave us shortly after we crossed the German frontier at Brenner Pass. After that, we would be on our own, and the Germans knew that. So, the enemy fighters just waited until we were alone and then pounced on us by the hundreds.

Ball-turret gunner Hynes wrote in a recent letter to me his memory of his combat experiences: "I remember being attacked by a couple of 109s—one of the few times I actually fired the guns of our ball turret at the enemy. They came in about four o'clock and did not seem to be using any deflection as they came at us but were firing their 20mm cannon directly at us. I could see the guns flashing. I had done pretty well at gunnery school and thought I was a pretty good shot, but the speed at which they came in at us completely confused me; my training had not prepared me for this. From being a mere dot in the sky until they filled the window of the turret, their speed left me amazed. I could see the flashes of the 20mm cannon as they fired, but they were not using deflection when they should have been. Thus, two German

fighter pilots and one American Liberator plane and its crew lived to fight another day. Those 109s had the yellow noses of Göring's own élite squadron. When it seemed as if they would crash into our plane, they flipped upside-down and dived straight down."

Fighters weren't the real problem

We all hated fighters; but at least you could shoot back at them. Flak was the real enemy because while you were charging along, doing your best to fly close formation, some guy on the ground was using you as target practice, and there wasn't a damn thing you could do about it. Survival was simply a matter of being the luckiest duck in the shooting gallery, and the Regensburg area was one of the most intense shooting galleries on earth. It was defended by three concentric rings of gun emplacements comprising 600 heavy AA guns that ranged from 88mm to the more dangerous and radar-guided 110mm and 150mm. All of the guns had an accurate range up to 40,000 feet. The 88mm was used for barrage flak; they didn't aim at specific aircraft but tried instead to fill a given area—maybe a cubic mile on either side of the flight path—with explosions and shrapnel. The heavier 110mm and 150mm would accurately target specific aircraft or flights by radar. Regardless of the type of gun we faced, most of our survival depended on not being at the wrong place at the right time.

On those missions, when our group was in the middle of the entire bomber stream, we could easily spot our target 15 to 20 minutes before we reached the initial point (IP). The pillars of smoke from the bombs dropped by the aircraft ahead of us made the target stand out from miles away. If we were the lead group, we had to set up the run and pick the target for those who followed; the trick was to make the bomb run as short as it could be. During the run, we were absolutely stable; we wanted to give the flak gunners as little time as possible to aim their weapons accurately. Only when the bombs were away could we begin to take evasive action.

To hit our target from 25,000 feet, we had to maintain a very steady airspeed and a level attitude because a bomber is really nothing more than an artillery platform launching its shell in a vertical, rather than a horizontal, arc. While inbound to the IP and while on the bomb run, we would attempt to distort the German flak crews' estimate of our altitude by throwing aluminum-foil strips known as "window" out of our aircraft. The foil reflected the radar signals from the German 110mm and 150mm AA guns, thus giving a false altitude reading—we hoped! If these guns were allowed to lock on to our altitude, we would be absolutely hammered and would lose a lot of men and aircraft. A few planes might even suffer direct hits and then explode in a fireball that would throw debris through the rest of the formation.

If our altitude distortion efforts were successful, our aircraft would literally bounce up and down because of the regular AA battery bursts below us. We would then be hit only by metal shards that made jagged holes in our fuselage. Fortunately, because their momentum was largely spent, they did not penetrate the aircraft's heavy metal parts.

On one occasion while we bounced down "flak alley", the turbulence was so bad that our tail gunner's steel combat helmet was knocked over his eyes. At that instant exactly, a flak shard penetrated his turret, missed the heavy, bulletproof glass that protected him from direct rear shots, and dented his helmet right where his left eye was! How lucky! Had that helmet not been shaken over his eyes, he would have been killed instantly!

I, too, had a stroke of luck: I was the recipient of the entire top of a spent 88mm shell that had exploded far below our ship, but Ev and I had taken precautions to protect our genitals. Pilots' seats were protected on the rear and sides by a sarcophagus of half-inch armor plate, but nothing except the thin aluminum keel of our aircraft protected our vital parts. Cutting torch in hand, we had visited the old fighter junkyard at the northwest end of our airbase at Gioia del Colle. The Luftwaffe had dumped 109s there, and we had each cut a piece of armor plate out of the pilot's seat and later dropped it right under our pilot seat cushions. On our very next mission, the aforementioned 88mm shell hit the bottom of my seat, but it bounced off the armor plate. After that, my officers used the shell fragment as an ashtray—a very lucky ashtray!

Setting up the initial point

Our course to the target took us right over the island of Split and then straight across the central Adriatic, across the Italian coast just southeast of Venice, over Bolzano, the Brenner Pass and on to the initial point. From there, we held a specific compass heading for 1 minute, 45 seconds to our Prufening Aircraft Factory target. As on all bomb runs, those 105 seconds seemed like an eternity.

The bomb run

Ev and I had the job of maintaining tight formation; our wingtips overlapped our lead element aircraft by about ten

A 451st BG squadron only moments away from releasing its bombs. This was the most dangerous time in a mission because pilots had to hold the bombers steady and could not maneuver to evade flak (courtesy of the 451st BG via Bob Karstensen).

feet. Flak burst all around us, but we had to concentrate on flying formation. It didn't do a damn bit of good to look at the explosions or even to worry about them, as we were helpless to do anything about them; but believe me, we knew they were there. The sound of our engines was deafening, but in spite of that, we could hear the 88mm shells through our headsets. The shells left puffs of gray smoke in the sky, and as the intensity of the barrage increased, our sphincters got tighter grips on our parachute cushions; anyone who says they weren't scared to death in these situations is a liar!

A B-24 piloted by Thomas "Doc" Moran on the October 13, 1944, Vienna raid was another flak victim. The number two engine and the main-gear's retraction/extension system were shot out. Moran made a perfect landing using the nose gear and the B-24's belly, and he didn't even bend a propeller (courtesy of the 451st BG via Bob Karstensen).

The movies may get the visuals right, but being there is something entirely different. In the first place, we were all kids who were facing our own mortality far earlier than we should have. Just flying close formation is dangerous enough. Right, left, up and down: other airplanes are only yards away. In the best of conditions, close-formation flying requires almost mind-numbing concentration; toss in the violent turbulence of flak and the difficult becomes nearly impossible. You're also fighting the controls and throttles to avoid sliding out of position. This is all stirred together by a thing called fear that, oddly enough, most of your mind forgets because you're doing your job so intently that there isn't time to think about it; your mind pushes the fear off to the side so you're able to deal with what is going on. If you make a mistake, you'll probably not only kill the ten men in your own crew but also those in the airplane you hit.

But there is no turning back! Our group—every one of the aircraft that arrived at the target area—plowed through this intense artillery barrage. It was the most dangerous part of the mission, and when we were most vulnerable. After a couple of eternities, our bombardier, Hotch, called out on the intercom, "Bombs away!" Sweeter words were never heard.

R E S T R I C T E D

HEADQUARTERS C-UPD-bmr
FIFTEENTH AIR FORCE APO 520

1 July 1944

GENERAL ORDERS) : NUMBER 1481)

Citation of Unit I

SECTION I -- CITATION OF UNIT

Under the provisions of Circular No. 333, War Department, 1943, and Circular No. 26, Headquarters NATOUSA, 6 March 1944, the following unit is cited for outstanding performance of duty in armed conflict with the enemy:

451st BOMBARDMENT GROUP (H). For outstanding performance of duty in armed conflict with the enemy. Notified to prepare maximum aircraft in the Group for a bombing mission to Regensburg, Germany, ground personnel worked feverishly, enthusiastically, and with untiring intensity to get all B-24 type aircraft in the best possible mechanical condition to insure the success of the operation. On 25 February 1944, despite the highly unsatisfactory conditions of the airdrome, forty (40) B-24's of the 451st Bombardment Group took off to bomb the Regensburg Prufening Aircraft Factory. Commanders and all personnel participating in the mission had been briefed that the enemy was capable of intercepting the formation with approximately two-hundred (200) fighters and that the route to the target would be without fighter escort. As the Group penetrated enemy territory, a running battle continuing to the target, ensued, during which time approximately two-hundred (200) enemy fighters intercepted the formation with well coordinated and vicious attacks. In the violent and bitter aerial battle, enemy aircraft used rocket guns, aerial flak, cannon and machine guns in an effort to disrupt the operation. Despite the intense, accurate, and heavy anti-aircraft fire, and enemy fighters over the target, the Group maintained a close formation, and scored many direct hits on the assigned target. The formation flown and the coordination between the attack units resulted in sixteen (16) enemy fighters destroyed, three (3) probably destroyed, and six (6) damaged, to the loss of six (6) aircraft of the 451st Bombardment Group. The tremendous material damage inflicted by the 451st Bombardment Group contributed greatly to the curtailment of aircraft production by the enemy at a time of great importance. The grim determination, outstanding skill and unhesitating courage of the officers and men of the 451st Bombardment Group in accomplishing the objectives of this mission through the heaviest of enemy opposition, reflects great credit upon themselves and the Armed Forces of the United States of America.

By command of Major General TWINING:

R. K. TAYLOR, Colonel, GSC,
Chief of Staff. OFFICIAL:

/s/ J. M. Ivins J. M. IVINS, Lieutenant Colonel, AGD, Adjutant General. A TRUE COPY:

C. E. CAMPBELL, JR.
WOJG, USA.

Going home

Immediately after "bombs away," our flight leader began strenuous evasive action and swung our flight to starboard and then suddenly to port, all the time varying our altitude. One moment we would be climbing, and in the next, we would be diving. Once past the outer ring of flak batteries, we settled down to our planned withdrawal, and we maintained 24,000 feet until we had crossed the Alps at the German/Austrian /Italian border. Then we set up a gradual descent on a southerly heading that would bring us down to 10,000 feet by the time we reached the Adriatic.

Shortly after we reached the Adriatic, several squadrons of our "little friends" joined us to provide top cover on the way home. Having survived the insanity over the target, I ran a quick head count over the intercom and found that my crew and our airplane had come through unscathed. Inside, I felt a silent prayer of thanks float upward. And my butt finally let go of the parachute.

A funny conclusion

In spite of very heavy fighter and flak opposition, we had succeeded in pasting the Prufening Aircraft Factory and had returned with minimum losses—six aircraft downed, and only five aircrew wounded enough to require hospitalization. Our critique by Eaton ended with some levity.

Col. Eaton's 1st pilot and crew commander on this maximum-effort mission was Capt. Sid Winski. Winski apparently had to relieve him-

self just prior to our arrival at the IP. Group commanders like Col. Eaton are not expected to fly the aircraft over the target; that just isn't their job! The first we heard of this "pit stop" was when Eaton was on stage during our post-mission critique addressing all group officers who had participated in the Regensburg mission. He suddenly turned, pointed at Winski, and said in a very loud voice:

"Winski, the next time you have to relieve yourself on the bomb run, do it in your pants!"

This was one of the funniest moments in our combat experience. You see, Eaton, though he had trained to fly Liberators, did not do so regularly, as did our crew commanders, including me. For Winski to expect Eaton to take over the controls while he emptied his bladder was asking a lot. But that isn't the end of the story.

Ignorant of the details, I thought that Winski had actually left his seat, attached the walk-around oxygen bottle to his mask and proceeded to the waist compartment and used the relief tube. Not until many years later, in September 1990, at the 451st Bomb Group Reunion at Fairmont Airbase, Nebraska—where we, the original cadre of our combat group, took our operational training—did I have an opportunity to learn more. It was there I talked with the then retired Gen. Eaton about it. I asked:

"Gen. Eaton; do you remember the time that Winski excused himself just prior to the bomb run on a mission to Regensburg to relieve himself?" Gen. Eaton chuckled and smiled broadly as he replied:

"Of course, I remember that incident very well, and I remember calling him down for it!"

"General, did Winski actually leave his seat to go to the waist-section relief tube?" The general laughed again—this time, very heartily.

"No, what he did was to remove his steel helmet, place it upside-down between his legs and then urinate into the helmet! However, because the liquid froze on contact, he couldn't get the helmet on again!" The general guffawed; I had never seen him laugh as much!

It's funny what we remember about life-and-death experiences. Maybe it's nature's way of protecting us from the darker parts. ✝