

06/25/2018

Dear Gary:

Enclosed you will find a photo of our crew and a list of members, along with an account of my missions.

Why do I have only 12 missions? My first assignment was as an instructor pilot, helping new crews to prepare for combat. During that time I had requested combat duty and I was finally given a crew headed for combat in December 1944. We left the States on January 12, 1945 and took 22 days in a convoy to get from Norfolk to Naples. Then to Foggia by slow, very slow, train so that my first mission was on March 2, 1945, late in the European war, with only time for 12 missions before the Nazi surrender and VE Day.

Whether any of this material will be of help to you, I don't know, but I hope so.

Thanks for the good work you do regarding the history of the 99th BG.

Best regards,



#### OUR CREW

Bottom row L to R: Lts. Axtell, Pilot; Boyce, Co-pilot; Coe, Navigator;  
Dual, Bombardier.

Top row, L to R; Sgts. Doss, Engineer; Bonanti, Radio Operator;  
Farnsworth, Gunner; Karper, Ball Turret Gunner; Heller, Gunner;  
Striebeck, Tail Gunner.



## MISSIONS

After each combat mission I sat down and wrote a report on what happened during the event. It was written on blank pages torn from my flight record book because paper was scarce. What follows is an exact copy of those reports.

March 2, 1945. Flew first mission, acting as co-pilot for Lt. Eakin, who had 33 sorties to his credit. Had trouble moving after I got into ALL the high altitude equipment. It consisted of regular uniform, over which went an electrically heated pair of overalls, heated jacket, heated felt boots, fur-lined rubber boots, alpaca-lined coveralls, alpaca-lined jacket, heated gloves, and leather flying helmet. Waiting around the plane before takeoff was hard to do—I wanted to get going. The takeoff, with 2700 gallons of gas, and 12 x 500 pounders, was the first I had ever made in a heavy airplane, and I was uneasy about its getting off. When I took the controls to fly my 15 minute shift, it was hard to fly formation because the plane was so slow to respond to the controls—more so than I had expected. When the surprise over the sluggish controls had worn off the trip to the target was the same as a mission at Alexandria. But about 10 minutes before target things began to happen fast. First the engineer draped 16 pounds of flak suit over me, and slapped a flak helmet on my head. Then off to the left at our altitude a dozen black puffs of smoke appeared—the first I had seen. I was excited and nervous. Then the bomb bays were opened and chaff from planes ahead came sailing by. Then “bombs away” was called, but the radio operator yelled, “Salvo!” Two of the bombs hung up. “Salvo, salvo,” the radio operator kept yelling, and Eakin motioned to have me hit the salvo switch. Bewildered by the speed at which everything was happening, but making a distinct effort to remain calm, I took off the clumsy heated gloves with a jerk, and hit the salvo switch. “2400 RPMs! 2400 RPMs,” the pilot yelled a couple of times before I reacted and gave him 2400. He was using plenty of power to stay with the formation leader, who was making a sharp left turn along with a screaming dive, to get away from the flak. The stuff was popping up all around us. The bomb bay doors were shut, and Eakin turned to me and grinned. Off came the flak helmet and the flak suit. The crew began chattering over the interphone, we all relaxed, and the tension was over. The return to base was boring, flying 15 minute shifts with Eakin, but there was satisfaction in knowing we had done a good job of bombing our target, the marshalling yards at Linz, in Nazi occupied Austria. The flight bushed me and I slept like the proverbial log.

<sup>3-9-45</sup>  
Mission 2. Flew as co-pilot for LT. Bell, who had 14 missions under his belt. Our target was the marshalling yards at Bruck, Austria. We were supposed to drop our bombs visually, but after circling the area several times we couldn't find a hole in the clouds, and were forced to return without dropping our eggs. No flak. No enemy fighters.

<sup>3-10-45</sup>  
Mission 3. Flew with my own crew, and as first pilot for the first time, but had a combat-wise co-pilot, Lt. Bill Kinard. Our target was the Verona-Perona Bridge. There were clouds all the way up to the target. Over the inter-plane VHF set I thought I heard the leader say we were going to hit the docks as an alternate target, so I told Coe about it. Navigator Coe was having a tough time. His compass didn't work, and cloud coverage below us was complete. According to his

positions we were still on course to hit the original target at Verona, and he recorded it that way in his log, despite what I had told him. At target we dropped our bombs, and just saw a little flak. The bombardier told Coe the bombs had hit the docks. Coe still thought we were over the Verona Bridge, but was afraid to say so. He turned out to be right! However he was confused plenty, and the whole crew thought that we had hit the docks.

Mission 4. March 12, 1945. Flew with the whole crew. It was the first time over the target for Co-pilot Mark Boyce. Our target was the Floridsdorf oil refinery near Vienna. We bombed through the clouds. Just saw a little flak. No enemy fighters.

Mission 5. March 16, 1945. Clear day. Our target was the Floridsdorf oil refinery near Vienna. The old-timers expected plenty of flak—and they were right! When we turned for the bomb run on the target, the sky ahead was covered with black puffs from the flak fired at the group ahead of us. We were headed straight for the flak area, and I was scared and nervous. Told the crew to expect plenty of the stuff, and asked Boyce which engine he wanted to feather. By joking on the interphone I was able to relax myself a bit, and I needed it plenty. Just before bombs away, our tail gunner, Jake Striebeck, called up and said the tail had been hit, but he was OK. Later, Mark said he saw flak sailing through the right wing, but said nothing about it at the time. Once I saw two bursts directly in front of us, the second closer than the first. I so fully expected the next one to be in the cockpit that I blinked and ducked, but the 3<sup>rd</sup> one never came. Even after our sharp rally the flak was still following and tracking us. Every side of the ship had lots of bursts nearby. The bomb-aimer, Dual, was able to say nothing but, "Multi flak, multi flak!" Ball turret gunner, Carper, turned his turret down to see what bomb results we had, but looked at all the flashes from ack-ack, got scared, and turned 'em up again. Our ship was hit about a dozen times, but no dangerous damage was done. Saw 5 fighters takeoff just before we reached our IP (initial point), but they didn't show up. B-24s were below us and P-38s were escorting, and could be seen tearing around leaving contrails above us. Our left waist gunner answered the oxygen check very weakly, and said he had trouble seeing, so we put him on pure oxygen, and watched him carefully. He came out OK. It was the roughest so far, even for some of the old-timers, and we aren't eager to go back there at all. Three bombs hung up, and radio operator Bonanti called, "Salvo!" Both Boyce and Dual hit their switches, but still the bombs didn't drop. Bonanti yelled, "Salvo!" twice more, and each time his voice was higher-pitched, louder, and more scared. That night when we all gathered to talk it over excitedly, Bonanti said he thought we didn't hear him, and he almost choked himself, pressing his throat mike closer. Finally the bombs dropped. Then the bomb bay doors wouldn't close, and engineer Doss had to crank 'em up by hand. It seems that bombardier Dual was so excited he tried to close the doors when he still had the salvo switch on, so the bomb bay motor burned out. But all is well that ends well, and we had hit the oil refinery a good crack. Striebeck said he saw smoke billowing up as high as 10,000 or 15,000 feet. It was mission 5 for me, and I felt that I deserved the Air Medal, for which I had just qualified.

Mission 6. March 21, 1945. We were briefed for Kagan marshalling yards near Vienna, but because of clouds we bombed Floridsdorf oil refinery on the NE side of Vienna by radar. The flak was light and no enemy fighters were seen.

Mission 7. March 22, 1945. Today we made a long trip to an oil refinery at Ruhland- - a round trip of 1400 miles! We encountered flak from the time we started on our bomb run till a long time after we had

left the target. Flak was all over the sky. We had our planes going as fast as they would go to get out of there. P-51s and P-38s were along as escorts, and we saw plenty of them frisking above us. Some of the other groups were attacked by fighters, but not our group. It was a long hop, and we were dragging when we got home. An inspection of our ship showed only one hole from flak—one piece barely missed the radio operator. Mario Bonanti pried the jagged thing out of our wing, and kept it as a souvenir.

Mission 8. March 25, 1945. Today we carried fragmentation bombs, and our target was Khely airdrome. There were a lot of planes located at the airdrome which were fleeing from the Russian advance. The flak was intense and accurate, but our frags did a good job, for according to later reports we destroyed 88 planes, and damaged 51 more. It was a highly successful sortie so we won't have to back there to Prague for that target again.

Mission 9. April 6, 1945. Target was the railroad bridge at Verona. We were to fly the No. 7 spot in high right Baker Squadron. At the higher altitude our # 1 engine began shaking, and it wouldn't develop any power. We dropped further and further back despite the fact that we were using more power on the 3 good engines than they were built to stand. Finally we dropped so far back that we were flying with Charlie Squadron. Then some squadron flew directly over us as we neared the target. So we pulled away, made a 360 degree turn, and came in for another stab at the target. This time another group was coming in using a different heading, so we made another 360 degree turn to make our 3<sup>rd</sup> attempt. All this time our #1 engine was jumping on its mount, and the other three engines were pulling 2500 RPMs! Flak came pretty close as we finally dropped our bombs, all alone. Our bomb bay doors wouldn't close so we began to lose Charlie Squadron until engineer Joe Doss cranked the doors up, and the leader finally slowed down in answer to my pleas. During all the turning we always stayed on the inside of the turn. It was a mad chase, and all the time we looked madly, from our lead ship to the #1 engine, and to our instruments. Of all the original ships, only 4 stayed together. We flew with Charlie Squadron, and two other ships from our Baker Squadron had to fall back and flew with Dog Squadron. Somehow or other we DID hit the bridge with good results.

Mission 10. April 14, 1945. Our target was Avigliana ammo factory. We flew #3 position in Baker box. Our squadron leader was the Ops officer from group, so we planned to keep our formation tight, and we did, too. The plane behaved nicely, and there was no flak over the target, and the only planes we saw were our own P-51s. Easy sortie—just like a training flight.

Sortie 11. April 18, 1945. Our target was a supply dump just south of Bologna. There was no flak and no enemy fighters—another affair just like practice. The target was squarely hit. I flew with Lt. Hanrahan as his co-pilot in the lead of the second element. From now on our crew will lead the second element.

Sortie 12. April 23, 1945. Our target was Albaredo Road Bridge, just SE of Verona. The idea was to prevent the Nazi Germans from withdrawing from their positions without capturing multi troops. We flew element lead of the second element. No enemy fighters, no flak. Over the front lines near the Adige River we could see the smoke and explosions of the artillery below.

