

By John L. Frisbee, Contributing Editor

Double Feature

Crossbow, the bombing campaign against German V-1 and V-2 weapon sites, included some unique events.

BY EARLY June 1944, the Battle of Britain had long been won. Luftwaffe bombing attacks on the island, no longer a major threat, were replaced by a rain of V-1 buzz bombs—pilotless aircraft that carried one-ton bombs, their inaccuracy limiting them to area targets. The first buzz-bomb attack came on June 13, 1944. It was no surprise to Allied intelligence, which had been keeping a close watch on launch-site construction in northern France. The Army Air Forces had lost seventy-nine aircraft in sorties against the sites before the first V-1 was launched. They were not easy targets.

Some 2,000 V-1s were launched against the UK, primarily the London area, by the end of June. Loss of life and property damage were extensive. Estimates vary widely, some as high as 6,000 killed, 17,000 injured, and more than a million left homeless. This use of unmanned weapons marked a new phase of warfare, against which there was no good active defense. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill persuaded Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower to give the launching sites top priority, with fifty percent of Allied heavy bomber and many tactical air missions targeted against them in Operation Crossbow.

On July 8, 1944, the 398th Bomb Group, based at Nuthampstead, Hertfordshire, UK, and other 1st Air Division groups were dispatched against V-1 targets. It looked like an easy mission—good weather, no fighter opposition anticipated, and flak expected to be light. The group was led by Capt. Tracy Petersen, flying with Capt. Hal Lamb and his crew. Deputy lead was Capt. Kearier Berry. Some surprises lay ahead.

All went well as the formation crossed the English channel and

made landfall. Then, as they left the initial point and approached their target, things began to turn sour. The formation was hit by a heavy barrage of accurate flak, concentrated on the three B-17 Flying Fortresses in the lead element. Oil poured from the two damaged engines of Captain Petersen's aircraft; the deputy lead completely lost two engines, suffered other major damage, and had to drop out of the formation. The number three B-17 disappeared.

Captain Petersen elected to continue the bomb run, getting what little power he could from the damaged engines that momentarily would run out of oil to feather the props. With great difficulty, the formation held together, if only raggedly.

After bombs away, the lead aircraft took more hits, losing a third engine. With two windmilling props that could not be feathered and one that could be, Petersen's B-17 headed back across the cold waters of the channel, steadily losing altitude. The crew members threw out everything not bolted down, hoping to make the Royal Canadian Air Force strip at Manston, the closest friendly base. Air-Sea Rescue was informed they might have to ditch. As they approached the English coast, it was clear they were several hundred feet too low to clear the bluffs that stood between them and Manston. Ditching was out because of heavy surf. They would have to belly-in on the beach.

Here, another unforeseen problem arose: The beach was full of concrete posts—tank traps that had been erected when a German invasion seemed likely. The crew had already weathered a left turn into the two dead engines—not a prescription for long life. Now what? Lifting first one wing then the other to avoid the posts, they finally saw a clear stretch of beach ahead of them. Hal Lamb and Tracy Petersen made a gentle wheels-up landing after a masterful job of flying.

As the jubilant crew poured out of

the B-17, observers near the beach shouted to them that they were between two mine fields and should not move until a guide could lead them to safety. Thanks to crew teamwork and a bit of luck, they had survived another brush with disaster. A 398th Bomb Group aircraft soon picked them up at Manston, uninjured, except for the radio operator, who had been slightly wounded by flak. Not your average July day.

Later, they learned that Captain Berry's crew had been forced to bail out over the channel. The last to leave the aircraft, Berry hit the water in sight of a rock formation along the British coast, a destination he reached after an exhausting three-hour swim. Moments after he emerged from the water, he heard an aircraft approaching. It was a fighter, blinking lights along the leading edge of its wing, headed directly for him. Its machine guns fired at him. Berry headed back into the water. Belatedly, the Spitfire pilot recognized that he had been firing at a human target. He called Air-Sea Rescue, which retrieved Berry from his hot spot, which turned out to be a gunnery range.

The rest of his crew also survived the bailout. All other 398th Bomb Group B-17s made it back to the UK that day, some with battle damage.

Although Crossbow has had relatively little attention in the postwar years, it was a major Allied bombing campaign. Nazi Germany hoped the V-1 and V-2 attacks would stem the tide of war that was running against them. They did not, thanks to hundreds of Allied heavy and medium strikes on launching, storage, and production facilities. The hazards of the mission flown by the Petersen-Lamb and Berry crews on July 8, 1944, were typical of that campaign, but not all missions had such welcome endings. ■

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