

By John L. Frisbee, Contributing Editor

A Day of Records

A direct hit in the bomb bay could spoil a crew's entire day.

FIFTEENTH Air Force in Italy was overshadowed in size and publicity by Eighth Air Force in the UK. One reason for its anonymity, some used to say, was that war correspondents preferred life in England to the less urban areas of southeast Italy. In any event, when the Fifteenth began operations, the Eighth had been in combat and in the public eye for more than 15 months.

The Fifteenth's contribution to the defeat of Nazi Germany was very substantial and deserves more recognition than it has received. Its heavies flew nearly 150,000 sorties against enemy targets, including 19 strikes on oil refineries at Ploesti, Romania, where it lost 223 aircraft. Its fighters claimed the destruction of nearly 1,500 enemy planes.

The 483d Bomb Group began operations from Italian bases in April 1944. Before the war ended, it was to become a celebrated outfit with two Distinguished Unit Citations. On July 14, heavy bombers, including Capt. Robert Goesling's B-17 crew from the group's 816th Bomb Squadron, were sent against the Shell Oil Refinery at Budapest, Hungary, some 450 miles from their base at Sterparone Airfield. They were to return that day with one—perhaps two—distinctions not shared by another Army Air Forces crew in the European Theater of Operations.

As the Goesling crew came up on the target with bomb bay doors open, they took a direct hit in the bay. The concussion was violent, with widespread damage to the aircraft. Copilot Lt. Bud Abbott's controls appeared to have been severed. From the flight deck, they could see that the airframe was bent and the fuselage was no longer perpendicular to the wings. Control of the B-17 was regained when the automatic pilot was engaged. Abbott was then able to move to the left

seat, so Goesling and flight engineer TSgt. George Freitag could survey the damage and decide if the bomber could make it home or would have to be abandoned. The odds looked favorable despite the damage and crew injuries.

Freitag then provided first aid to the injured crew members. The most severely wounded was radio operator SSgt. Tom Lewicki. When the anti-aircraft shell exploded, fragments had riddled the radio room, hitting Lewicki's legs and lower body—wounds from which he would never completely recover. Navigator Lt. Bernard Garhart and both waist gunners had been hit but were able to continue their duties, painfully, after Freitag had patched them up.

Damage to the B-17 was extensive. The oxygen, electrical, and hydraulic systems were out. Leaking fuel from a punctured wing tank was burning, but the flames soon blew out. The bomb bay catwalk was warped, there was fire in the bay, and five fully armed 1,000-pound bombs were hung up in the racks. The first priority was to put out the fire and get rid of those bombs. Bombardier Lt. Robert Johnson and ball turret gunner Sgt. Richard Varner extinguished the blaze and began the sensitive job of releasing the trapped bombs. Working over an open bomb bay with only the tools at hand—a screwdriver and pliers—they released the bombs after 45 minutes of high-risk work.

With no oxygen, it had been necessary to leave the formation and descend to a lower altitude. A never-identified B-17 from another squadron dropped out of formation and flew escort for them while they were behind enemy lines.

As soon as emergency actions were completed, the crew members who were able began lightening the aircraft by throwing out everything movable. They headed for Italy at reduced speed with the bomb bay open, the fuselage bent, many holes in the plane's skin, and uncertainty about the extent of structural damage. For-



tunately, no enemy fighters attacked the limping bomber.

As they approached the coast with 125 miles of Adriatic water ahead, the number three engine quit from lack of fuel. Freitag was not able to transfer fuel, but he, Goesling, and navigator Garhart were confident they could make it to Italy and try to land. They had no brakes.

The situation called for a long runway and a hospital to care for the wounded. Goesling decided to land at Foggia, which had a longer runway than their home base and better hospital facilities. Adding to their landing problems, the gear could not be lowered mechanically and had to be cranked down by hand.

To substitute for brakes, bombardier Johnson attached parachutes to the waist gun mounts, to be opened as the wheels hit the runway. A crosswind caught the chutes, forcing the bomber off the runway. It came to a stop just short of a row of parked planes.

After the wounded were taken to the hospital, a survey of the B-17 revealed many hundreds of flak holes, thought to be a record, but not one that other crews would want to break. It was remarkable that only four crewmen had been hit.

Getting the damaged bomber back to Italy was a team effort for which each member of the crew was awarded the Silver Star. The Goesling crew is believed to have earned the distinction of being the most decorated crew flying a single mission in the European theater. None of them wanted an encore. ■

Thanks to Ralph H. Simpson, former president of the 483d Bomb Group Association.