Lucky Escape

21 July 1944:  Smith and crew land in Switzerland

MACR 42-94821:
Location last seen/heard:  49.00 N - 0830 E
Aircraft landed near Dubendorf, Switzerland

Eye witness report from Sgt. John J Dvorak Ball Gunner.

It is raining this evening as I sit here in my room in the Hotel Regina, Wengen, Switzerland. today is August 23rd or 24th. Ido not know which, at least I know it’s more than a month since our last mission and that is what i’m going to write about.

I will start with the evening of July 20th. We were having a dance at the Aero-Club at our 490th Bomb Group, naturally i was in full attendance, The biggest attraction of he dance was at 22:00 hours at which time we were always served GI ice cream. i choice an enlisted WAC for partner for the refreshments, or perhaps she chose me, anyway, she said she would see me again at our dance in a fortnight. i laughingly remarked that I would perhaps be dancing in Germany or France by then and this remark almost became fact.

The dance ceased at 2300hrs: all the English gals took off for their respective town in GI trucks.

I peddled my way over to the 851st Squadron and it was then that I saw the red flag waving over the orderly room. it was then, that I first knew we were scheduled for a raid the following morning.

I checked the alerted crew roster and Lt. Smith’s crew was listed.

I guess I had hardly finished my prayers and had dozed off when the C.O began turning on the lights and arousing the men, At 01:00 hours we were already down to the mess hall, lined up waiting for our fresh fried eggs. Oh yes, we had fried eggs for breakfast every morning that we went on a mission and we got them fried just as we wanted them, too!. We drank several mugs of coffee to compensate for our lack of sleep, smoked a cigarette and then boarded trucks which took us to the briefing room, some 3/4 mile away. we assembled in the briefing room and began to cloud it up with our infernal cigarettes. Finally, the briefing officer came in and we all watched attentively but not too eagerly as he began to plot our mission on the large map in the front of the room. Perhaps the Captain who briefed us was just naturally inefficient or else they had not had time to get all the information for the mission, anyway about all we learned from the briefing was that we were to bomb an airdrome and field southwest of Munich. The bomb load was to be tel 500 pounders and we were to have a full gas load - 2700 gallons.

We checked the formation chart to see what positions we were flying and it was then that we found out that we were an extra crew, that is a standby and we wouldn’t fly unless some of the scheduled planes failed to take off. This cheered us a good bit and I was already planning to be “back in the sack” by 0800hrs, the latest time to take off.

We went to the Equipment building to check out our heated clothing, oxygen masks, parachutes and other accessories. i left my wallet with $150 in American and British currency in my locker, safe enough I thought for I would be back in a couple of hours. We wouldn’t be flying today! we rode out to our ship, “Pete the Pelican” and unloaded our equipment. we then made our way to the armament shop and checked out the ships ten guns; we cleaned and oiled them and carried them to the ship. We installed our guns. dry fired them and checked our turrets for oxygen, inter phones and all electrical switches. All the turrets were in good order and after polishing the optical sights and turret glass we all sat down for a cigarette. it was now about 04:00 hours and already faint streaks of light began to show in the northeast.

At this time the officers arrived and began to bustle about, asking about the ships’ condition, turrets etc.

Somehow the officers always got to sleep an hour later than us GI’s I never did know just why, except that they were officers. The crew chief of the ship was missing and he couldn’t be found anywhere, his tent nearby was empty and no one seemed to know where he was.

I made two trips with a gallon can for fuel for the auxiliary power unit(putout) and felt very bad over it as this was the crew chief’s duties.

We turned the props through, checked the tires, superchargers and hydraulics and once again we sat down for a cigarette. It was now nearing take off time (0600 hours) and all over the field you could hear the planes starting up the seemingly unwell ing engines.

Bombra, our radio man had been standing by on the receiver just in case we were called upon to take some other ships place. Lt Green then handed out our escape kits and French money and then that “candy bar” . we always got a candy bar before every mission and we enjoyed this immensely, more so today because we wouldn’t even have to fly - so we thought.

Then everything seemed to happen at once, the control tower called and gave us a position to fly in the formation, the crew chief finally arrived, offering some excuse about his ship wasn’t scheduled to fly so he had gone to early breakfast. He assured us that the ship was all Ok - however we were a little skeptical when we noticed on the Form A that No:3 and 4 engines each had over 350 hours logged on them.

We were supposed to climb to 15,000 feet and then get in formation. We got our altitude by 07:45 but we couldn’t find our formation. It seemed our radio buncher signal was not coming in and a layer of clouds at 10,000 feet prevented us from getting a land bearing.

it was now drawing near 08:00 hours at which time the formation was to leave the English coast. The navigator gave the pilot a magnetic heading and his D.R. was very good that day as we intercepted our formation just as they were leaving the coast.

As we crossed the North Sea we gained an additional 3,000 feet of altitude as 18,000 feet was our bombing altitude that day.

Everyone was in good spirts as is always the case when you’re starting on some adventure. Our route was plotted over very light flak areas and enemy planes were getting rarer every day, so we all decided it would be a pretty easy mission. We made landfall in Holland and it seemed the weatherman had made true predictions for the continent as the clouds at 10,000 feet had all vanished and the day was now clear and beautiful. I viewed for the first time the lowlands of Holland. The calls were numerous and it seemed that there was nearly as much water as there was land. We all kept on the alert for sight of enemy planes or whatever else we might observe.

We were now over enemy territory, that is Germany proper and it was then that I saw two unidentified planes at 3 o’clock proceeding in an opposite direction. We watched them out of sight and then forgot them.

it was about 10:00 hours when I sighted a large group of barrage balloons flying on their cables at perhaps 5,000 feet. I called these out over inter phones so as the navigator could make a note of it for the intelligence officer. 30percent of the information of installations and equipment obtained by group intelligence was gotten from bomber crews observations.

As we went past the barrage balloons we could see that they were protecting a power dam from a low level bomb attack

We were about 30 minutes from the target now and everything was going well. We had seen no enemy fighters and only a few scattered bursts of flak, it was at this time that Dunn, top turret, reported that no1 engine was losing oil. I looked out of the left waist window and could see the oil fairly streaming from the trailing edge of the wing. the navigator now called out the final correction for our I.P.A. and this was the signal for the radio operator to prepare for opening the bomb bay doors. I.P.A. (Initial Point of Approach) meant that we were now 10 minutes from the target. Suddenly no.1 engine was feathered and we could hear the pilot telling the co pilot to give him more power on the remaining three engines so as to keep up with he formation. in spite of the added power we nevertheless got behind a few hundred yards but we were going in over the target regardless of the rest of the formation. It was then that i called out to the pilot that No.4 engine was losing oil. He acknowledged my call but had already known by the oil pressure indicator that something was amiss and then a series of events happened so quickly that we were all rather in a daze.

The weather men had made one of their rare mistakes. The formation ran into dense clouds only 2 or 3 minutes from the target and then it was every plane for itself. The formation peeled off in their assigned directions so as to avoid collision with the other ships. a close formation cannot possibly fly through clouds, it is more dangerous than enemy flak! suddenly it was necessary to feather No.4 engine and the pilot keep calling for more and more power from the two remaining engines, as we were losing altitude rapidly. It was necessary to rid ourselves of our 2-1/2 ton bomb load. With “bombs away” we felt the plane grow steadier beneath us.

The bombs were released over open country so perhaps they only damaged the wheat fields below. The co-pilot called the formation by radio and told them we were at 12,000 feet with two engines out and were flying a course of 270. This was all the information they needed to know that we wouldn’t be going back to England that day. We received no reply from them as radio silence was essential when in formation.

We attempted to call for fighter protection but also got no reply. Our course of 270 would take us toward France and if we could make it across the border we would have a fair chance (about 6 to 10) of getting in touch with the French Resistance and on to Spain.

Our two inboard engines were not at maximum power settings which is only for take off and these power settings are never to be used in excess of five minutes. Nevertheless we were still losing altitude, we were down to about 10,000 feet and now the sky was once more clear and we could see the German towns and farms much to plainly. We keep wondering why they didn’t send up a fighter of two to finish off our crippled bomber.

We then decided to lighten the plane, we jettisoned all the ammunition and guns through the camera hatch. Followed by dismounting the guns and everything else, clothing, life rafts, flak suits, oxygen equipment and much else.

We steadied down at 9,000 feet. With the plane more than a ton lighter we changed our course to 210 and headed for Switzerland. Nearer than France. Praying all the way that the two remaining engines would last.

We were surprisingly calm, we were confident in each other and anyway felt that we could always bail out.

We passed over a large German city and they fired flak at us but it was too low and behind us. We now sighted a large dam with two towns straddling the river. one in Germany and the other Switzerland. The navigator had about him all his maps and was trying to locate an airfield that we could reach without crossing any high mountains, which would be impossible as we could go no higher.

He located a small airfield which was beside a lake so we all began to search the landscape for the lake. It was then that we saw several fighter planes sweep in on us. They were without doubt German design but within moments we had identified the Swiss red cross on the wings as they exposed the markings so that we would not fire on them, had we been able to.

According to neutrality laws we were supposed to lower our landing gear and open our bomb bay doors when flying into a neutral country but this was impossible as the extra drag of the lowered landing gear would have cost us flying speed. So we took a risk and continued flying, waving at the Swiss pilots to show our friendliness. Then the Swiss fighters shot out some blue rockets and proceeded to lead us into the field that our navigator had already located.

We ought to have been more happy but the landing strip was worryingly short, intended for fighter planes only. As we circled in approach, our pilot asked us if we cared to bailout we could rather than make a crash landing, we decided to stay with the ship.

We lowered the landing gear and headed into the field, making a very steep approach so as to maintain our flying speed. We took up our crash positions, practiced so many times when training back in the States. The pilot came in perfectly but at 150 miles per hour landing speed meant we soon ran out of runway. We mounted the surrounding grass with brakes locked and wheels sliding. For a moment we thought it would be a normal stop and then suddenly when the plane had slowed to nearly 20 miles per hour we hit a ditch which collapsed the nose wheel and our ship reared up in one final effort. We were all flung to the rear of the ship.

We abandoned the ship with all possible speed, and Dunn was up on the wing with a fire extinguisher in case that one of the engines should catch fire. The Swiss were right on the spot with the crash wagon and ambulance but luckily the ambulance was unnecessary.

The Swiss soldiers surrounded us with pointed guns shouting “Switzerland! Switzerland! but we carrels noticed them as we were too busy batting our pilot and navigator on the back and shaking each others hands. We were alive.

