

Chapter 1

Last Mission Of The "Umbriago" Crew

Our crew first came together at Sioux City, Iowa, where we received our combat training in B-17 aircraft. This was during the winter from early January through sometime in March of 1944.

Our crew was made up of the following:

- 2nd Lt Joseph W. Pedersen - First Pilot
- 2nd Lt Leon J. Blood - Copilot
- 2nd LT Norman Eiler - Navigator
- 1st Lt William Smith - Bombardier
- Sgt. - Flight Engineer
- Sgt. John Woning - Radio Operator
- Sgt. Jack E. Blackwell - Ball Turret Gunner
- - Waist Gunner
- - Waist Gunner
- Sgt. Herman Erhard - Tail Gunner

Upon completion of our training, we were sent to Grand Island, Nebraska. We were assigned a brand new B-17 which we ferried to Northern Ireland. Enroute, we made stops at Grenier Field, N.H., Gander, Newfoundland, Keflavik, Iceland, and on to Nutts Corner, Ireland (near Belfast).

Our crew was assigned to the 367 Squadron, 306 Bomb Group (Heavy) at Thurleigh, near Bedford, England. This area is known as the Midlands of England. Squadron 367 was known as *The Clay Pigeons* with our [insignia](#) shaped like a clay pigeon with a skull inside wearing a flying helmet.

We flew most of our missions together as a crew. We soon became pretty well bonded (to use an overworked 1997 term). We even had a plane assigned to us which we named (but never had the name painted on.) There was a popular radio show by Jimmy Durante in which he talked and sang about his fictitious friend Umbriago. The name translates, of course, as Drunkard. So that is what we named our plane. Lots of other planes were also given this name, as we later found out.

As we became combat wise (not long) we were often assigned to fly a so-called Deputy Lead Ship. Deputy Lead planes were outfitted with all of the necessary bomb sight and radio equipment necessary to take over in the event that the lead ship was shot up so badly that it could not continue to lead. Thus, it got to the point where we seldom got to fly our own plane. But still felt that we belonged together even though there were times when we were actually split up.

In order to understand fully the events of JUNE 17, 1944, it will help to get some feel for the changing Eighth Air Force mission during that period. Prior to the Normandy landings on D-Day on June 6, 1944, the mission of the Eighth Air Force was the so-called Strategic bombing of the factories (and unfortunately also the cities) of the Axis countries. The intent was to destroy the enemy's ability and will to fight. Therefore during this period, we flew mostly long distance and very high altitude missions. By high altitude I mean that we would always cross over to the continent at between 20,000 and 30,000 feet.

German anti-aircraft batteries were usually made up of a radar unit which controlled four 88 mm guns. These 88 mm batteries were very accurate up to 15,000 to 18,000 ft. When you flew below 15,000 feet, they were extremely accurate if you flew straight and level for one minute or longer. The Germans also had 106 mm batteries which were effective up to at least 25,000 ft, but they did not seem to have the accuracy. They usually sent up volley after volley into the area that they knew the formations had to fly through to get over the target. This type of defense was responsible for the black flak clouds that were so impressive. We soon learned that we needn't be concerned with the black flak except that red bursts might show up near them. I mention these facts because they help to explain the events of June 17.

After D-Day (June 6, 1944 Allied landings at Normandy beach heads) the mission of the Eighth became one of tactical support of the ground forces. We were sent out to destroy anything that supported the enemy attempts to move his forces. Bombing missions were usually in groups of 60 or less heavy bombers. We went after bridges, railroad marshaling yards, fuel and ammunition dumps and the likes. The fighters which previously had done such great work flying support for the heavy bomber missions, now were assigned to low level missions to shoot up any enemy that they could find.

Bombing missions usually were flown at about 15,000 feet to conserve fuel which was now sorely needed by all of the motorized ground forces.

On June 17th, a small mission was set up to bomb some oil tanks near Orly airfield outside of Paris. The total force was made up of only 12 planes. One of these planes was manned by a crew on their first combat mission. The copilot of this plane was a friend of mine from Preflight School, named Charlie Barchard.

Our Navigator, because of a manning screw-up was assigned to the lead ship and we were left without a Navigator. A Navigator for another crew, who had completed his missions was down at the ready room seeing off the rest of his crew on their last mission. They got him in a jeep and drove him out to our ship. He climbed on board and we were off. He did not have any of the correct maps and was only there, as it turned out, to get shot down.

Our crew was assigned to a plane that was to fly off the right wing of the lead plane. We were to cross onto the continent over the beachhead at Normandy. We had been doing this regularly since D-Day because the Germans no longer had any anti-aircraft batteries there due to the invasion. Unfortunately for us, the Germans were able to get a four gun 88 mm battery operating that day. We came in, as usual, fat dumb and happy, flying straight and level at 15,000 feet. The first four gun salvo immediately knocked down the deputy lead (flying to the left of the lead ship). It also caused damage to the lead ship but it was able to continue. The next blast was under the left side of our plane. The first indication was a sound similar to hail on a tin roof. We had a call on the intercom, "Sir, I've been hit". It was the radio operator, Johnny Wonning. Flak had come up through his table and through his right arm. Flak had also gone through number 2 engine exhaust stack which allowed exhaust flames to penetrate into the wing. This we did not notice at first as we were busy getting Wonning attended to and continuing on course in the formation.

Bill Smith, the bombardier had had a smattering of medical training, so he had always been our designated medical officer. Now Bill was also an ex college football player and so heavy he had to have a couple of waivers to fly. Also a great guy. Thus it was no easy feat for him to snake his way through the bomb racks, but he did it and managed to stem the flow of blood and get the wound bandaged.

Thus we continued with the formation towards Paris. We soon were able to see the Eiffel Tower. But the target itself was obscured by cumulus clouds. The group tried a couple of passes from different directions to try to make visual contact with the target to no avail. The rules were that we could never bomb a target in hostage countries by use of radar. You had to be able to see the target in the Norden bomb sight. So the lead ship had to abandon the primary target and, for this mission, go look for a "target of opportunity." So the formation began roaming around southwestern France looking for a valid target. This was not easy because the cumulus clouds covered most of the area with scattered peeks at the terrain below.

All of this of course, ate up time. Soon the holes in our exhaust stack caused fire to spread into the left wing. Soon there was a huge fire along the whole left side of the plane, so we decided to prepare to bail out, if we had to. Two problems immediately presented themselves. First, the D ring which initiated the parachute opening required the use of the right hand, which was Wonning's severely wounded hand. The guys got around that by putting his chest pack on upside-down so that he could pull the D ring with his left hand. This was the only solution. Unfortunately this left the attachment hooks upside down. So when he did bail out, the hooks ripped up his face severely.

Then it was realized that Bill Smith had left his chest pack (chute) up in the nose

when he went back to attend to Wonning. So he clambered all the way back. Unfortunately, as he hurriedly picked up the pack, the D ring caught on something and the chute popped open. Fortunately, all planes took along a spare chute for such emergencies. Guess what? The spare chute was in the rear of the plane. So big old Smitty had to clamber all the way back again. Meanwhile, the fire is really getting going good.

Next we see all of the other bombers opening their bomb-bay doors. We are on a bomb run! Our bombardier is in the rear of the plane and our borrowed Navigator has no idea how to release the bombs, especially with the nose section full of a billowing parachute. But we sure would like to be rid of those six 1000 pound bombs. Fortunately this particular plane had a manual means of jettisoning. Pete said to go ahead and try it. It was a red ball about the size of a baseball. I gave it a tug and sure enough the bomb-bay doors opened. They had been released and were flapping in the wind. I tugged further the six big babies together with the attaching hangers headed for the railroad yards at Noyen-sur-Sarthe.

As soon as we got rid of our bomb load, we pulled out of the formation and prepared to bail out. This was a fairly orderly procedure which had been rehearsed many times on the ground. Those in the front of the plane (Navigator, Flight Engineer, copilot, and pilot) went out in that order through a hatch in the crawl space under the pilots compartment. The door simply released by an emergency latch and blew away. The Bombardier usually exited through this same hatch, but for obvious reasons didn't this time. Those in the rear exited through the rear door which would also blow away using the emergency latch.

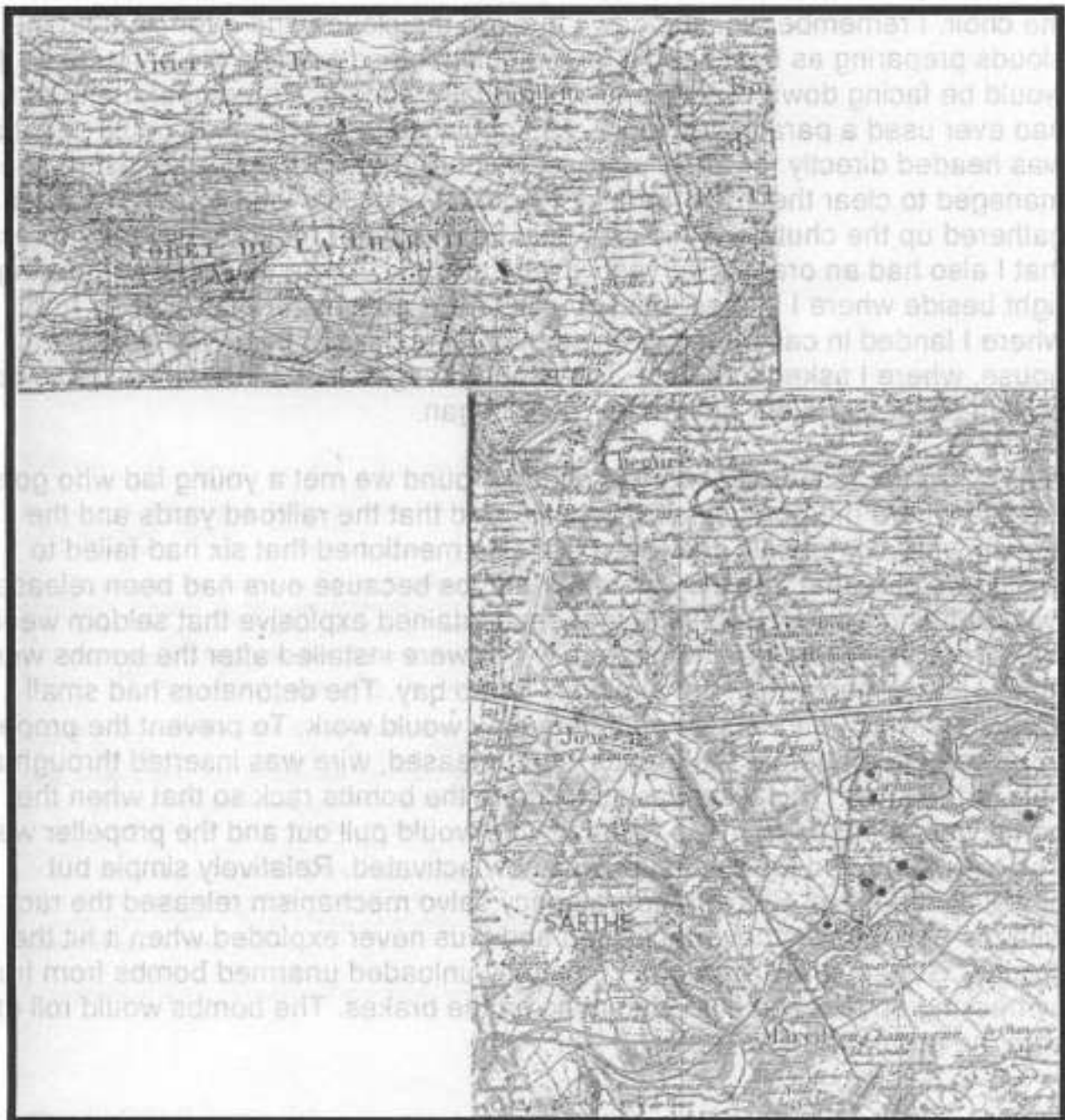
Back to Smitty who had to make his way back to the rear of the plane to get the spare chute. Remember; he was an ex-college football player who had to get waivers to fly because of his weight. This also meant that he had to have an oversize chute because of his weight. Most of us had 24 foot diameter chutes. Smitty, on the other hand, used a 28 foot chute. You guessed it. The spare chute was a 24 foot one. Furthermore, the straps would not go around his football player legs. Well, he managed to get them around and buckled, but not the way they were intended. Consequently, when he bailed out, not only were his legs badly wrenched, but his weight caused some of the parachute panels to blow out. He, of course, landed with a hell of a thud.

As soon as we bailed out of the plane, we no longer were part of the crew and were pretty much on our own. In fact it would be foolish to try to find each other as it would attract too much attention.

For me the bailout was a strange experience. The sudden quiet after all the tumult prior to the bailout. Then I realized that I was wearing a borrowed chute and that the leg straps had not been adjusted properly. The result was sudden severe pain to my privates and wondering if I would end up singing soprano in

the choir. I remember floating down through the clouds and after clearing the clouds preparing as best I could for a landing. I tried twisting the shrouds so that I would be facing down wind. Behold, it actually worked. Remember, none of us had ever used a parachute before. As I got close to the ground I could see that I was headed directly for a row of trees. By pulling my feet up at the last moment I managed to clear the trees (barely). I landed very softly just beyond the trees. I gathered up the chute and hid it as best I could under the trees. I seem to recall that I also had an orange life vest which I also hid. There was a small building right beside where I landed, but I couldn't raise anyone. I headed away from where I landed in case I had been seen coming down. I finally went to a farm house, where I asked to be hid. They soon brought Jack Blackwell in, gave us civilian clothes and our adventure really began.

NOTE: On the first or second day on the ground we met a young lad who gone to the site where the bombs had fallen, He said that the railroad yards and the station were completely destroyed. He also mentioned that six had failed to explode. I presume that they were our bombs because ours had been released without being armed. Bombs of that era contained explosive that seldom went off by impact. They required detonators which were installed after the bombs were hung on their hangers in the airplanes bomb bay. The detonators had small propellers which had to spin off before they would work. To prevent the propellers from working off before the bombs were released, wire was inserted through a hole in the shaft. This wire was attached to the bombs rack so that when the bomb was released from the rack the wire would pull out and the propeller was free to spin off and the detonator was now activated. Relatively simple but obviously effective. Since the emergency salvo mechanism released the rack with the bomb it was never activated and thus never exploded when it hit the ground. Ground crew Armorers commonly unloaded unarmed bombs from trucks by backing up fast and then slamming on the brakes. The bombs would roll off onto the ground... USUALLY.



- **Straight line indicates aircraft flight path to final crash site.**
- **Black dots indicate where 9 parachutes (everyone) landed.**

This document is the private property of L. J. Blood.
Do not publish nor copy in any form.
Copyright 2002



- [Home](#)

1. [Last Mission Of Umbrigo's Crew](#)
2. [Ferry Crossing Of The Loire](#)
3. [Mlle. Lily The Worst Cook In France](#)
4. [Working On The Roblin Farm](#)
5. [Louis Fontaneau Little Man With A Big Heart](#)
6. [CAPTURED](#)
7. [Escape With Two Whores And A Pollock](#)
8. [Fate Of The Camp Followers](#)
9. [SS Major Wants To Hang Us](#)
10. [Wood Powered Trucks](#)
11. [Dijon Turkey Shoot From The Ground](#)
12. [Induced Air Attack](#)
13. [P-47 Strafing And Escape At Belfort](#)
14. [Life In The Usine-a-Gaz](#)
15. [Escape Into Switzerland](#)
16. [Return To Duty](#)
17. [Epilogue](#)
18. [The P-47 and George Hebbel](#)

- [Older Memoirs #1](#)
- [Older Memoirs #2](#)

This document is the private property of
L. J. Blood
Do not publish nor copy in any form.
Copyright 2002