

STUTTGART RAID

LIFE photographer rides through flak and fighters on tough Fortress mission to Southwest Germany

by FRANK SCHERSCHEL



To LIFE Photo-reporter Frank Scherschel befell the rare and dangerous task of photographing the American bombing raid on Stuttgart, Germany, Sept. 6. The day of this air action—one of the war's greatest—35 American planes were lost and many more barely reached England before crash-landing. Of the latter one was Scherschel's plane, *Wining Run*. As eleventh man of a B-17 bomber crew, Scherschel manned three cameras in a space of less than phone-booth size. LIFE here presents both his pictures and his own story of the flight.

We landed on a wing with four dead engines and no time for specific prayers. My prayers had all been said going into Southwest Germany. We wished ourselves back out of Germany, cursed the Nazi fighters through France, said a prayer for our gas to hold out to the Channel and thanked God or His Son for the sight of the English coastline. (It was the most beautiful coastline in the world that day.) We crash-landed in a pasture after missing two houses.

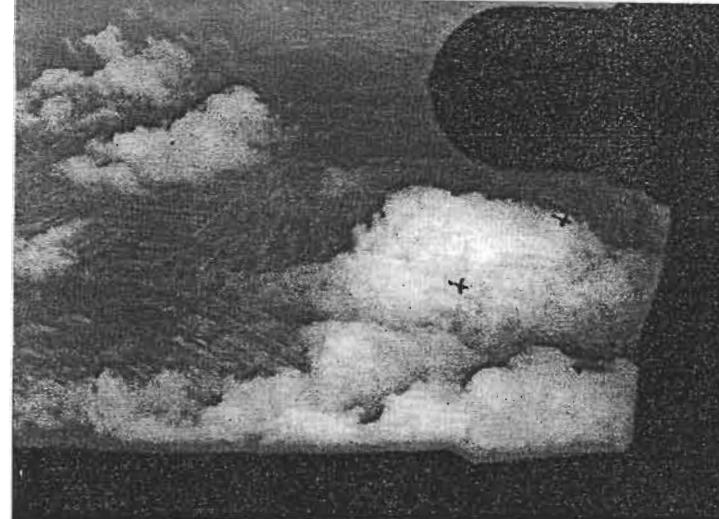
It all started the night before at the dinner table. Lieut. Colonel Stevens invited me along on a hot one. He wouldn't say where, but just reaffirmed that the going would be rough. So, two Coca-Colas, one double-feature movie and three hours' sleep later I found myself looking at two fried eggs that looked right back at me. Eggs out of a shell are a treat given quite regularly to combat crews—nothing is too good for them when it's available. I met the skipper of the plane, Lieut. Jacob C. James of Valliant, Okla. (the best darn pilot in the world). Several officers chipped in flying gear for me. We spent many anxious minutes finding a parachute harness to fit properly. Arriving at the plane I found the space I thought would be a good place to ride was all filled with extra gear. I wound up behind the pilot and copilot straddling a hatch. There was as much room as in an undersized phone booth with three people in it. Lieut. James called out, "Two minutes to engine-starting time." There were some last-minute preparations. I left my Graphic and a borrowed aerial camera behind since there was no room to use them, and took three small cameras along—a Leica, 135-mm. lens, Rolleiflex and an Ikonta B. We wouldn't be on oxygen for an hour after take-off, so I could move about the hatch with comparative ease. Copilot 2nd Lieut. Howard C. Ness pointed out my oxygen outlet and intercom plug-in. Then he left me to start engines. I was on my own for a while. I spread my cameras out, placed one in the nose of the ship. Why? I'll never know . . . it took 20 agonizing minutes to retrieve it later on.

You never know about oxygen

All the warnings about using oxygen came back now: you don't know when you are not getting enough because you just drift away very pleasantly. A story told by an officer lecturing on oxygen flashed back. It seems during an active part of a mission when fighters were coming in from all directions one waist gunner didn't hear his partner's gun firing. Turning around he found him leaning on his gun, grinning at the show, having a great time watching the battle. He noticed that the gunner's oxygen supply had been cut off by a twist in the line. Untwisting the line, the gunner soon had the other revived and down to business. The moral was if anybody looks like he's enjoying a mission, he lacks oxygen.

Moving about was extremely difficult. The heavy clothes and cramped quarters meant inching forward or back. The motors were started and we moved along the runway to our take-off position. Plugged into intercom, and the show was on.

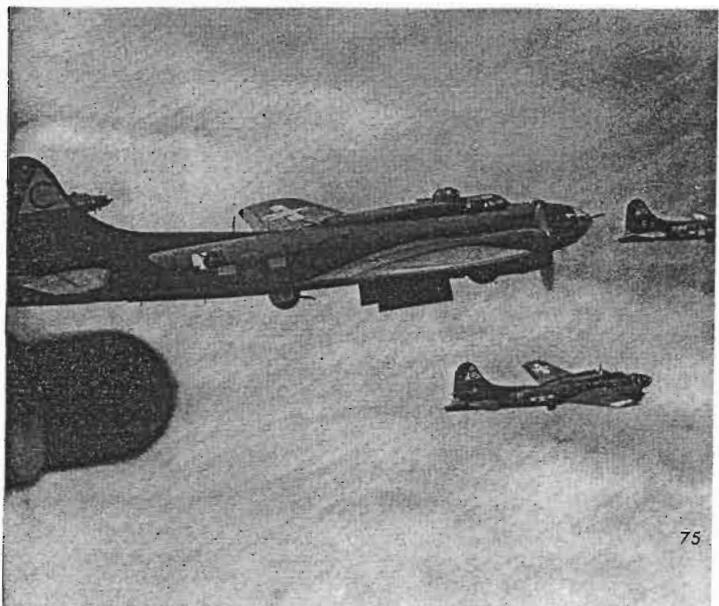
Pilot to crew: "We are going to be on a long mission that will require a lot of oxygen. Want everybody to keep spare bottles nearby . . . we have more than enough."



Nazi fighters dive in head-on attack on low planes in Scherschel's formation. These Focke-Wulf 190's are two of the hordes of fighters that jumped U.S. bombers in Germany and harassed them all the way into northern France. More than 70 Nazi fighter planes were destroyed by Fortress gunners on the Stuttgart raid.



Flak bursts show just ahead of the three lead planes and at their left as they approach the target. Formations went into twisting turns and violent evasive action that threw enemy AA gunners off aim and jolted Scherschel from the floor to the ceiling of his plane. Below: planes come off target with bomb-bay doors open.





Heading for Stuttgart, Scherschel snapped this picture of a Fortress squadron formation flying at 25,000 ft. near his plane, the *Winning Run*. His pilot flew a high position in the last group of the attacking bombers so that LIFE would have a ringside seat for all of the action going on.

Feathered propeller is an ominous sign of the engine that went dead north of Paris on return from target. Scherschel's Fortress was still two hours from home. Plane was able to hold formation on three engines. When it reached French coast, a second motor cut out for lack of gas.





Bombardier Walter Witt sends his bombs away in a quick target run over Stuttgart, then returns to his job as nose gunner, protecting *Winning Run* from head-on attack.

STUTTGART RAID (continued)

Copilot then checked all members of the crew, calling out: "Copilot to navigator." From the nose came, "Go ahead, copilot." "Everything okay?" "Everything okay," came back from the navigator. In turn came the bombardier, engineer, radioman, tail gunner, turret gunner, waist gunners and last he called out: "Are you all right, LIFE?"

I replied, "Everything okay." My voice through the throat mike over the intercom sounded like I had my head in a bucket of water.

Climbing into position behind the pilots, I watched them take off and soon we were circling the field. Planes were everywhere—high, low, circling and joining their groups. In the formation a signal flashed and we headed for Germany. We reached the British coastline and several planes turned back. Over the intercom: "Pilot to tail gunner."

Tail gunner: "Go ahead, pilot."

Pilot: "Did one of our planes abort?"

Tail gunner: "Yes, but Number 3 is moving in to take his place."

Pilot: "Roger. We are now going up. Everybody on oxygen."

In a few minutes the copilot checked all hands making sure oxygen masks were functioning properly. The bombardier called out the altitude as we climbed up into the blue.

No flak or fighters—so far

As we crossed the French coast, scattered clouds began to appear. We seemed to crawl along. The French countryside differs quite a bit from the English terrain in that the plots of farmland seem to be rectangular rather than square . . . no flak or fighters so far . . . looks like a soft trip—I hope.

Talking to the copilot I discovered we usually had fighters over the target and coming out. Make a few formation pictures . . . have to save film . . . changing film is too much trouble . . . every picture must count. Up ahead we see some flak. The bombardier reports it over the intercom: "Flak at 10 o'clock." We plod on.

"Pilot to navigator."

"Go ahead, pilot."

"What time do we reach our target?"

The navigator announces the time: "Two hours to go to target."

The intercom quiets down.

Turret gunner: "I don't like this. It's too damn quiet."

Meantime . . . I have found and lost my cameras three times. I check my oxygen supply . . . maybe I am getting forgetful. Between the space where I am standing and the hatch I climb through are many places to scatter my equipment—too many.

The formations are all about us. We are going to be the last group into the target. Some miles ahead are two more groups of B-17's . . . they are mere specks. At times a puff of flak explodes near them.



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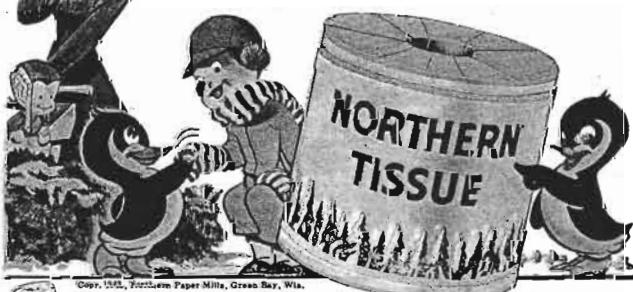


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STUTTGART RAID (continued)

Navigator to pilot: "In about an hour."

Pilot to navigator: "What time do we reach the French coastline?"

Navigator to pilot: "We are due there at 12:05 . . . it is now 10:30."

Pilot to navigator: "When do we reach the English coast?"

Navigator to pilot: "At 12:25. . . ."

A few more fighters came in on our formation. Up ahead the other groups are catching a lot more fighters than our group.

Waist gunner to pilot: "Want us to lighten our load?"

Pilot to waist gunner: "No, I think we can make it all right."

From over their shoulders I watch the pilots babying along the three motors. Copilot Ness is checking the gas. We have something like a two-hour gas supply if nothing happens. A new group of fighters come in and then our own fighters show up . . . one break for us. A quick glance at the oxygen supply shows it is down to around 125-lb. pressure.

Longo, the turret gunner, calls in: "I think I have enough oxygen but will somebody please check me every so often in case I run out?"

Waist gunner assures him that he will look out for him . . . there is a spare walk-around bottle of oxygen beside me . . . I change over to conserve the main supply. The engineer signals me to make room for him to come out of the turret. He starts pumping gas out of No. 3 tank into the other tanks. Lieut. Ness takes off his mask and shouts, "Better go back to the radio room—take your chute."

"Prepare to bail out"

I shed all my surplus gear and go down the hatch for my chute. Meet Lieut. Scoggins throwing out ammunition . . . take time and help him. Lieut. Witt, the bombardier, comes back with a heavy box of ammo. . . . "Damn shame we couldn't shoot it at those fighters." Through the hatch between the engineer's legs I head through the bomb bay for the radio room. . . . I try to squeeze through the catwalk but my heavy clothing and parachute harness stop me. I go around and walk into what was a radio room. All the radio equipment that was loose or could be pried loose was being thrown overboard. I help pass some things back to the waist gunners . . . At the remaining radio a grim radioman is sending S. O. S. Here was the real thing . . . S. O. S. has been dramatized in books, movies and the stage, but when an S. O. S. is personal it reaches new heights. Another motor has gone dead . . . Radioman stops and shouts we have reached the Channel, prepare to ditch. We take off our chutes and cut the safety wires of the rubber dinghies. We peek out of the hatch and look at the Channel. "Helluva lot better than Germany or France," somebody shouts. Everybody is calm . . . radioman is still sending S. O. S. He stops. We are not going to ditch.

"Prepare to bail out."

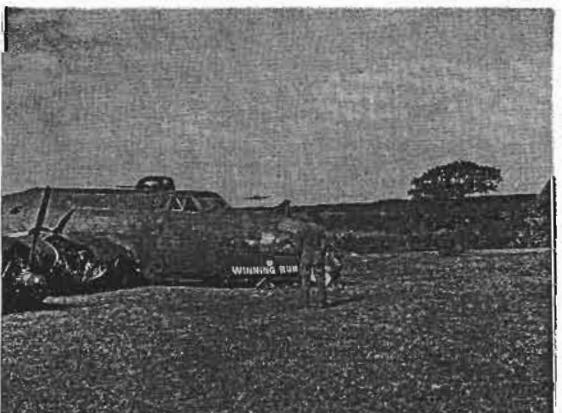
We snap on our chutes. . . . Pop Hamilton comes over to me and looks over my harness and chute . . . puts his mouth to my ear: "Go out crouching like this."

And he doubled up to show me how.

"When you jump go head first and count ten before you pull the rip cord. . . ."

I nodded O.K. Everybody is calm. . . . It proved what training and instruction has accomplished. . . . Nobody was visibly excited. . .

CONTINUED ON PAGE 82



"Winning Run" skidded in to land with four engines dead but her crew safe and two houses she dodged undamaged. Over her nose, another Fort makes emergency landing.

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STUTTGART RAID (continued)

Not even me . . . somehow I felt we would make it all right. The pilot was very optimistic at all times. He later told me he was lying like hell . . . he didn't want to excite anybody . . .

We see the beautiful English coastline. The navigator has found an airport.

"Prepare to land in a small airport. . . ."

We all sit on the floor bracing our backs against the wall behind us. Three boys are seated like they were bobsledding. . . . We are turning in. The flaps are down, the motors sound throttled completely (they were out). Martel, the radioman, is sitting in his armored chair and peeking out of a window. . . . "Here we go," he shouts. The wheels hit with a bang. Empty shells rattle and dust flies into the air. . . . We bounce twice with more noise. Then there is a helluva lot of noise and we are all thrown up in the air and sideways—plop askew. The plane has stopped. . . . nobody moves. Somebody says, "Let's get the hell out of here. . . ."

"We started to scramble to our feet. . . . Sgt. Hamilton says, "Let's take it easy or somebody might get hurt. . . ."

Everyone slowed down and we got the hell out of there. Our tail surfaces were in a hedge and we ran around the wing. Lieut. James saw us, counted noses. Everybody was out.

"Let's go way out in the field. Number 2 motor is burning and it might explode."

The first words said when the crew looked back at the plane were, "Moore ain't goin' to like this. . . ."

"Who's Moore?"

"Oh, he is the crew chief and this is his pet plane."

I had left all my cameras up with the pilot . . . they were still in the plane.

"How about the cameras?"

"Stay away for a while and see what happens. . . ."

Just 14 miles to spare

We waited for a minute, then Lieut. James and I went to the plane. He boosted me into the pilot's window headfirst and held my legs while I got all three cameras out. Then I boosted James in and he picked up a fire extinguisher to put out the engine blaze.

Looking overhead we saw another formation of B-17's pass in perfect formation. . . .

"Where in hell did they get the gas?"

All about us planes were landing in all directions. Upwind, downwind. . . . Lieut. James said we would have made it O.K. if he hadn't been cut off by other planes. We still had two motors when he started to land but as he swung around another Fort these two went dead. There was nothing else to do but jump fences so long as we could and miss houses until we stopped.

A truck with some R. A. F. boys came along, took Lieut. Ness over to a telephone where he reported the crew safe and the plane a wreck. This same truck then dropped us off at a nearby pub where we had a cheese sandwich and a boilermaker and a helper. Later in the afternoon we rode to an airport and were picked up by a plane and flown back to base. We had made the English coast by about 14 miles.



CREW of Scherschel's Flying Fortress included (standing) Lieuts. James, Ness, Scoggins, Witt, and Sgt. Watts; (sitting) Sgts. Martel, Hamilton, Misiak, Tripp and Longo.