

# Climax

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## January 8, 1945

In his book „The War in Austria” Manfred Rauchensteiner describes, in addition to wartime events on the ground, the operations of the American 15th Air Force, in particular against targets in the Ostmark. In the chapter „The January Raids” he writes:

»The Western air forces had set themselves ambitious objectives for the January of 1945. They wanted to relieve the pressure on the Soviets on their western front, to finally subdue the German fuel and armaments industries, and then to attack the last of the potential targets in their sights...

It began on January 8 when 121 B-17 bombers, escorted by 105 fighters, attacked the central railroad station of Linz around noon, and the 5 bomber formations dropped a total of 1304 500lb bombs...

That was only the first wave. At the end of their combined approach, 328 B-24 bombers from five other groups, accompanied by 178 fighter aircraft, split up. One formation of 85 bombers also attacked targets in the area of Linz, while the others, finding their visibility impaired by a thick layer of cloud, bombed as alternative targets the railroad stations of Graz, Klagenfurt and Villach...

There was no German fighter screen whatsoever. In those attacks, the 15th Air Force did lose six bombers to anti-aircraft fire, a seventh though a crash-landing, plus one escort fighter. From a total of 520 bombers and 283 fighters participating in those operations, these losses were minimal...«

According to my diary, Monday January 8, 1945 was an absolutely routine day. Snow had fallen the day before and, despite it being a Sunday morning rest period, we had to dig out the cable pit; in the afternoon NCO Bleicher persecuted us with political indoctrination. Otherwise, „*we were writing and making time.*” Compared to the other weekdays with their routine duties, it appeared a quiet one: „*Aircraft identification in our barrack. Sat on the 3rd level [of the bunks] with Altmann. Bähr*

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Bombs falling on the alternative targets of Klagenfurt, above, and Graz. (HF)

*and Russmann opposite, eating Spitzzi's apples. Below sat August who was throwing chunks of ice that he broke off an icicle. Then I reported for aircraft observation duties. Hell of a fog... 11:00 hrs stand to. Fired at formations that were flying back from Linz. Totally frustrated with the FuMG radar that initially, was always tracking with the parabolic antenna at 15 degrees, although the aircraft were flying at 7000m. Figl turned up in the afternoon. In the evening the lights went out, so we sat there in the candlelight. Did math with Biehler, studied philosophy while I wrote up my diary. Finally, we fell into the arms of Morpheus."*

At the same time, the 376th Bomb Group of the 15th USAAF flew northward from Italy to bomb the railroad facilities of Linz in Austria. My diary entry and the American reports indicate that one of our eight salvos, numbering a total of 48 rounds and mentioned in the battle order<sup>52</sup>, might have scored a hit that led to the downing of an aircraft. Did „we down here” have an influence in determining the fate of „them up there”?

The following is quoted from statements made by 2nd Lieutenant Philip R. Scott, the pilot of a B-24 Liberator. His report covers damage to his Liberator "Red Ryder" shortly after dropping his bomb load on the target in Linz, the evolution of the return flight of the stricken aircraft along two-thirds of the route until it hit the sea off the coast of Dalmatia, and his rescue by a British-Canadian patrol boat:<sup>53</sup>

»On January 8, 1945 the 376th Bomb Group headed North to bomb the marshalling yards at Linz, Austria. Our 512th squadron encountered clouds that put a strain on formation flying and also forced us to fly at higher altitudes than planned. Our windows were well frosted by the time we reached the target area. Scraping off this ice to create viewing ports kept many of us busy.

Over Linz flak bursts would be observed at many altitudes and it looked heavy and dangerous to all of us. This was only our second mission to be flying as a complete crew. For this trip we had a new bombardier assigned to us, as well as a cameraman to record bomb hits as we passed over the target. This was not to be their lucky day, nor was it ours.

Our bombs were released toward the target, photographs were taken, and the crew kept busy checking oxygen equipment, looking for enemy fighters and fighting the awful feelings

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<sup>52</sup> See Appendix, page 251

<sup>53</sup> See also Missing Air Crew Report 42-95285, 8.I.1945 in Appendix, pages 278 et seq.

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of anxiety caused by the flak that was bursting all around us.

I saw one B-24, off of my left wing, diving straight down into some clouds. Then, all of a sudden, we suffered a near miss burst that shook up our plane and the number one engine was knocked out. I feathered the prop but soon afterwards I noticed that the number two engine was losing power.

By that time, I could see only two other B-24s and one was a pathfinder radar plane. I followed them for as long as I could but we gradually fell back and eventually were forced to descend into the heavy clouds below. Our navigator did a fine job of guiding on a course that would bring us into the island of Vis, near Yugoslavia, for an emergency landing. There seemed to be no reasonable options due to the solid clouds over the mainland and the coast of Italy was further away.

Then the crew reported that a fuel leak was suspected because the fuel levels in our gages were dropping excessively. We knew that we were in a desperate situation but at least we had the >good luck< of not catching fire.

We made frantic efforts to contact Air-Sea Rescue Units and any friendly air base to report our position and emergency. But, before any response was known to me, our fuel supply ran out. So, I guided our powerless plane down towards the rough seas with all men stationed in ditching positions. Everyone that is except Dick Dumm, our navigator, who was busy on the radio. He finally got a response from Air-Sea Rescue...

I was also amazed to learn Air-Sea Rescue simply said to Dick, >good luck<, because they told him that there were 9 or 10 other reported ditching that were ahead of us. There was no chance that they could search for us anytime soon. >Good luck< indeed! With time running, I finally succeeded in calling Dick back to the flight deck when we hit the Adriatic seas in a controlled crash that ruptured the fuselage and the tail section sank quickly... Up forward the top turret came crashing down on impact and water poured into the flight deck compartment. One man disappeared, a second man did not survive his head wounds, and our navigator suffered severe fractures to his forehead and one hand.

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The crew of the B-24 Liberator "Red Ryder", an aircraft of the 512th Bomb Squadron, 376th Bomb Group, that was hit during the attack on the "Hermann Göring Works" Linz on 8.I.1945; front row: Pilot 2nd Lieutenant Philipp R. Scott , Co-Pilot 2nd Lieutenant Kenneth F. Martin, Bombardier 2nd Lieutenant Knie, who was not on this fateful flight, Navigator 2nd Lieutenant Richard C. Dumm; back row: Air Gunner 2nd Sergeant Gerald L. Harden (†), Air Gunner 2nd Sergeant Colby G. Walker, Air Gunner 2nd Sergeant John H. McDermott (†), Flight Engineer Tech. Sergeant Oscar Snipes, Radio Operator Tech. Sergeant Jack D. Holt (†), Air Gunner 2nd Sergeant Gerald Messing (†). Not shown on the photo are the Bombardier 2nd Lieutenant Robert C. Walker, and the Photographer 2nd Sergeant Löwenthal, who were specifically assigned for the flight described.

Within a few minutes there was nothing left of our big, beautiful Liberator except bits and pieces floating around us. I recall seeing plywood chips, several oxygen bottles and a dark colored blob of canvas bobbing in the waves. This package turned out to be a spare raft that had been stored inside in the compartment above the wing structure. That raft was our >good luck< because we spent 42 hours and two cold nights floating on the rough seas.

On our third day, Dick Dumm got very lucky! He spotted a PT patrol boat just cruising by; he fired his 45 caliber Colt at it while someone else fired our last two red flares. Well, as luck would have it, Dick hit their windshield and that lucky hit led to our rescue but not before one tense moment when the PT came alongside our rafts with their crew pointing machine guns directly at us. It took some talking

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to convince them that we were American airmen. Dick explained that he was the one who fired those shots to get their attention.

There is a lot more to this story but I've told enough to demonstrate that there is such a thing as >good luck< and then there is also >bad luck< to some of us. No one can explain it or understand it. Things happen, that's it. We took our chances in those days flying our B-24s into battle. We take chances even today, nearly every day. So, I say >good luck< to all of you.«

Scott's report is underpinned by a letter dated November 24, 2004 from 2nd Sergeant Colby Walker, one of the machine gunners of this aircraft, to his friend Richard G. Yerick, who made that letter available to me. In it, the former 2nd Sergeant Colby Walker describes the dramatic events in more detail, including the rescue and the fate of his comrades:

»Dear Rick,

Thanks for the card notifying me that you did receive the copy of Phil Scott's >Good Luck< story. As I mentioned before, this letter contains more detail of events which occurred during the time between ditching (3:30 p.m. Jan. 8, 1945) and the rescue (about 9:30 a.m. on Jan. 10)...

The B-24 broke in two upon impact aft of the bomb bay. Tail section went to the bottom immediately, but I managed to swim away from it despite being several feet underwater. After inflating my Mae West I paddled towards the front section of the plane where others were freeing one life raft from under the wing. The other raft could not be freed, but luckily a spare raft was seen floating nearby (This 2nd raft had a puncture in one compartment and held only 2 men). There were 6 in the other raft, 3 men were lost in the ditching incident directly.

The clouds soon covered us at nightfall. We were at least 5 miles north of Vis, the tiny island off the Dalmatian Coast of Yugoslavia (some 40 miles from the mainland). Vis was guarded by British commandos who maintained the short landing strip... A storm struck with wind, rain, and even sleet at times during the night. Several of us were injured in the crash and the pilot Scott was ill from taking in too much sea water. The assistant engineer, Gerold Messing was incoherent. Tragically he passed away during the night. Waves