

# Richard Cooke's account

The morning of February 25th, 1944 broke bright and clear over nearly every target in Germany.....

I remember the ground crews waving at us as we left and became airborne. I never thought much about whether I'd see them again. I was too anxious to get on with the war. The weather was cold and foggy, as usual.

After we broke out over the clouds visibility was no problem. We circled and joined the formation. There were six (6) Forts in our squadron and five (5) squadrons from the 457th for this raid.

The target was Augsburg, deep in Southern Germany. Our specific target was a central Messerschmitt plant for the Reich. We were flying deputy lead for our flight. As we joined the formation and headed toward the French coast, everyone settled in for the ride. It would be more than five hours before we were over the target. We flew in at 27,000 feet. It was our third mission.

As we arrived over France, Bower (p) ordered us to our battle stations and to clear our guns. It was February and it was cold. Sweat froze. Ice formed in our oxygen masks. I pulled down my controller and fired my guns in the chin turret. I swore as only one of them worked.

I radioed Frank Giardino, our engineer, who agreed that there wasn't much we could do about it now. Intermittent flak started almost immediately. Later, the closer we got to the target, the worse the flak got.

Over Saarbrücken it was really bad. As we neared the target, number two and number three engines were hit by flak. We initially managed to stay up with the flight, and dropped our bombs on target, although under heavy fire all the while. Soon our speed slowed and we had to drop out of formation.

That's when the fighters came in.....

All of our gunners began firing heavily. I got off a burst at a Bf-109 attacking our nose. He came in head-on firing and barrel rolling. I was dazed by how fast he flew by. He was there and gone. They buzzed around us like bees. I wished that damned second gun was working.

About this time Archie Bower (p) ordered Lee Hoskins (n) and me (b) out of the nose because number two engine was running away. He was afraid that if the prop disconnected, it would take the nose with it. We came up through the pilot section of the plane. I remember at the time that Giardino (e) manned the top turret. Lee Hoskins (n) and I (b) crossed the catwalk over the empty bomb bay to the radio room.

There I manned the radio room gun, which pointed up and toward the tail. John Popowitz (r) was in his seat manning the radio. Joe Schneider's (bt) guns became inoperative and he came out of the ball turret up into the waist. Our intercoms were still connected at the time. I remember hearing Archie (p) telling Lee, (n) our navigator, to "Get the hell up here and set a course for Switzerland". Lee Hoskins (n) looked over at me and said, "See 'ya later Cooke," and started over the catwalk back to the pilots compartment. That's the last I saw of him.

I got off another burst of the radio room gun at a passing fighter. In the aft section of the plane, it was controlled chaos. Spent rounds were bouncing all over the place. The plane shuddered from the recoil of our guns.

Suddenly, all hell broke loose. A second wave of Fw-190 s attacked from the right side and rear. We were hit hard in the waist several times with machine gun and cannon fire from incoming fighters. The center of the plane exploded in fire and smoke. Wes Schneider (bt) (now at a waist gun) and Jesse Hirschberg (wg) were tossed like dolls and were killed instantly by the cannon fire.

John Popowitz (r) was blown across to the other side of the radio room with a bad hip wound. Joe Snyder, (wg) was badly hit in the body and both legs. One of his legs especially was all chewed up.

I was hit in the legs with shrapnel. In a matter of seconds, everyone in the waist of the plane and radio room was either dead or wounded. John Woskovich, (tg) our tail gunner, who had felt the impact and knew we were in trouble, came immediately up from the tail. Bower (p) sent William Baxendale (cp) back to see what had happened. A third engine was hit. Number two was now on fire. Bower (p), now alone at the stick with one good engine, started to lose control of the aircraft.

Bower (p) hit the bailout alarm. The plane began a slow diving spin, which threw us all around and made it hard to move. We all knew that we had to get out fast, but couldn't move. I crawled to the waist and checked Jesse Hirschberg (wg) and Wes Schneider (bt) to see if they were dead. Both died in the second attack.

I knew Popowitz (r), in the radio room, had been hit but wasn't sure how badly. Everything was crazy. It was unreal, like a dream.

Bower (p) was trying hard to get the plane out of the spin and maintain altitude. Finally he managed to level out for a few seconds. That few seconds gave us the break we needed. As we leveled out and could move again, I yelled to Popowitz (r), "Let's get the hell out of here, Paps". Both Woskovich (tg) and Snyder (wg) had already managed to jump. By this time Baxendale (cp) had arrived from the front. I saw him check the still bodies of Hirschberg and Schneider. He started over to the hatch toward me. I crawled up to the hatch and started to jump. Suddenly Bill Baxendale (cp) came up behind me, wrapped his arms around my neck and said, "Let's go Dick! - I'll see you on the ground!" We jumped.....

I didn't understand why Baxendale (cp) jumped with me like that. I thought he was going to stay together with me to get free of the plane. We jumped and free fell for several thousand feet. He never spoke. He never let go. As I pulled my chute at about ten thousand feet, the impact broke his grip and he fell away. I watched him, waiting for his chute to open. It never did. "Oh, god," I thought, "he doesn't have a chute!"

All the time we were clinging together, I thought he was wearing a chute. It wasn't until I saw his chute not open that I realized he didn't have one. He had been trying to ride my chute down with me. He had not said anything to me. My chest tightened up. Bill was my friend, a good friend, and a good man. We had trained together, traveled together and practically lived together for over a year. Our wives were friends. It wasn't supposed to happen like this.

The whine of a fighter engine brought my attention forward. A Bf-109 was flying directly toward me. "Son-of-a-bitch is gonna strafe!" I tried to swing on my chute and make as small a target as I could. Rather than open fire, the pilot rolled his plane and saluted as he flew past. He was so close I could see his face. This was one of the men who had taken us down. As I followed his plane, I saw him engaged by a P-51. It was over quickly. His fighter exploded in the air.

I looked around and saw four other chutes. I guessed they were Woskovich (tg), Snyder, (wg) Hoskins (b) and one of the three left in the plane when we jumped. The plane was still going

down. Suddenly, two more chutes popped very close to the ground. The last one looked like it took one swing before the guy hit. That made seven chutes, including mine. "Maybe the other guys are OK", I thought.

Lee Hoskins (n) jumped out shortly after I did. With all that happened, I lost track of him. I thought that he landed fairly close to me, although I never saw him. Lee Hoskins (n) disappeared that day. None of us ever saw him again. We thought that the civilians got him. All of us were treated badly by the civilians when we landed. If a couple of German troops had not intervened, I wouldn't have made it either. I would have been hanged.

As I landed, a group of civilians, all shouting, were waiting for me. One had a pistol and another had a rope. They pushed me over to a tree and threw the rope over a branch. I suddenly realized what was going on, and that I was about to be lynched. I decided I'd start running, thinking I'd rather take my chances with a pistol shot in the back than a rope. Right then two German troops arrived. An argument ensued and luckily, the troops won the bout. Never thought I'd ever be saved by the German army. I was taken into custody and moved to a collection point for other survivors. For me, the war was over.

*As told by Dick Cooke to son, Gregory, summer 1994*