

High-Low D-Day Bombing



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ENGLAND—You had to keep reminding yourself on the afternoon of June 6, 1944, that this day was something special and enormous. After all, the machinery that moved American Fords and Libs out of England and over Fortress Europa is no new thing, but an established and finished apparatus. Its movement from briefing to takeoff, bombing, return and late chow for the crews is something classic.

D-Day did not change the routine.

D-Day for the Eighth Air Force was a day of bombardment across the Channel in France, the same kind of bombardment that had been going on for a long time. The commanders and Operations officers and pilots of the Eighth Air Force are veterans. D-Day or not, Major Roy W. Forrest, a squadron commander at one of the bases covering "our friends on the ground," was relaxed, although busy, at operations with his feet perched on the desk; the ground men went through the thorough checking of aircraft; the pilots moaned about lack of sleep and long flying hours and got ready for another takeoff.

Captain S. L. Burr, the briefing officer, busy giving bombardiers the detailed breakdown of the afternoon's target, asked about the chow he had missed at noon, and stared sadly at his quick-lunch jam sandwich.

At the briefing there was only one new touch—a bomb line; i.e., a line roughly outlining the area inland from the enemy coast which Allied penetration should have covered by H-Hour plus on D-Day.

"You will not," said Captain Burr, "under any circumstances drop your bombs within the bomb line."

Out on the stand the newer silver and the older green-painted Fords waited for another raid. The pilots in the officers' lounge listened intently to a radio speaker talking an awful lot about D-Day but saying very little. The pilots were very interested even though they themselves were going to fly today and were in effect part of the invasion operation. They listened to somebody off in London giving them the low-down.

They made a lot of interesting comments while waiting for the afternoon raid. They said: "I called Calais 1 and 2, but was told the telephone line wasn't quite ready yet," and "It's dangerous ditching in the Channel today. There's no room in the water."

They had nothing much to say about the early morning raid. There had been ten-tenths cloud cover. On the way back, landing barges and naval craft had been seen in the Channel through a break in the clouds.

There was a young Chinese-American pilot from California in the officers' lounge, Lt. Dong Ong, for whom this afternoon of D-Day would provide his No. 1 or entry mission into the European Theater of Operations. His crew called him "Swede" and they stood around him before the mission showing a great deal of affection and respect for this stocky, amiable young pilot who would command them in action.

Lt. Col. Chester C. Cox, of Superior, Wis., strolled around Operations with his hands in his pockets.

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This morning, flying in the lead ship of the earliest formation of American heavy bombers to cross the enemy coast on D-Day, had given him the honor of being the first U. S. heavy bombardment pilot to drop bombs in direct support of landings in France. The event had taken place at 0700 this morning, but other mornings Col. Cox had seen more flak, more enemy fighters, and more merry hell than he had seen today. He was taking it easy.

But the man who was really taking it easy today was Lt. Robert H. Thompson, who had finished a tour of duty on D-Day's morning raid. The lieutenant had started with Berlin. He'd been over Berlin eight times, and had gradually worked his raids closer to the French coast, ending up with a raid on France on Invasion Day. This was the reverse of the tour of duty when the Forts began to fly in November, 1942. You began at the coast in those days and worked into Germany.

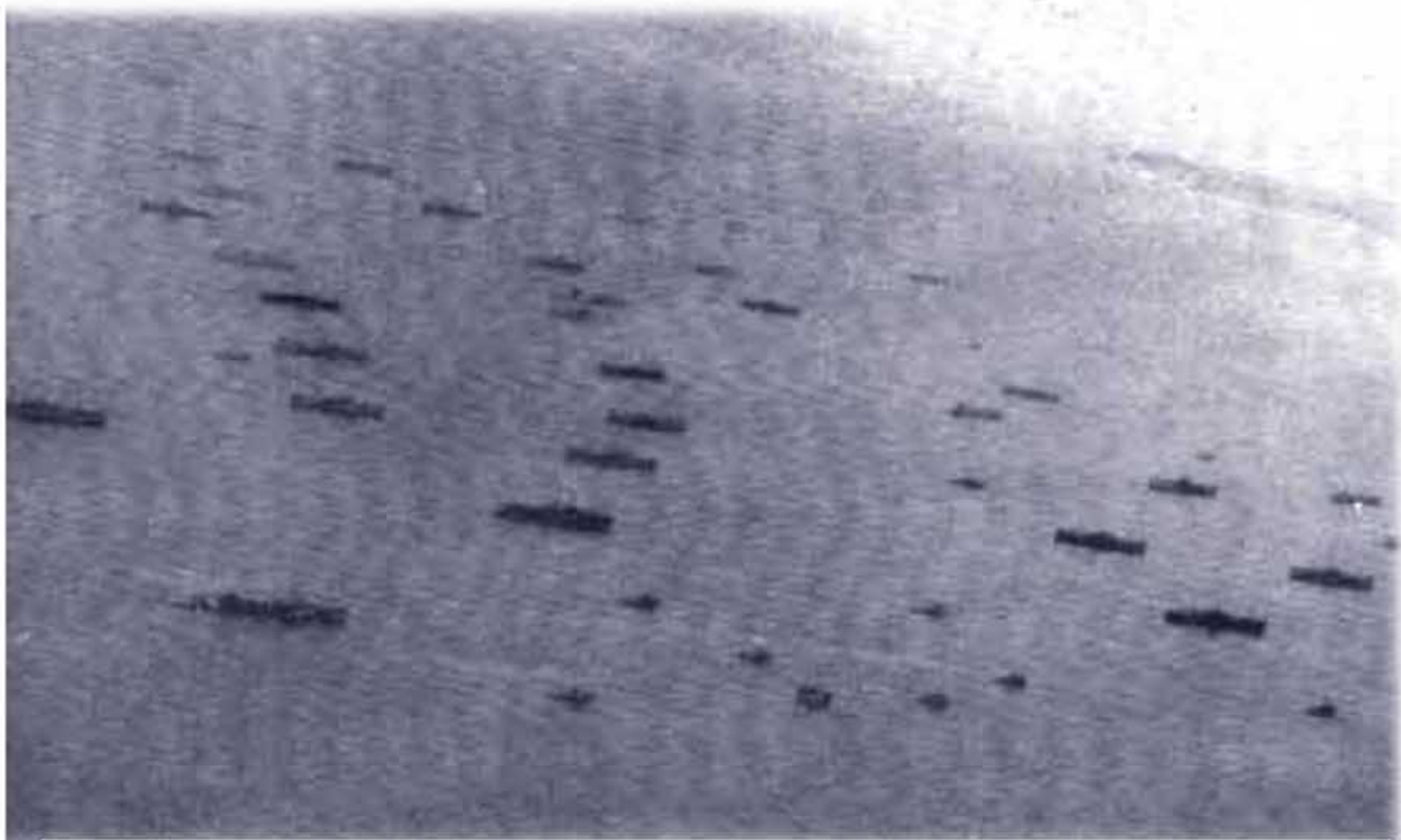
D-Day wasn't a good day for flying. There were clouds, and very late in the day there was rain. Carefully controlled, but nevertheless very real, were the signs of a sense of responsibility towards the men storming onto the French beaches. Short of a typhoon, the weather would not stop flying. At the briefing at 2100 hours the night before, they had been told the next day was invasion and there had been one long burst of cheering and then back to the business-like routine of plane checkup, takeoff, and bombing. The ground crews worked with a little more zest than usual. For more than a year now they had loaded bombs and checked engines and guns and nothing to show for it except what it said in the papers. But this invasion made a milestone in two long years of bombing. It was as if the pin-ups in the barracks were beginning to stir out of their paper frames and would soon talk for real in the accents of the girls back home.

At 2 o'clock there was a briefing; at 3 o'clock the mission was scrubbed; at 4.30 it was on again, leaving your chow halfway down your gullet. It might be D-Day, but it was just like any day at an airfield.

I was assigned to the crew of Lt. James J. Gabler, of Pittsburgh, Pa. At the ground-crew tent the flyers sat around and gassed with mechanics. One of the ground crewmen is 43 years old and Lt. Gabler, squinting out at the clouded sky, said, "I wish I was 43 right now," and moved around trying to imitate someone with St. Vitus's dance but fooling nobody, for he is a big, healthy-looking young man.

WE took off at 1720 hours of a cloudy day and climbed up through the overcast to join our formation, which was led by Col. William B. David. Everything was shipshape except that you couldn't see much through the overcast and everyone aboard was very much interested in what "our friends" were doing downstairs. Through an occasional break in the sky we could see the Channel. Over France was revealed the mystery of no flak and no enemy fighters. Moving into our target we could see smoke columns and fires clearly visible below, although you couldn't tell if they were the result of off-shore shelling or bomb damage. The navigator, 2nd Lt. David L. McGee, handed over a pair of binoculars and the fires really stood up big through the glasses.

We dumped our load, and the bombardier, Lt. Harry M. Hill, looked satisfied and relaxed. Lt. Gabler, the pilot, sounding slightly bored, asked his radio operator, T/Sgt. John T. Middleton: "See



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if you can find out anything about this invasion on the radio."

"I'll see what Jerry has to say," said the radio operator.

On the way home we followed the most ambitious traffic pattern ever conceived for aircraft. For, in effect, the all-day trains of aircraft at all levels from England to France and home again meant a careful "all-the-way-through" pattern that would not crowd the air over England to a danger point. So we swept wide on the return, making it a long trip home.

There were broken clouds below us and through them the first real glimpse of invasion. You could see miles-long columns of ships moving like herds across the water. Long streamers of gray gun smoke lay near the water.

We were above the overcast and letting down very slowly. The props of No. 1 and No. 2 whirled in the sunlight, but Nos. 3 and 4 were caught in the evening dusk; over on the right the moon was up above the clouds. We let down through the clouds. The bombardier dozed off.

Rain and almost night now. Another huge flotilla was moving toward the enemy coast below us. We looked down and could see them and we knew the men were looking up at us. We had nothing to say to them, except that perhaps it was understood between us that there is a thing called "air support."

We were over England. Somewhere a light flashed a welcome mat for returning planes. We set down nicely at the home base at 0010 hours of June 7 or ten minutes after D-day was finished. In the rain and cold wind we asked one of the ground mechanics, "What's happening?"

"Churchill spoke, there's been hymns and prayers, and casualties are not as heavy as they expected," he said, and got to work on the Fort. The interrogation was smooth and over with quickly. One of the nurses grabbed hold of a gunner who had hurt his head in the flight by banging into something in the waist and ran her fingers through his hair to find the wound, scolding him like his big sister.

Everybody was off to bed because today had meant fifteen hours of flying. Lt. Gabler said before going off: "If you want to really do a job, why don't you come along with us to Berlin sometimes?"

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