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THE ARMY



WEEKLY



A-20



An eyewitness report of a pre-invasion mission over the Continent in one of the newest and most effective U. S. air weapons, an attack bomber that looks like an insect but moves and hits with the speed of a meteor.

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E NGLAND—Flying in an A-20, newest weapon in the arsenal of U. S. air power to make its bow in the European theater, is like grabbing a ride on a meteor.

The regular flying schedule of these planes is frequently as hot as two missions a day. On one of the rare afternoons when no operations were scheduled, I went up to see what flying in an A-20 was like before getting in the real action that came the next day.

Going along with me on the conditioning hop was Capt. Ward B. Warren, a flight surgeon from Indiana, chalking up some flying time. The bombardier-navigator was Lt. Norman W. Merrill, a very eager young man who was suffering a mild case of scrub jitters; he'd been briefed many times for missions but so far had flown only a few.

The pilot was Maj. Albert N. Roby Jr., a poker-faced flyer with the subtle twinkle of a gambler in his eye. "Have you ever been up in an A-20 before?" he asked casually. "No," I said, and the major just nodded pleasantly. I should have realized that my "no" would be like a red flag to a bull, but I got aboard without suspecting what was in store for me.

As if the A-20 had never been flight-tested before, the major shot her up toward the sky like an ack-ack shell, then banked her over hard, leveled off, nosed her down and dropped her like an elevator whose cables had been cut.

Just before it seemed we were going to dig into the ground, I thought of my air-crew training in the States and what the second lieutenant who was my instructor had said: "When you hit the ground it will be too wet to plow."

I was thinking about how wet the ground was going to be in the half-second that Maj. Roby suddenly decided to level off. We skimmed along the runway like a jeep, while bystanders probably wondered whether they ought to call the crash wagon.

The exhibition was intended to give us a hint of the possibilities of the A-20. This fast, maneuverable, good-looking little attack bomber went into action quickly in the ETO and has been going strong since then on a two-a-day schedule of attacks on tactical installations in France and the Low Countries.

You can call the bombing by A-20s a part of the schedule of pre-invasion flying. As with the B-26 Marauders, their attacks on railroad-marshaling yards, coastal installations and airdromes are tactical operations designed to cripple German movement on the Continent.

In one two-week period, A-20s carried out 675 sorties, dropping more than 700 tons of bombs. These are not enormous figures, measured against the vast tonnage of bombs that have fallen on industrial targets in Germany. But the A-20 tonnage is important because it's being used to cripple the enemy's striking power, to harass him and keep him from uncorking whatever he may have in the way of a Sunday punch.

With its nose wheel and its fuselage like a slender pencil, the A-20 somewhat resembles a long-legged insect. You might almost think of her as a fighter except for the bomb bay and other little breaks in the streamline of the gun placement. She's a dandy little ship that comes in for landings at a helluva clip but sets down "as steady as a baby carriage."

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THE morning after the conditioning flight, we went down to the briefing room. It was one of those great spring days—good for baseball and very good for bombing.

The A-20s had left early and were due back soon to pick up another cargo and be off again across the English Channel. It was quiet and empty around the field, the way it always is around a flying field when the floating assets are out looking for business.

When the formation showed over the field, the men below sat on a high mound overlooking the landing strips and indulged in the ancient sport of counting the planes and seeing them in.

The flyers came down to the briefing room, carrying with them the roaring electric excitement that always comes home with a mission. Lt. Wilbert L. Sawyer's plane had a couple of 20-mm holes through the fuselage. "When I saw that blue smoke," said Sawyer, paying grudging tribute to the Jerry fighter and talking faster than you consider normal for a Virginian, "I said to myself, 'That guy's fortune is made.'"

Apparently the *Luftwaffe* is somewhat more dead in the newspapers than it is over France. Another pilot, Lt. Charles A. Thomas, had one of those close calls that you tell your grandchildren about—a shell whistled across his chest and cut his mike cord, severing interphone communication between him and his crew.

In the interrogation reports of a previous raid, a Lt. Benson announced somewhat sheepishly that he was all alone because the rest of his crew had bailed out over France. The flak was heavy, he said, and when one blast bounced the A-20 upward, the men apparently figured the ship was badly hit or out of control; they jumped, and their chutes were seen to open. Lt. Benson got himself a new crew and kept on with his missions.

FOR the afternoon mission I was assigned to the crew of Maj. Arthur R. Milow Jr., squadron commander. The major is from Omaha, Nebr., but he's spent a lot of time in the South, and that has brought a slow rhythm to his speech.

His bombardier-navigator, Lt. John (Moose) Ertler, a buoyant amateur boxer from Cleveland, Ohio, is one of those Grade-A acquisitions of the Army who really loses sleep if his bombs don't get in there. On one of his first flights in an A-20, the Moose was lead bombardier of a formation. He was so excited he was trying to pace the floor of the tiny nose, which is practically impossible. He kept yelling through the interphone to Lt. Col. Crabtree, the pilot, a Texan and a veteran combat flyer. Finally Crabtree came back in the lowest and softest of voices: "Now, Johnny, suppose you take it easy and tell me just what you want." Since then the Moose has settled down into a veteran. The A-20s saw flak and fighters their first time out, and that settled all of them down nicely, for that matter.

The turret gunner on Maj. Milow's ship this afternoon was S/Sgt. Angelo A. Mattei, built along the solid, reliable lines of a baby tank. Mattei has crossed the Channel more than a dozen times in the brief period he has been in combat here. As a civilian, he flew in a B-24 across the Pacific to Australia many more than a dozen times. But each minute heading across the Channel toward combat is a helluva lot longer than each hour across the Pacific as a civilian. Mattei flew that Pacific route for two years, clocking 2,000 hours in Liberators for Consolidated Vultee. It was a technical job, checking stress and strain in new ships bound for combat—and he had a background for it, acquired in 3½ years of engineering courses at the University of Southern California.

At the briefing I heard the same things that make all briefings a classic of understatement on the part of the officers: "You may expect flak at X and again at Y. It should be light flak, but the Germans, as you know, employ mobile flak guns. Coming out at the coast, the navigators should make sure they avoid Z, which is a big town. You should have no trouble coming out if you follow the prescribed course."

But today there was also the scarcely uttered, but still clear, knowledge that now the time of the air war was running out—into the new time of men who will invade by sea.

At the last minute, Maj. Milow told S/Sgt. Bill Pierson, one of his gunners, that I was going to replace him for this afternoon's trip. The major regretted this and said so.

"I know this is putting you behind Mattei on the missions, Bill," he said, "but we'll try and get it evened up some other time."

Bill didn't seem mad about it but he looked at Mattei carefully, and you could see that he was going to sweat Mattei out on the ground.

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These boys have flown together for some time.

Bill went up into the plane and made sure that I had all my flying equipment and showed me a few minor adjustments of his gun.

This was another spring, and the flying would be different from the flying last year. Last April they didn't wear flak suits, and escort fighters were practically nonexistent. They wear the suits this year and this time there would be Spitfires in the sky over and back. It was spring 1944, which would be remembered for more reasons than most springs are ever remembered.

OUR planes got away fast, climbed up high in a hurry. The formation was set in no time at all. Then we passed the coastline of England—friendly, familiar shore and beaches that many thousands of airmen have said good-bye to from above the blue ditch of the Channel below.

Right behind us was Lt. Reed's plane, so close beneath our fuselage that you'd have thought this was infantry close-order drill. We could see Reed chewing gum and grinning in his cockpit.

France, separated from England by this impudent, tough inlet of water called a channel, came up with its beaches and curving shoreline like the other half of a clamshell. It was something to see. The yellows and yellow-greens of the countryside's little farmhouses made everything seem peaceful. It reminded me of an ambush. Underneath this peace slumbered German guns, but the sight of northern France was so clean and good looking in the spring of 1944 that it would have burst a loyal Frenchman's heart.

The first flak blossomed behind us. We were going very fast, with escorting Spits just outside.

The Moose called back and said: "If you lie flat on your stomach, you'll be able to have a good view of the bomb hits. Will you do it?"

I said yes. Lying flat, I could see sticks of bombs falling beneath the bellies of the A-20s like a school of fish. They were lost for a moment as they blended with the landscape; then would come the telltale puffs of smoke. It was the clearest sight of exploding bombs a man might ever want to see. The bombs fell in rows, one after the other, as if someone were planting seeds in furrows. One stick of bombs fell square across the center of a rail yard, and each bomb seemed to throw a sheet of flame 10 feet high.

I told this to the Moose on the interphone, but he was not sure his own had hit in there and was already beginning to fret. The ordnance officer had said the bombs being used by U. S. planes now had five times the concussion effect of bombs dropped a year ago. These looked rough as they exploded down there. The fire leaping up from the bomb puffs made you blink your eyes and wonder whether it was enemy 20-mm fire, but the flames were much bigger than that, I decided.

THEN we were going back, even faster than we went in. The blue ditch came in sight. Below us a freighter moved to the south with a small fast boat playing games around it and leaving a wake like a water bug.

The Moose was singing into the interphone, and I asked him if he always did that on the way home. The major broke in: "You're only hearing him once. We get it all the time."

Our A-20 landed smooth and fast, and the major said as we climbed out: "This business of leading the formation is too damned much responsibility."

Bill Pierson was waiting for Mattei. After the interrogation, they went down the road to their barracks, shoulder to shoulder.

Our A-20 raid had taken us to the railroad-marshaling yards at Busigny—not a major raid by the standards of Schweinfurt, Berlin, Regensburg and Hamburg, but a different kind of attack designed to cripple the German military arm.

Busigny has been a frequent target for the two-a-day raids they've been making in the last few weeks. One day there were three raids, which may or may not be a record but is still an awful lot of combat flying.

A few weeks before, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower promised the flying men of this theater that he would drive them so hard they would not have proper sleep or food for weeks, and the A-20 airmen will tell you that the general is making good his promise.

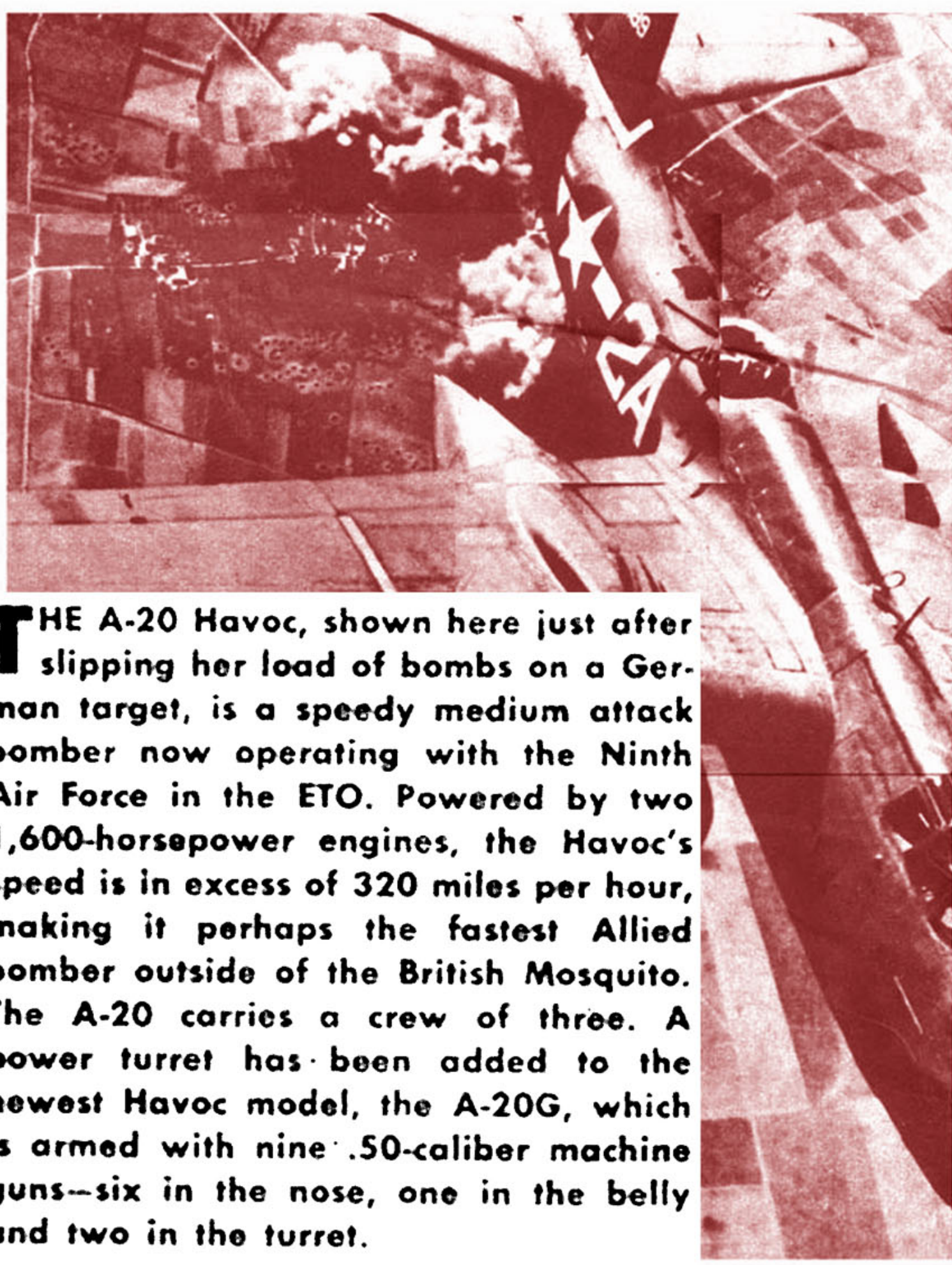
The men of course get very tired, and there is very little time for a frisky evening down at the pub in town. These spring bombing days make a long heavy routine, like working a punch press all day long—but slightly more dangerous.

Lt. Frederick O. Rovente, a pilot from Binghamton, N. Y., with a little wisp of a black mustache and a manner of warm friendliness; slow-voiced Maj. Milow; exuberant Lt. Ertler from

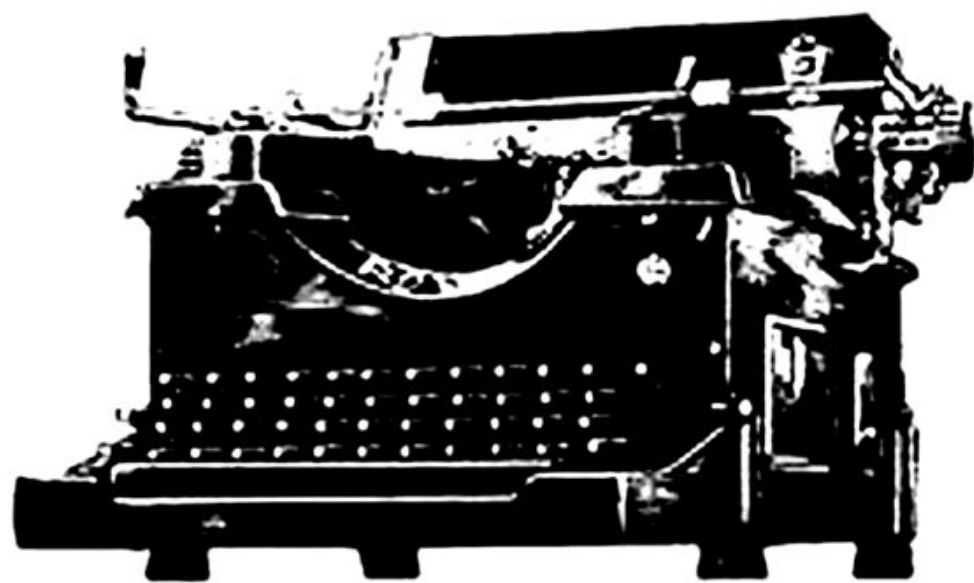
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Cleveland; Lt. Merrill, a bombardier with the look of a young college professor; Lt. Larry Smith, a laughing boy whose letters go home to Minneapolis; young Red Walters from Idaho and Mattei from San Diego—these are some of the men in the last lap of flying before the war in western Europe becomes a ground war. They're in on the finish, following the "war generation" of Americans who have blazed these combat trails over the Continent since July 4, 1942.

Next morning, leaving the field, I saw the A-20s off again. You always imagine you hear planes long after they've faded over the horizon toward France.



THE A-20 Havoc, shown here just after slipping her load of bombs on a German target, is a speedy medium attack bomber now operating with the Ninth Air Force in the ETO. Powered by two 1,600-horsepower engines, the Havoc's speed is in excess of 320 miles per hour, making it perhaps the fastest Allied bomber outside of the British Mosquito. The A-20 carries a crew of three. A power turret has been added to the newest Havoc model, the A-20G, which is armed with nine .50-caliber machine guns—six in the nose, one in the belly and two in the turret.



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