

## Bombing Marshalling Yards



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In the early hours, a few minutes before 5:00 AM, we were in the 485<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group briefing room, waiting for the colonel to arr-----“Ten-Hut!” a voice blared out, and everyone rose as the Colonel entered the room. “At ease”, the voice called out again; we settled down and watched the drape being pulled back from the front wall, revealing the large map of Southern Europe. A route was drawn on the map from our base at Venosa to the marshalling yards in a

little “berg” in Germany. A sigh of relief went across the room. It was good news that we were not scheduled to bomb one of the deadly, heavily-defended targets, such as Vienna or Linz.

The Colonel was trying to explain how the bombing of this rail junction in the town of Attnang Puchheim was going to help the war effort. We were not listening. We were more interested in the amount of flak and the number of enemy fighters that could be expected over this target. Not much opposition was expected.

Not long after we left the briefing room we were in a formation of B-24's heading up the Adriatic Sea toward our target in Germany. We wouldn't reach enemy territory for a while, so I had time to think about the target, these marshalling yards. Some marshalling yards were in heavily defended cities like Vienna, Linz and Regensburg and were rough targets, while others, like this one, were in small cities and routine, if any combat mission could be called routine.

The bombing of marshalling yards doesn't sound very significant or essential to the war effort, not like destroying oil production or aircraft factories, but during the war rail transportation was the military and economic lifeline of Germany. Nearly all materials were shipped by rail. Cutting the rail lines was not effective, because the rails were repaired in a matter of hours and trains were running again. The object was to destroy the cars loaded with the materials. This is why the marshalling yards were repeat targets. We could destroy the cars in the marshalling yards on a mission and, if the same yards were filled with cars the next month, they went back on the target list. Bombing the railcars interrupted the flow of war materials, delayed war production and crippled the economy. Although the destruction of rail cars does not sound like a critical mission, it was a vital factor in the overall war effort.

“The attack on transportation.... the weakest link.... was a decisive factor in the collapse of the German economy and the German Army.” (U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey)

The weather did not look too promising. Out the side window in the navigator’s compartment I saw the clouds were building. We passed the port of Pola and crossed the coast at the north end of the Adriatic Sea, entering into enemy territory. Our escort, consisting of 36 P-51 Mustang fighter aircraft, joined us. The formations tightened up and everyone was on the alert. The gunners were scanning the skies for enemy fighters. We flew over the snowy Alps and on into Germany.

As we reached the Initial Point (IP) and were ready to turn on the bomb run, we aborted, because our target was covered with a layer of clouds. We flew to the first alternate target and then to the second. No luck at either, as both were covered with clouds. We flew around Salzburg to avoid their flak guns, to the marshalling yards at Rosenheim, where there were a few clouds, but not enough to obscure the target completely. Rosenheim was an important hub, with rail lines to Munich, Innsbruck, Salzburg and Muhldorf.

We made our run on Rosenheim. I toggled (released) the bombs when I saw bombs falling from the lead bomber and watched them fall to the target, which was already partially covered with smoke from bombs from the group ahead of us. I wrote in my log, “It looks like we got some good hits.” The official Air Force debriefing report read: “The photos showed a good pattern of bombs covering the central and southeast end of the yards, damaging 50-100 pieces of rolling stock. Highway Bridge south of the yard was destroyed and the installations adjacent to the southeast choke point were damaged. No enemy aircraft were seen.” The formation did not encounter any flak. This was one of our better successes and we were thankful for a “Milk Run”.

After flying around Germany looking for a clear target, most of our fuel had been consumed and we still had to go over the Alps before we could descend and coast home. By the time we broke out of the clouds over the Adriatic Sea, our fuel gauges were showing empty. We received permission to refuel at a forward fighter base along the coast, near Ancona, Italy. We had no trouble landing; however, after turning onto the taxi strip, the engines began to sputter. Homer (Cotton), our pilot, was flipping the switches between the fuel tanks, trying to find fuel and keep the engines running, but only fumes were left. All four engines conked out, one after another, and we had to be towed.

If it had been necessary to circle the field one more time we would have been in serious trouble. We didn’t have enough altitude to do anything but hope the pilot could find a place to set her down, which would have meant a crash landing. We lucked out again. Close calls seemed to be occurring regularly and it was giving me the jitters.

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