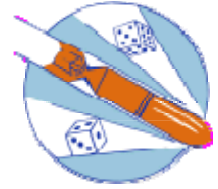




A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

by John Stockham, navigator on the Rohde Crew

an addendum to *The Story of Umbriago*



The Eindhoven Airfield was given to us as an alternate landing site at the navigator's briefing before our October 7, 1944 bomber raid on Merseburg. This was the first time Eindhoven was given as an alternate landing site and due to the close and heavy fighting in the area, it was the only time. The 101st Airborne dropped into Holland about 15 km north of Eindhoven on September 17, 1944 as a part of Monty's Market Garden operation and entered Eindhoven on September 18th. The area was hardly secure however, until late November when the 101st was pulled out of line. Easy Company of the 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne had 36% of its men in Holland.

We approached Eindhoven Airfield using the normal landing pattern and Lt. Rohde made a nice landing. The Canadians told us we were lucky we did not encounter small arms fire as they were using a reverse landing pattern because of the nearness of the German troops. The CRAF fighter-bombers were taking off, dropping their noses and firing rockets, returning to base and repeating this operation.

The Canadians welcomed us and gave us tea and crumpets and treated my wound. Lt. Cook and several other crew members found room in an airplane bound for England. The rest of the crew were trucked to Brussels.

Lt. Rohde and I were dropped off at a schoolhouse being used as a billet by American forces in the area to recover gliders used in the airborne drops. The kids around the school were really the "gum chum" group. Their hero was a young lad that spoke English. We asked permission to go into downtown Brussels. Permission was granted with two conditions. One, we were to wear side arms because there were pockets of German snipers in the city, and two, we were not to bother the British as it was their sector and we were their guests. Well, Lt. Rohde and I strapped on 45's and with another officer went into town.

We found a lively place called the Blue Bird Cafe and went inside. Finding no open tables we turned to walk out. A Belgian man came after us and invited us to sit with his group. He said it was so different than during the occupation. The Germans would come in and tell the Belgian citizens to leave. We were most welcome! The Belgians were still celebrating their freedom from the Germans having been liberated September 3rd by the British Second Army. Having no local money, Lt. Rohde opened his escape kit and bartered with the cafe owner for spending money. I don't recall what exchange rate we got but it was not a good one. Lt. Rohde caught Holy Hell upon our return to base for this transaction. We had a great evening made even better when the locals found we were Americans and not British.

We left the cafe about 11:00 P.M. to catch the trolley back to the barracks and avoid bothering the British. However, we stood on the wrong corner and never caught the tram. A young man said he would lead us on foot back to the schoolhouse and we started off walking with a group of young people. After a couple miles we began worrying about snipers and who was leading us, so we left the group and returned to downtown to bother the British.

We entered a hotel and inquired about a room. The British soldier could not have been nicer. He gave us a room and breakfast tickets and asked us to vacate the room early the next morning so he would not be in trouble. We got up early the next day, had breakfast and got back to our barracks.

The next day they informed us they had a B-17 that was airworthy that we could fly back to Rattlesden. The plane had been heavily damaged and bloodstains were in the cockpit. But the ship flew and we arrived back at base in time to stop our MIA stamped mail from going out.

In the aftermath of our flight, the crew got a week of R & R while I went to a general hospital and had a piece of flak removed from my thigh.

It was truly a night to remember!