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Colonel BOUVARD'S MISSION

From the Memoirs of General Lasnier-Lachaise

August 18, 1944

Today's mission of the French B-26 Marauders based in Sardinia was in support of the Allied landings on the French Riviera. Its primary objective, was to silence the coastal batteries defending the naval base of Toulon. Encountering heavy and accurate flak (German Anti-aircraft fire), we lost one of the B-26 from the Gascogne Group.

The same evening we received orders to load our aircraft with four, one thousand pounders bombs, indicating that tomorrow's mission would be against concrete fortifications. Probably, the same objective that today's sorties. Rumors have it that the results of the bombing left much to be desired.

August 19, 1944

The 0700 briefing confirms our suspicions, it is indeed the same objective than yesterday's; the Saint Mandrier coastal batteries. My squadron (2d Squadron of the Franche-Comte Group, FAF) will provide the third flight of six B-26s in a bombing mission consisting of eighteen planes.

My aircraft, tail number 77, is leading the third flight, and therefore will have an extra crew member in the person of the commander of the 34th Wing, Colonel Bouvard.

Perfect takeoff weather at Villacidro.. We roll at 0940, with the sun shining on the nose of our silver craft. Six small bombs are already painted on it, and by tonight, the mechanics should be painting the seventh.

Corsica is left behind, and the crew is at battle stations, fitting helmets, flak jackets, Mae West life jackets and parachutes.. Still not a cloud in the sky, and the sun is very bright... We are already seeing the outline of the coast of France, which we soon reach; crossing close to the Giens Peninsula, and turning left ,straight for Toulon.

The objective is now getting nearer and having passed the IP (Initial Point, the start of the bombing run) we must maintain a straight track and a steady platform., regardless of the flak, whose smoke puffs are getting nearer. Suddenly a rain of fragments hits the nose of 77, the aircraft shakes, and smoke start to invade the cockpit. "Its nothing it will pass" is the only comment from the co-pilot. Words spoken at the same time, that we are releasing our bombs, and immediately after being informed by Col . Bouvard that the aircraft is on fire. In fact, a shell has gone through the bomb bay, made its way through the radio compartment, and hit the fuel transfer lines starting the fire. As one bomb has hanged up in the bay, there is the danger of an immediate explosion.

There is no other alternative.. I make a sharp turn to the left.. lower the gear to reduce speed, and give the order to bailout.. The three gunners are first, followed by the bombardier, the colonel . then the copilot.

During the evacuation, I reduce speed by throttling back the two engines, then jump myself seconds later. Number 77, left by itself, rolls to the right, facing the coast of France, and explodes within twenty seconds, ending its last and seventh mission.

After two hours in the sky, we are finding ourselves in the sea for the next two and a half hours, swimming toward the coast, supported by our life jackets. The last one to reach shore is the rear gunner, who unable to swim, paddles like a dog for five hours.

We are finally on the Riviera, but not for the usual fun on the sea or beach. our welcoming party consists of German speaking tourists armed to the teeth. As for myself, I am fished out by two soldiers in a small boat, more interested in finding something of value, in our crashed aircraft, than getting me out of the drink. The short cruise, terminates by my having to climb the Cap Sicie's cliff, under a broiling sun and after swimming for two hours.

While climbing the cliff, I cannot help thinking, that an airman's life provides for many sports. Within a few hours, I have gone from flying in the sky to the sea, and even done mountain climbing. Arrived at last on top of the cliff, I am locked up in a small chapel appropriately named "Our Lady of Good Guard" as my jail is also the Command Post of the local "Flak" battery.

In the evening I rejoin five other members of my crew, and we are all quite happy to find that none of the six out of seven is injured and that we are together. The reunion is followed by our first German provided meal, consisting of black bread, cheese spread, and an unknown black beverage, grandiosely called "tea" by our guards. We shortly thereafter are separated between officers and NCOs and led into separate barracks for a night without too much sleep after such a memorable day. We are all thinking that the next step is going to be a POW (Prisoners of War) camp in Germany.

August 20th, **1944**

The morning is hot and bright with continuing air activities over Toulon, and we can see P-47s and Spitfires in the sky. However the attitude of the German soldiers, seems to indicate that the town is not yet surrounded. It seems that we can give up on the idea of not being evacuated to an inevitable "Stalag".

In the afternoon we are trucked through parts of Toulon after crossing the Seyne river. The first visual contact of a French town on the ground is painful, everything seems to be in ruins and deserted. Going out through one of the gates of the city, we finally see French civilians having taken refuge in open fields. A winding road takes us to a fort dominating the town.

By the time we arrive at the fort, the town is under bombardment by B-25s and B-26s. We are searched along incoming American airmen and infantrymen that have been made prisoners.

We find Col. Bouvard in the courtyard and the crew is now complete. Around 1900 hour there is a commotion in the fort with the arrival of a group of camouflaged and heavily armed German soldiers. We are forced by the new arrivals, with one sided discussions and arm waiving., to walk down the same winding roads by which we arrived earlier.

Within five hundred meters from the fort, our escort is attacked by F.F.I.s (French Forces of the Interior, or armed underground) Caught in the cross-fire of both attackers and escort, we find ourselves

nose down, in the side ditches, with whistling bullets overhead. our hopes are dashed after about 15 minutes of wild firing. The underground forces greatly outgunned, disappeared. No apparent casualties on either side, but our guards are getting rather nervous and firing at any French civilian showing his head.

Leaving the road, and after walking some distance along a railroad track, we find ourselves arriving at another fort at sundown. Instead of entering directly, we are led into the protecting ditch and lined up against the wall of the fortification. I will remember this, as the most agonizing moment of this whole adventure. It is hard to describe the feeling of being in a ditch, against a wall at sundown, facing nervous and trigger happy troops.

“The bastards are going to shoot us” whispered my senior NCO, who obviously, with the rest of us, got the same impression. We stood there for about a half hour, which seemed an eternity, with the tension broken only by an officer coming from the fort who informed us in perfect French that he was sorry that he was unable to obtain more comfortable lodgings.. we were hardly in the mood to laugh.

The change of guards, was most welcome, as our former escort, would have, I still believe, be too happy to shoot the whole lot of us. We find ourselves in a small room, eating the apparently normal fare of black bread, with jam this time, along with the undescrivable black beverage. We were left in the room to sleep as best as we could.

August 21st,1944

New arrival of prisoners in the morning. This time French infantry; they informed us that by now, Toulon must be completely surrounded and that the final attack is about to begin. We have already noticed that the Allied Air Forces have stopped bombing the town. We are hoping again to be soon free.

During the day we are often visited by the French speaking German lieutenant, who holds long conversations with our colonel. The lodgings are improving and we have been transferred to a new room which has a large barred window in it. By now we are playing cards and we have even been offered packs of cigarettes after dinner..

We are awakened during the night by strong detonations, and are led into the shelters for about one to two hours.

Constant arrival during the night of numerous Allied prisoners and among them two civilians, apparently FFI's, who are to be shot. Upon hearing this, Col. Bouvard insisted in being taken to the German commander in charge. Not only he protested the coming shooting of people that should be considered POWs,insisting on the fact that with the imminent capture of the fort that obvious reprisals would be taken against the garrison, if the two prisoners were shot.

August 22nd ,1944

The morning entrance of the German lieutenant brought good news..... instead of being shot, our two FFI friends are to be released. It seems that our colonel has some influence with the Germans. which raises our morale. Soon after the good news,tremendous explosions with the enemy blowing up the harbor....does this mean our evacuation ?

The guards are getting even more friendly, and are offering us cigarettes by the carton . Nothing happens until the afternoon, when we are moved again to the shelters, we are left there and by the evening ,the 25 of us jammed in a small space are feeling pretty crowded. The Americans among us start singing a few songs, and before long all of us are chanting “Alouette...Gentille Alouette”. Finally we try to sleep.

August 23rd,1944

During the morning, French artillery start shelling,close to the fort; 155 guns according to some artillerymen in the group. Time is starting to bear on us and there is obvious danger from “Friendly” fire. on the other hand, we have by now, a German soldier cleaning our dishes, and the visit of a German nurse; so things are not all bad.

This is indeed another long day, we are moved several times, during the day and early evening,through underground passages filled with armed soldiers. We land finally close to the infirmary deep down the rock along with the French speaking German lieutenant who seems to be sticking with us, most of the time. Things are beginning to become unpleasant as we are tightly together, surrounded by a thickening smoke making it difficult to breathe.

With nightfall there is a renewal of activities, the German lieutenant asks Col. Bouvard and the senior American officer to follow him.. a half hour later we seen the American coming back by himself.. .addressing his countrymen, he has only a few words:

“You Are Free”

Apparently the German understand English as well as us, as we see them lowering their weapons to the ground, leave the shelters and assemble in the courtyard. Instinctively ,we all pick up arms and follow them up. on the way we meet Col. Bouvard, who confirm this surprising turn of events, the tables have turned and we are the captors. As we enter the courtyard, no less than 400 Germans, raise up their arms and surrender to our small group.

We lead the whole garrison, out of the fort, through a small group outside, consisting of a few policemen, two civilians and one woman. We fall in the arms of the surprised first French woman seen..... The problem of our new prisoners is resolved on the spot. Deciding that the policemen as local authorities, must be considered as the local “French Forces” we turn the whole lot to them and return to occupy and form the new garrison of the fort.

Back inside the walls, Col. Bouvard explained to us how he was able to obtain the surrender of the fort. He had been called upstairs along with the American officer, at the same time that a white flag was seen approaching the gate. Expecting an ultimatum followed by an attack, the German commander thought that the best course of action, would be to surrender to the senior officer present.. in this case our colonel.

Therefore, a surprised French North African Army major, indeed bringing an ultimatum, saw a French Air Force colonel moving through the Germans and informing him, that the threat ‘.o subject the fort to heavy bombardments was unnecessary as the garrison had already surrendered to him. Faced with

this unexpected situation, the major could only salute, and request the colonel that the new garrison hold the fort till relieved the next morning.

August 24th ,1944

The rest of last night was spent gathering any interesting weapons and materiel Among the booty, we discovered some good bottles of wine, which we proceeded to drink so that they would not fall into the wrong hands. We were than able to sleep soundly after five harrowing nights

In the morning we are relieved, by the promised infantry during a most moving ceremony. on one side of the courtyard, the French infantry, and FFIs,,,,,,us, on the other side, presenting arms at the rising of the French flag.

After the ceremony, we all leave the fort, headed toward the town. We are welcomed by a population, particularly happy to see representatives of liberating French Forces.

our joy is tempered in the evening. Arriving at the meeting place given by the two FFIs that the colonel saved from a firing squad. “ The Moulin Rouge” is closed. Knocking at the door results in a window opening, and a woman informing us that our new friends were killed in combat shortly after being released from the fort.

This seventh day, terminated the adventures of the seven survivors, of the seventh mission of Marauder “77”.