

*Memories of John J. Sittarich*

## Veteran's History Project

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Partial clip from an interview of Mr Sittarich by Wayne G. Sayles during the 2009 reunion of the 416th Bomb Group in Branson, MO: Worms Mission Narrative

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John J. Sittarich enlisted September 16, 1943, and was assigned to the 416th Bomb Group 668th Bomb Squadron

On March 18, 1945 both SSgt. John Sittarich, engineer/gunner, and Lt. James Kenny, pilot, went to the early morning pre-flight, 416th bomb Group briefing. The weatherman told them they had a 10 tenths cloud cover, meaning they could not see anything. They would need a path finder plane with very special type of radar device called a 'Gee Box' to find the way for the mid-March bombing mission. A navigational system, developed by a British scientist to improve navigation and bombing accuracy, 'GEE' was an earlier system that used an air borne transmitter which interrogated two ground beacons back in England to triangulate bombing through heavy overcast. The 'Gee Box' took a special operator who was trained in the operation to pick out targets on the ground. One of these special guys would take off early from their home base and fly to where they were and then lead the group through bad weather.

John Sittarich had a brand new pack of Lucky cigarettes in his pocket, but the day wouldn't prove to be a lucky one for him or his pilot. On that Sunday morning, Lt. Kenny's plane, number 261, was in Box 1, flight A, in a tight formation following the path finder plane heading for a bombing mission over Worms, Germany. They had just passed the Rhine River on mission #239.

The Minnesotan states, "I heard something so I looked through the periscope which was just like a submarine periscope. Using the scope, one could see 360 degrees, all around. I could see the leader plane taking flak pretty close. He moved over but we didn't move over. Flak burst under the bomb bay of our plane and the plane pitched up in the air. Lt. Kenny settled the plane back down and we got hit again." SSgt. Sittarich could smell the flak, which meant they were too close. The plane went straight up in the air and rolled over. John was semi-conscious at the time and doesn't remember the plane rolling over. The plane had taken a direct hit to the right engine, was doomed and already going down.

Twenty-one year old Sittarich had a fear of jumping out of the plane and forgetting his parachute. He had told himself several time in the tent, back at the Laon, France airbase, if he ever had to bail out, he would do it. He grabbed for parachute which had big hooks for snapping it on. The chute kept moving out of reach. He was scared stiff. In the excitement, he took his ear cords wires and throat mike off, jerked them off, right away. He now says, "I should have tried to call Lt. Kenny".

"We had a big red safety button that was wired. I hit the button for the bomb bay door but the doors remained closed. I had my shoes on so I jumped on the doors, doors were pretty solid, wouldn't open. The bomb bay was on fire so I got out of there. There was an escape hatch or crouch hatch up above. I pulled the emergency handles, but that door got stuck and wouldn't open. When the door came off, I stood up and looked out. The plane was leaning to the right. I had to go out the right side or I would be hit by the tail. The right engine was on fire shooting flames toward the tail."

John bailed out through the fire. He hit the wind and started flipping over real slow, could see the plane. When he pulled the rip cord and the chute came up, he must have been hit himself in the mouth. The confused gunner looked for pilot could not find him. He thought he must have bailed out earlier, must have pulled a delayed jump and hit the ground and beat it.

Coming down, the left of his face began to hurt really bad. He thought they must have shot his face off. His hand was trembling, and he put it up to feel the left side of his face. It was still there. He forgot about the pain and looked for a soft place to land. He saw three trees and was coming close to them so he pulled the 'clothes

line'. He started dropping too fast so he let go. When he did hit the ground, the chute tipped over. A gust of wind pulled him up against a tree. He sat up and started to take his shoes off and two German soldiers came up, "So I was caught".

De-briefing report given by pilot Wes Chitty and others: #261 received direct hits in the left engine between the PPF IP and the target. It was last seen disintegrating and in flames, going down at a undetermined point.

Both Kenny and Sittarich were picked up by the enemy and taken prisoner.