

USAAF 9th Air Force Attack Against Worms, Germany, March 18, 1945

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Based on 416th Bomb Group Veterans interviews and additional research

PREPARATION

Worms, Germany was an important target on March 18, 1945. Allied armies were attacking all along the western approaches to the Rhine River. Patton's Third Army was now less than 25 miles from Worms. The goal of this attack by USAAF Ninth Air Force medium bomb groups was to destroy communications and the railroad marshalling yards in Worms. A successful attack would prevent German forces from escaping the city or bringing in reinforcements.

Earlier that morning, aircraft of the 9th Weather Reconnaissance Squadron reported heavy cloud cover over the primary target area. With that report, Plan B was put into effect at 0500 hrs and Teletypes sprang to action at USAAF Air Groups in central France. Because of the heavy cloud cover, this mission would be a PFF (Pathfinder Flight) mission to Worms, Germany for the 416th Bombardment Group (Light) stationed at Laon/Athies, France (A-69). PFF missions are flown when there is heavy cloud cover in the target area and, for the 9th USAAF, these missions are led by Martin B-26 Marauders from the First Provisional Pathfinder Squadron equipped with OBOE, a British aerial blind bombing targeting system, based on radio transponder technology.

The 416th BG wasn't the only Group ordered to attack Worms that morning. Six waves of medium bombers were scheduled to hit the area; the first wave starting at 1000 hrs with subsequent waves at 15 minute intervals. The 416th BG would be the second wave. The other waves were from the 387th, 394th, 397th, 391st and the 344th Bomb Groups.

From the 416th BG, forty one Douglas A-26 Invaders were readied by their ground crews for Group mission number 239. The Battle Order called for 36 A-26 in two Boxes of 18 aircraft each to be the primary attacking force, three WINDOW aircraft to lead the B-26 Marauder PFF aircraft and the A-26's into the target and drop chaff to confuse the radar-guided FLAK batteries. Two A-26 spares would tag along for the first part of the mission to replace any aircraft that developed problems early on in the mission. They would return to A-69 if they were not needed.

All flight crews were briefed at 0630 hrs the morning. They were greeted with a bit of dark humor when the briefing started with "Gentlemen, let me say simply that this morning the early birds get the worms". The fact that the target area had 10/10 cloud cover gave a modicum of relief that this morning's mission would be another "milk run." Earlier in the war, cloud cover gave the air crews a much higher chance of returning. The thinking went..."If they can't see us, they can't hit us." Unfortunately, at this point in the war, the radar-directed anti-aircraft batteries didn't care whether the skies were clear or not, however, that false sense of protection still welled-up when the thought of a "milk run" was presented. The anxiety level was much lower than it might have been as

the briefing ended. The air crews were shuttled out to their waiting aircraft, loaded with fuel, ammunition and bombs hours earlier by ground personnel.

TIME TO GO

At 0807 hrs, with aircraft inspections and ground checks completed, the mission lead aircraft and all others in Box I started their engines. Taxiing began at 0822 hrs and the first aircraft was off at 0832 hrs. The second box started their sequence three minutes after the first box. After circling the base in the USAAF prescribed manner for 40 minutes, the Group formation was completed and they were on course at 0912 hrs. Their ETA at target was 1015 hrs. 416th Bomb Group mission 239 was underway.

The Group met up with the B-26 PFF planes enroute and the formation started passing waypoints on their way to the Initial Point. The formation passed Charleville, France, Ettlebruck, Luxembourg, and Cochem, Germany, all cities now under Allied control. Missions never took a direct route to their target to confuse the enemy. At 0958 hrs, as they approached the Rhine River, the heavy cloud that they had been flying over until now all but disappeared. This unexpected turn of events raised doubts about continuing on a PFF mission in clear weather. A PFF mission required a fairly long bomb run to permit the PFF plane to “fly the arc” set up by the OBOE system. On this specific mission, a bomb run of 8 minutes would be needed...an extremely long time to be “sitting ducks” in clear weather.

Lt. Carl Weinert, pilot of aircraft 351 in the number two position in Flight II of the second box, recalls hearing his Box leader break radio silence. This was unusual, but with the clear weather, the Germans could see them anyway. Captain Charles Anderson (505), Box II leader, felt it was important enough to break radio silence and he called Captain Hugh Evans (523), Box I mission leader. He asked if they were going to follow the PFF bombing plan as briefed or change to a visual run which is many minutes shorter. Captain Evans radioed that they would follow the PFF plane into the target area visually using landmarks for navigation.

The visual bomb run would give them more latitude for evasive maneuvers. Box I would bomb as a Box (all 18 A-26's) on the B-26 leader. This decision still put the formation at risk because the PFF bomb run was still over heavily defended FLAK areas. A lot of zigging and zagging would be required but they would be in full sight of enemy FLAK guns all along the 8 minute bomb run.

THE RUN INTO TARGET

The formation approached the Initial Point (IP) for the PFF bomb run at Geroldstein, Germany at 1004 hrs, turned right and took up a true heading of 144 degrees. That course took them about 5 miles east of the Rhine River city of Bingen Am Rhein. Unbeknownst to USAAF planners, almost all the FLAK batteries that were protecting Bingen previously had been moved 5 miles east of Bingen the day before.

At 1005 hrs, heavy flak damaged Lt. James P. Kenny's aircraft (361) flying in the number three position of flight I, Box I, setting the left wing on fire. He pulled the plane out of formation but lost control almost immediately. Gunner S/Sgt. Jack Sittarich managed, after some difficulty, to escape the burning and twisting aircraft. He parachuted near one of the FLAK batteries and was immediately captured. Luckily, at this point in the war, prisoners of war would only need to wait less than a month and a half before repatriation. Lt. Kenny also escaped the aircraft. German ground observers said that the pilot's chute did not open and he was killed.

At 1005 hrs also, Lt. Clifford Vars aircraft (213) was flying directly behind Lt. Kenny's plane in the number five position of flight I, Box I. He was hit in the bomb bay fuel tank engulfing the aircraft in flames. Both the pilot and gunner escaped successfully and but were captured quickly.

Two aircraft were already down and the formation was just at the start of a very long bomb run. The heavy FLAK continued for the entire bomb run to the target with the formation continuing to zig and zag and make planned altitude changes to thwart the FLAK batteries.

The three WINDOW aircraft took the lead now and flew into the target area about 1500 feet below Box I. They dropped half of their chaff in the target area and then made a 180 degree turn to pick up the second Box which was 2 minutes behind.

Box I arrived on target at 1014 ½ hrs, ½ minute early. The entire Box dropped on the lead bombardier of the B-26 PFF aircraft and made a sharp right turn across the bomb line heading to the rendezvous point (RP) several miles west of the German town of Kirchheimbolanden. Box I later garnered a "good" for bombing results.

As Box II was making its way to the target area, a sluggish gyro in the Norden Bombsight system in Captain Anderson's aircraft prevented the bombardier from identifying the aiming point. With insufficient time to pick up ground references and under constant heavy FLAK, Captain Anderson decided to go to the predetermined visual IP, which was the town of Kirchheimbolanden also.

Box II reached the visual IP and set a true heading of 99 degrees to the target. Instead of bombing as a Box, Captain Anderson called for visual bombing by flights. When the formation arrived in the target area at 1024 hrs, smoke from the fires started by the previous B-26 wave and Box I was obscuring much of the area over their aiming point. While there was no issue with dropping into smoke since the whole area was a target, it was almost impossible to pick out their exact assigned aiming point. Post-strike photos determined that Box II bombing results were unsatisfactory.

After releasing their bombs, the formation pulled a 180 degree left turn, as briefed, and flew over a heavily defended part of Worms to get to the Group RP. At 1026 hrs, Lt. Ross

Cornell Jr.'s aircraft (521) was hit. Smoke was seen from both engines and it was going down fast. Lt. Cornell attempted to contact the bombardier, Lt. Roland Enman and the gunner, S/Sgt. Ashton Carter, but he got no response. When flames broke out in the right nacelle, he sounded the bailout alarm and exited the aircraft. He parachuted to safety but was immediately captured. The right wing was seen to fall off at 3000 feet before the aircraft crashed. The bombardier and gunner bodies were later found at the crash site.

At about the same time, Lt. William Jokinen (237) took a direct hit and was seen to crash land several miles east of the bomb line. Both Lt. Jokinen and his gunner, Sgt. E.J. Creeden survived the crash landing but they were later captured.

HOMEWARD BOUND

The remaining aircraft from Box II made it to the rendezvous point with no further losses and formed up with the circling aircraft of Box I. The flight back to Laon/Athies airbase was uneventful but many aircraft were heavily damaged. The 20 minute period between 1005 and 1025 hrs on March 18, 1945 was something that those who survived that mission remember still. The 416th Group refers to this mission simply as "Black Sunday".

COORDINATED ATTACK

The coordinated attack on Worms included 224 twin-engine aircraft made up of Martin B-26 Marauders and Douglas A-26 Invaders. Six different Bomb Groups/Waves of aircraft participated: 387th BG, 416th BG, 394th BG, 397th BG, 391st BG and the 344th BG. The first two waves were sent against the Worms Communications Center. The remaining four waves were sent against the railroad marshalling yards. The makeup of each wave is detailed below

Wave 1

Initial Attack Time: 0958 hours
Group: 387th BG
Aircraft: 38 B-26 Marauders dispatched including 1 PFF and 3 window A/C
A/C dropping: 32
A/C lost: 1
Target: Communications Center
Ordnance dropped: 868 x 100 GP and 4 x 500 GP
Home Bases: 387th BG at Clastres, France (A-71)
1st PFF Squadron at Perrone, France (A-72)

Wave 2

Initial Attack Time: 1014 hours
Group: 416th BG
Aircraft: 41 A-26 Invaders dispatched including 3 window A/C

1 B-26 Marauder PFF aircraft from 387th BG
A/C dropping: 34
A/C lost: 4
Target: Communications Center
Ordnance dropped: 660 x 150 GP and 4 x 500 GP
Home Bases: 416th BG at Laon-Athies, France (A-69)
1st PPF Squadron at Perrone, France (A-72)

Wave 3

Initial Attack Time: 1031 hours
Group: 394th BG
Aircraft: 39 B-26 Marauders dispatched including 1 PFF and 3 window A/C
A/C dropping: 35
A/C lost: 0
Target: Marshalling Yard
Ordnance dropped: 140 x 1000 GP
Home Bases: 394th BG at Orleans/Bricy, France (A-50)
1st PPF Squadron at Perrone, France (A-72)

Wave 4

Initial Attack Time: 1045 hours
Group: 397th BG
Aircraft: 34 B-26 Marauders dispatched including 2 PFF and 3 window A/C
A/C dropping: 27
A/C lost: 1
Target: Marshalling Yard
Ordnance dropped: 104 x 1000 GP and 4 x 500 GP
Home Bases: 397th BG at Perrone, France (A-72)
1st PPF Squadron at Perrone, France (A-72)

Wave 5

Initial Attack Time: 1100 hours
Group: 391st BG
Aircraft: 35 B-26 Marauders dispatched including 2 PFF and 3 window A/C
A/C dropping: 31
A/C lost: 0
Target: Marshalling Yard
Ordnance dropped: 116 x 1000 GP, 12 x 1000 GP on window primary and 8 x 500 GP
Home Bases: 391st BG at Roye/Amy, France (A-73)
1st PPF Squadron at Perrone, France (A-72)

Wave 6

Initial Attack Time: 1115 hours
Group: 344th BG

Aircraft: 36 B-26 Marauders dispatched including 2 PFF and 3 window A/C
A/C dropping: 32
A/C lost: 0
Target: Marshalling Yard
Ordnance dropped: 87 x 1000 GP, 32 x 1000 Comp. B and 8 x 500 GP
Home Bases: Cormeilles-en-Vexin, France (A-59)
1st PPF Squadron at Perrone, France (A-72)

Total ordnance dropped:

491 x 1000 GP

28 x 500 GP

660 x 150 GP

868 x 100 GP

Total Tonnage = 345 Tons

Information per: BAFB-16