



This story was written in 1998 by Mr. Alan Cook, co-pilot of the Rohde crew of the 711th Squadron and provided for the collection by Mr. Ernst "Bob" Rohde.



The Story of Umbriago

On a list of 447th Bomb Group (BG) aircraft names sent to me by that Group's energetic Murray Codman I found a sad reminder of our days in 1944 with the 711th Squadron all by itself on the second page of the listing. There, with no Captain's name to accompany it was the forlorn word, "Umbriago." Several years ago one of my grandsons asked me: "Who was Umbriago, and why did you name your Fortress that?" When I told him that Umbriago was Jimmy Durante's mythical sidekick whom he sang about in the WW II song of the same name, I, of course, had to explain who Durante was as well. Not being quite certain why we had picked such an unusual moniker for an airplane, I bulled my way through the rest of the question by telling him the whole crew had been to a party where we had had a great time and, feeling little or no pain, we had all sung the song together when it came on the juke box. Then, naturally, I had to explain to him what a juke box was. I still have the Durante recording of Umbriago. As far as I know no other artist ever chose to sing it, except for us, "the motley crew of '92," the accomplished collection of cocky airmen put together by our Stockton, California leader, Ernst M. "Bob" Rohde.

In 1944 I wrote the description, quoted below of this ugly looking B-17, perhaps the last of its kind to be delivered to our Rattlesden airbase. For a time we weren't even sure it was a B-17G; we thought it might be a beat-up F model dressed up to look like a G. "Only one B-17G Flying Fortress ever had the misfortune to have the stately name, 'Umbriago' painted on its shiny Alcoa surface; only that surface was hardly shiny; it was a dirty camouflage burnt umber color, and at present, (1945), it rests in peace with the remainder of its skin, plus small quantities of its flesh, on a forward RAF airstrip at Eindhoven, Holland. That particular airplane was a misfit and a mongrel from the day of her origin. (I don't think the 447th had any but shiny aluminum craft in the fall of 1944; our ship was apparently a throw-back to the days when B-17s were loaded with the useless extra weight of a couple of hundred pounds of camouflage paint.) Umbriago suffered the doubtful privilege of participating in just one combat mission over Germany: she then settled into her present grave site. She was an ugly duckling, bowlegged, with a pronounced curvature of her vertical stabilizer. But, once in the air, her ungraceful form trimmed up to fly as in a Pilot's dream. Her life was short, but that definitely was not so with the group of characters, who, by fate or fortune, found themselves strewn about her innards on the day she died. We resolved thenceforth to never inscribe another airplane with "Umbriago..."

This is about that one single mission that Umbriago ever flew, (plus a sequel to the same target by the same crew). That mission turned out to be the worst we had to experience through-out our tour of thirty. We, Crew 1092, had recently finished Lead Crew Training; our Nissen Hut mates in the 711th had made our lives a misery in the evening as they returned exhausted, dirty, hungry, and scared silly from their long hours over Germany in that summer of 1944, while we flew endless training exercises over East Anglia and the Wash. One of those playful tormentors was Lt. George Roberts, who, out of deep friendship for Bob Rohde, had given up probably the best Navigator in the 447th, Lt. John Stockham, of Racine, Wis., to us in exchange for our less competent one. John's talents were recognized by both Squadron and Group lead Navigators; his presence on crew #1092 was one of the reasons we had been selected to be a lead-crew. John & Rohde made a great team; I recall one practice flight in which John's expertise with our Gee navigation set-up plus Bob's pilot skills permitted us to complete a blind instrument landing as if Rattlesden had been with modern ILA equipment. I flew contact while they successfully completed the experiment.

We were lucky; not only did we have the best Navigator in the Group, but I would have put my money on our Bombardier, W/O Gordon Serrott, from Columbus, Ohio over any other in the 447th. In fact I often did just that when Gordon sat down in the Officers' Club to partake of his other great talent - playing poker. I never saw Gordon miss a bombing target, and I never saw him lose at the Officers' Club. One of the keys to his success was that he knew how to relax and enjoy life without any need to resort to alcohol or tobacco. Now, five decades later, having finally achieved the same 'state of grace' myself, I think I understand what made Gordon such a great Bombardier and poker player.

Finally, the third leg of our Lead Crew stool was Pilotage. The story that follows for October 7 and November 2, 1944 demonstrates why Bob Rohde was picked to be a Lead Crew Pilot, an honor he richly deserved: He was an excellent leader and Pilot, but as so many others of similar stature, in those days of late 1944, no real recognition of his skills was made by his 711th Squadron superiors. Aside from the everlasting gratitude of his fellow crew members for successfully piloting them through 30 missions and the respect of his pilot peers of that time, the only mention of Bob Rohde is that found at the top of the next page, copied from the *Pictorial History Of The 447 Bombardment Group (H)* edited by Captains Estley K Surridge and Edward C. Dooley:

MISSION NO.	MISSION	DATE	FIELD ORDER NO.	A/C AIRBORNE	A/C DISMOUNTED	A/C ATTACKING	A/C FAILING TO ATTACK				BOMBS DROPPED			RESULTS OF BOMBING				GROUP LEADER	CONFIRMED CLAIMS ON E/A		AIRCRAFT LOST			CASUALTIES		A/C BATTLE DAMAGE	OTHER DATA						
							A	B	C	D	TOT.	NO.	TYPE	TONS	RESULTS OF BOMBING	ALTITUDE	TIME OF TAKE OFF		TIME OF LANDING	POSITION IN COMBAT WING	RES.	NO.	A/C NO.	PILOT	SQ.			K.	W.	M.	MAJ.	MIN.	
156	MERSEBURG	OCT 7	442	34	34	29	5	0	0	0	5	288	GP	72	UNR	26,000	800	1515				0	0	0	1	44-11	HARRWOOD	0	5	9	16		

(See Operational Charts, Pictorial History On Line)

This excerpt, the 447th's mission #156 record, did mention our leader and our exploit that October day, but it didn't even correctly identify the country of our forced landing; it had

us in Belgium instead of Holland, hardly a major mistake, considering that not too long ago these lowland lands were one country, the Netherlands !

Prior to October 7, 1944 our previous eleven missions had been a relative "piece of cake." We had picked up a few flack holes, had yet to see a Luftwaffe fighter, and had encountered no serious problems for a still-green crew. In fact we had been lucky enough to participate in a delightful wartime flying experience, one of the four missions of mercy that the 447th undertook to provide the French Resistance Movement, "the Maquis," with supplies and armaments. This was on July 14th, Bastille Day in France, and the mission was code-named "Cadillac," with our own 711th Squadron Commander, Major Edward J. McRay leading both the 447th Group and the 4th Combat Wing.

It was our longest mission of the war with nine hours and fifteen minutes of flying time deep in the Charolles Mountains of southeastern France's Savoy region. We landed back at Rattlesden using only the 100 octane vapor left in our fuel tanks! Ours was the lowest ship in the entire Group formation which dropped its load of goodies nearly at ground level. That position, "tail-end Charley," if you like, was one requiring the use of more fuel than any other ship, just as is the case with the last car in a bumper-to-bumper traffic jam on our highways today. Major McRay later told us he had been much concerned that our low-low section of the low squadron would be flown into the ground or one of the steep hills as he wound the Group's way through the valleys of the Charolles. We kidded him back that we had only snagged one tree branch with our left wing as he swung the Group into the IP for the drop zone. We got a special thrill as we watched the French men and women, who were close enough to wave at us, rush from their hiding places in the woods out onto the smoke-marked open field to pick up the canisters we had dropped. The mission was no fun for Gordon, or George "Moose" Schwegel, our Radio Operator. One of our canisters had hung up in the bomb bay, and in the process of trying to release it by hand its parachute opened and spread its way into the radio compartment engulfing Moose in nylon. Gordon finally managed to cut the shrouds, leaning out dangerously from the narrow bomb-bay catwalk over the open bomb bay, and jettisoned the stubborn wayward tube; George, meanwhile opened the radio hatch on plane's ceiling and managed to push the mass of nylon out into the slip-stream, where it floated silently to the ladies of the Maquis below who industriously used every panel to manufacture lingerie.

Crew #1092 was virtually a virgin, when it came to real air war as we awoke in the early morning hours of October. We had acquired that well-known Air Force disease of over-confidence. For me, it was to be an especially exciting day: my fiancée, Patricia Yulle of Southall, a London suburb, was scheduled to travel from the big city to quarters I had found for her in Ipswich, less than an hour's travel by train and bus from Rattlesden. I had every expectation of getting home from our day's work in plenty of time to meet her late afternoon train. That's how cocky I had become, and I think the rest of the crew shared my high level of confidence that we were near invincible.

As we sat through briefing I don't recall that our Intelligence Officers gave us any special insights into how dangerous our target of the day, the Leuna synthetic oil refinery

at Merseburg, truly was. Ours was certainly not the first 8th Air Force mission to Leuna, the largest and most important of Germany's synthetic oil production, accounting for more than 60% of synthetic output and near 40% of Nazi total oil resources. The main briefing did not mention that the infamously accurate Nazi anti-aircraft gunners formerly located at Paris were then guarding Merseburg, along with other battalions noted for their accuracy, but perhaps this was mentioned in the Navigators Briefing Session, (not that they, or any of us, could do anything to avoid those guns !) We were told of the importance of doing the customary 447th good job of bombing at this target, but that was about all I remember. Our Group was already noted as one with one of the highest bombing accuracy ratings in the entire 8th Air Force.

It was an especially pleasant trip that morning, an unusual beautiful sunny day over England. Group and Wing Assembly had witnessed no mid-air collisions, our biggest threat so far in our Tour. Guns were fired without incident once we passed over Orford Ness and were out over the North Sea. As far as we could see from our Deputy Lead position of the High Group, #2 to Captain Don Harris flying with Lt. Mahl's crew, our formation appeared neat and tight as was typical of 447th Pilots. Mayor George C. Smith, Operations Officer of the 709th Squadron, led 4th Bomber wing flying in a PFF, ("Mickey"), ship from the 94th Bomb Group at Bury St. Edmunds, accompanied by eight more 447th crews. Their navigation was excellent as we met each arrival point on time and in correct position, avoided the heavy flak at the Dutch coast in as we flew over the Zuider Zee, and rendezvoused perfectly with our 8th AF fighter escort. The weather turned a bit gloomy as we penetrated the German heartland on our route to the Leipzig area, sneaking just south of the flak guns at Munster and Bielefeld, and avoiding the heavy concentration of anti-aircraft firepower at Kassel. It wasn't until long after, on our return to Rattlesden, that we learned that German fighters had been tailing the Group just as we turned at the IP onto the bomb run, now spread out and completely helpless in our commitment to the target that Lt. Harwood's 711th ship, "TNT Kate," had been picked off.

As we made a sweeping turn at the IP onto the Comb run we were stunned by the sight ahead of us - a solid black cloud of flak bursts, the number and precision of which we had never before encountered. The picture opposite here portrays their density and accuracy. This flak exactly bracketed the course we were about to fly. We could only look at each other in stunned silence. We had heard the expression, "flak so thick you could walk on it," and here it was, only more so ! When I describe the flak over Leuna as a cloud, I don't mean just a wall of smoke; it was a box, the length, width and depth of our route to the "bomb; away" point. The Leuna gunners were economical: they didn't waste any ammo above or below or outside the pattern through which our Third Air Division had to fly.

We just sat there, eyes aghast, silent in our despair, rosary beads twirling in some cases, everyone praying; in his own fashion, even Gordon as he blotted out the scene ahead of us by hunching over his bomb sight in readiness in the event our lead Bombardier was to be knocked out of action. It was a futile effort as clouds and burning smoke pots slowly obliterated the target. John Stockham also played out his back-up role,

carefully noting position and time and double checking our course home. The bomb run actually was only a few minutes duration but it seemed more like an hour to us as we flew silently into the dark cloud of flak bursts ahead of us. Rohde turned to me as a barrage of red explosions burst directly in front of us and said "They've got our range!"

Indeed they had. In the next instant we felt the accuracy of the Leuna gunners, taking one direct hit and another close-by explosion. John Stockham was hit in the knee by a piece of flak; no one else was wounded, but when I felt a thump on my thigh, I looked down to find a still warm piece of shrapnel on my lap, which I still retain as a Merseburg souvenir. John's wound was to heal well over the following weeks and it earned him a well-deserved Purple Heart.

We had taken critical blasts in both numbers two and four engines. At least, if we had to lose two engines, they were not on one side of the ship. #4 was hit directly in the planetary gear system leaving it impossible to feather. Its drag was thus a serious detriment to efficient flying and the resulting vibration from the wind-milling prop as a cause of concern. #2 engine suffered strikes in its gas lines, its main oil tank and its accessories section.

Fortunately we were able to feather it due to Bob's quick action before the limited oil supply for that purpose drained away. When Gordon tried to close the bomb bay doors, after first jettisoning our load and giving first aid to John, he discovered the door motor controls had been shot out. Thus it was up to our aerial engineer, Walter Hemhauser of Avenel, N.J. to climb down from his top-turret perch to laboriously hand-crank the doors shut. Walt was away from his gun position for almost an hour, for after getting Sergeant Frank L. Wisnieuski of West Orange, N.J. up and out his ball-turret slot, we learned that Umbriago was not carrying the necessary tools to unfasten and release the ball turret. (From that time forward, at least four of us, Bob, myself, Walt and Frank, always checked every aircraft assigned to us to ensure all tools were on board.) Walt and his cohorts improvised somehow and eventually managed to unfasten the turret bolts, and we dropped it somewhere north of Kassel.

These problems of a wind-milling prop, bomb bay doors that took forever to close, and a ball turret we were slow to abandon all created drag that meant we steadily lost altitude-as we heeded alone and lonely for friendly territory, despondent, nervous and frightened. Even though we threw every last item of non-essential equipment over-board (including my carefully stocked escape bag!), we dropped like a lead weight from our bomb-run height of 24,000 feet to around 10,000 feet altitude, where, flying at near stalling speed of 120 mph, we were able to hold our height over mother earth. Bob and I were able to light-up at this altitude! We had run our two surviving engines at their maximum power settings for way beyond their specified maximum of ten minutes, and we were finally able to ease up a bit on them as we munched along, a badly wounded duck. As we straggled along we were fortunate to pick up a friendly escort of six to eight P-47 Thunderbolt USAAF fighters who stuck with us until we reached friendly territory. This was a great relief for we had been a easy target for any Luftwaffe ship which had risen to

check us out, All our guns except nose and tail were unmanned as the Sergeant gunners struggled to overcome our bomb bay door and ball turret problems.

At 10,000 feet we were an easy target - any flak battery, and although both Gordon and John struggled to get our exact position. in order to avoid flak, due to low clouds this was near impossible. As a result we did run over several more flak guns, but fortunately their aim lacked the precision: of what we had experience at Leuna. Each time we saw those ugly black bursts rise in front of us either Bob or I would radio to Gordon, "Which way to turn?" Gordon now having recovered his normal composure would yell back, "I don't know; you pick"

We missed the largest flak concentrations as we slipped north of the Ruhr into Holland. We had drawn near maximum power on engines # 1 & 3 for almost an hour and a half vis-à-vis that maximum of ten minutes after which they were supposed to blow up. Even though the engine temperatures remained below the danger level, we had no intention of risking the long flight over the North Sea back to base. Just beyond the enemy line Gordon led us to the recently captured forward RAF airstrip at Eindhoven. I don't remember if we bothered to ask for permission to land, but Bob sat Umbriago down on the grass runway with a perfect three-point landing. Despite what seemed like little or no braking power we were also able to taxi her to a corner of the field out of the way of the heavy traffic at the field. As we all descended to the ground, each in his own way kissed the ground or expressed our happiness at being safely back on planet earth: There must have been 250 flak holes in that forlorn carcass of a B-17. Everyone came up to Rohde to express their thanks for the great flying job. John was still in some pain but we got him patched up by the RAF medics.

The shock of our ordeal took some time to wear off to the point where we were able to plan our next moves. I was especially up-tight wondering how I was going to be able to reach my wife-to-be in order to tell her I hadn't stood tier up; just delayed a little ! Most of the crew were in favor of taking their time in getting back to England, except for myself and Frank Wisniewski: every evening it was Frank's custom to write his wife in New Jersey a book describing the day's happenings, and he feared she would be upset and worried if his string of letters was interrupted for any length of time. Before leaving our sad-sack of an airplane, some of us elected to strip her of a souvenir, I among them:



PILOT'S CONTROL COLUMN MEDALLION FROM B-17G, "UMBRIAGO," WHICH WE WERE FORCED TO CRASH-LAND, EINDHOVEN , HOLLAND, 10/7/1944

We asked our RAF hosts what they might have by way of transport out of Eindhoven, and found out there was a RAF Avro Anson due to depart shortly for Brussels. Frank and I elected to take advantage of this, and waist gunner Sergeant Leonard Smith of Deer Trail, Colorado, decided to join us. It was a short crowded flight in the four passenger plane, which the RAF sergeant pilot flew at about 300 feet over the dingy, foggy late afternoon landscape of Holland and Belgium. Brussels had only recently been retaken from the Nazis, and was still suffering from the

torments of enemy occupation. We found a place to sleep, and I was able to reach Pat by phone in Ipswich to explain my absence. The next morning we hitched a ride on an RAF Dakota, (DC-3), from Brussels to Northholt airdrome outside of London; we got back in Rattlesden by 4:00 PM., October 8th, 1944. Our compatriots on this particular flight across the sea were mostly Canadians from the First Army, some of whom wounded. A couple of the Canuck GIs had gotten their injuries when the 8th Air Force had accidentally bombed short when we struck Brettville, Normandy in support of their advance out of General Montgomery's stalemate with the Germans at Caen. Although it had not been the 447th that bombed short on that unfortunate August 8th day our plane mates treated us as if we had been to blame.

I have so far left out our tail gunner, John Biscardi, Brooklyn, N.Y., from this tale of woe. John stuck faithfully to his lonely post during that October 7th ordeal. I can vouch for its for loneliness and cold, having flown a mission in that spot as a lead crew co-pilot. John was our crew comedian, but on this day he left his humor at home.

Back at base our generous Ground Executive Officer gave us all a couple of days off, and I had a joyous reunion with Pat at Ipswich that same evening. Bob, John and Gordon, and the rest of the crew found their way back via Paris, which had been liberated for a much longer time than Brussels and presented an opportunity for a high-spirited survival party, and who knows what else since I was not there. They showed up at Rattlesden a couple of days later, and as a reward for troubles we were given a week off. We didn't return to action until October 25th when we had an easy oil target at Harburg.

On Oct. 30th, we found ourselves once again on our way to Merseburg. About three hours into the mission the 8th Air Force was recalled due to impossible formation flying conditions in the target area, prompting a great sigh of relief by yours truly and the rest of the crew. On the 30th we did observe for the first time, the new ME 262 German jet fighter.

Our relief was short-lived. November 2nd saw us once again on our way to Merseburg, this time in the lead of the low section of the low squadron in what turned out to be the largest fighter battle of the war. Mayor W.C. Allen, a veteran of 75 missions in various war theaters led the 447th, flying with Captain Reynolds in what turned out to be the 447th's third worst mission in terms of casualties. Captain Reynold's plane took a direct hit over the tar, let and exploded, the entire crew lost, as bits and pieces of the craft, plane #634, a PFF ship, drifted back through our formation. On the way to the target, Lt. Moses of the 711th squadron and Lt. Hayes planes suffered a mid-air collision with the #3 prop of the latter cutting Moses' plane in half at the radio room, resulting in major loss of life on Lt. Moses' plane. Flak and enemy fighters combined to knock down Lt. Wings of the 708th squadron. Lt. Hayes and his crew were able to bail out over Belgium, and returned safely to Rattlesden. Lt. Haight had to crash land his ship in France. Lt. Johnson's ship was lost and Lt. E.E. Tetrault, 711th squadron, had to ditch in the North Sea, earning him a DFC, while his entire crew was rescued.

The most noted casualty was that of 711th Squadron's Lt. Robert E. Femoyer, the only member of the 447th to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, by enduring the suffering of his wounds which proved to be fatal by refusing to accept medication for his pains so that he could complete his job of safely steering the badly shot-up B-17 which was straggling safely back to base. As mentioned, Lt. Rosenblum's plane was still partially blocking the runway when we brought our own beat up ship in to land.

November 2nd, 1944 was publicized by the Army Air Force as the biggest Air Battle of WW II with our fighter pilots and bomber gunners having destroyed 208 Nazi planes. We did witness an immense struggle around us with many dog-fights, planes going down in flames or a smoky trail, plus several parachutes, but, as was the case through-out the war, with multiple guns at work, there come after-the fact reports of duplicated casualties. From German reports captured after the war we now know that German losses on November 2nd were more like 40 planes. I don't think Germany had enough aviation gasoline or ready-to-fly pilots to have put more than 208 planes in the air in the late fall of 1944.

Meanwhile, back in our low section lead spot, crew #1092 was experiencing a repetition of events of October 7th including the same fears and anxieties, but fortunately, no physical wounds. # 1 engine was hit and on fire. Thanks to the new USAAF policy of reducing the amount of feathering oil in each engine to reduce weight, we were unable to feather the beast. Its vibration was so great it shook the engine into pieces, broke the crank-shaft and the prop fell off as we landed. We dropped our bombs and fell out of formation slipping and skidding to put out the fire, which we did, thanks to Bob's skills. #3 engine had also been hit in its gas and oil lines but we were able to draw full power on it. That was a good thing for we had been having trouble with a runaway supercharger on #4 and were not able to get full force from it. The navigator-bombardier compartment suffered a lot of flak damage but both John and Gordon escaped unharmed. The entire mid-section of the airplane from the top turret back to the waist guns was full of holes and Frank Wisniewski actually wound up with a splinter of plexiglass from his ball turret in one hand. Again we had been lucky; no injuries.

As we struggled alone at a pace less than ideal on the equivalent of two and one-half engines, we were the object of two separate passes by enemy fighters, but again our luck held - they were poor shots. Finally we were picked up by a most welcome P-51 pilot who swept ahead of us for flak and escorted us to allied territory. That plane was piloted by 21 year old Major Richard A. Peterson of Alexander, Minn., of the 357th Fighter Group, 8th Air Force. In addition to his protective action, Major Peterson, later to be featured in a Yank magazine article, kept our spirits up by his cheerful wise-cracks over the radio.

Other than sweating out whether or not we might hit Lt. Rosenblum's wreck of an airplane on the runway, our return to Rattlesden was relatively uneventful. After two of these kinds of missions to Merseburg, I took advantage of Gorton's gift to us at post-mission interrogation: the consumption of his two shots of whiskey in addition to our

own rations! Our Group Intelligence Officers had much to note and write about on that ugly day of November 2nd.

The remainder of November, 1944 was a comparatively easy month, as the weather was poor for flying. On November 29th our entire crew was allowed to stand down in order to attend my wedding to Patricia Yulle which took place at the Ipswich Town Hall. After the brief ceremony all of us enjoyed ourselves at a near-by Pub, the name of which has escaped me. This was the beginning of what is today, in 1998, our fifty-fourth year of incredible wedded happiness together, including three wonderful children and five delightful grandchildren.