

By Sgt. SAUL LEVITT  
YANK Staff Correspondent

ENGLAND—Somebody ought to write a story about a briefing room, with the lights going on and off and the experts stepping up one by one to give you the dope on the mission. The lights go off and the maps appear on the screen. The voices go on. Here is the weather, here is the formation, this is where your plane will be. Nobody says much. The job is set, is definite. You even know the figures on the anti-aircraft that will be down below blowing up those black puff-balls of hot iron at you. And here is your mission—Saint-Nazaire, the myth, the Paul Bunyan place where you're supposed to be able to walk across the flak. Saint-Nazaire is where you're bound for today.

And today the sun is spread everywhere over the English countryside as you go down the road to the line and break down your guns. Rub that oil off, for the stuff will freeze in the guns at altitude. Check oxygen, radio, bomb fuses; check a thousand damn things and still you haven't checked them all. Around you are the boys on your crew, Clanton and Petro and Lt. Brady, the pilot: the men who will go with you through the living myth of Saint-Nazaire. Time runs and take-off time will not wait, for the timing is spread through a dozen airfields, and up in the sky over England the armada will form. Take-off time waits for no man. Gangwer, the ball-turret operator, can't find his flying boots and electrically heated shoes. To hell with them.

You're in the radio room—"Saul's bird cage," somebody names it. Please, buddy, remember your signals for enemy aircraft or in case that old devil sea gets you on the way back. Remember to turn on the detonator so, just in case you land in Jerry's Europe, the secret equipment will be blown to hell. Remember this, remember that.

And that's all you have to do as you climb up there and circle and circle in the sun, sweating out that bombing run—your very first real mission. Back in the waist Clanton and Petro, the waist gunners, are leaning out of the open hatches, checking the formation. You smoke cigarette after cigarette because after altitude you won't be able to smoke any. The signals are beating through the static into your headset.

Now the water down below. Good-bye England. Over the interphone the navigator says, "An hour and a half to the target." Now you go to your gun and swing her through her circle. "How about test firing?" asks the ball turret. "OK," says the pilot. The caliber .50s sing through the air. Petro, the gun expert at the waist, asks through the interphone about all guns. "All guns

Over the interphone: "Let's get away from here in a hurry." That's Lt. Hamilton, the bombardier from Kansas, speaking from the nose.

You are riding away from France now. And eastward there's a line of smoke climbing into the sky. You open the radio-room door to the bomb bay, and there is one flak hole. Just one. You look around to find more. That single piece of hot iron ripped through the bay and went somewhere. But just where? Clanton comes up and points, and you follow his finger around to where that little hunk of iron went—in the wall a foot from your head.

The coast of France and that line of smoke

Your mind isn't very good at 20,000 feet; it's kind of slow and frozen. Frostbite, and you're the first-aid man: that's the radioman's job. What did they tell you about frostbite? Your mom used to take your shoes off when you were a kid and rub your feet until they were warm and stinging. You pull off Gangwer's shoes and wrap his feet in blankets. Under his oxygen mask his eyes are yelling at you to do something.

"Fighters at 3 o'clock level," says the co-pilot. Petro is now in the turret, and you and Clanton are at the waist guns. You see them sweep wide and around to the rear. "Eighteen of them," says McCusker, the tail gunner. Your guns circle,



# First Mission

OK." Down in the ball, that lonely ball turret below the belly, Gangwer's feet are beginning to get cold. The cold is knifing through the metal, and an electric suit doesn't quite do the trick for the toes and fingertips.

You are at altitude now, and soon there is France below. The enemy is down there in his Fortress Europe, and his Saint-Nazaire submarine-building plant is buried under 14-foot roofs. But maybe your bombs can rip up some of the works. You swing your gun through her circle.

You are over Saint-Nazaire. The planes go in one by one. Don't ask what you think about because you don't think. You just stretch taut. The bomb doors go down. There are minutes now, maybe seconds. There's an uprush of cold air that cuts your ears and fingers into little pieces, and with one dead finger—by God, you did remember it—you press the camera button. Hold it for two minutes. And now the bomb doors close. You get a glimpse of innocent-looking puffs of smoke. There's a sharp crack like a pistol shot somewhere in the ship; it seems up forward,

seem to hang on to us, won't let go. Why aren't you moving? Can't you get out of here? The interphone is silent for a minute. You suppose everybody is holding his little hunk of life in his hands and looking it over tenderly. And that damn coast of France and that smoke hanging on.

A voice out of the cockpit: "Is everybody OK?" Gangwer from the ball turret: "My feet are frozen. I can't take this much longer."

"Just a little longer," says the pilot.

"How much longer on oxygen?" asks Blum, the engineer.

"Just a little longer," says the pilot.

"My oxygen line is screwed up," says Blum.

"We're descending gradually," says the pilot.

"We should be seeing fighters just about here."

says Lt. Crosby, the navigator.

"I've got to get out of here," says Gangwer. "My feet are gone."

Petro, the waist gunner, steps up and opens the ball turret. Clanton comes over, too. They lift Gangwer out and lay him out in the waist.

Just what do you do for frostbite? You forget,

waiting. The fighters hang back of us. One of your ships falls back; maybe flak in an engine, maybe this, maybe that.

Now we're below oxygen level. You rip the things off your face. You go up to the radio room, give Gangwer a cigarette. Life is back in his feet. His eyes are better. Signaling England now about enemy aircraft and no answer. The radio picks its own damn time to get coy.

The fighters disappear below the horizon, but one of your planes is going down. She lands smooth. The planes circle her like a flock of birds as she settles in the sea, with her crew tumbling efficiently into their dinghies. They go in right, just the way they've been told a thousand times in lectures about those dinghies and how to get into them, and all the radios are at work summoning help.

You're over England now. England, I love you. Everybody is chattering, including brother Frostbite, now that the big thing is over.

And that's all there is to your first mission, just that and no more.