

'I Am the Captain of My Soul'

A dying navigator clung to the last slender thread of life until his job was done.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

ARMY Air Forces planners who selected oil refineries and synthetic fuel plants as one of three major target systems in Germany underestimated that country's military reliance on synthetic fuel—particularly aviation fuel. Eighty-five percent of the Luftwaffe's aviation-grade gasoline came from one type of synthetic process—the hydrogenation plants that produced fuel from coal.

While Allied invasion forces were building up in the United Kingdom, both ground and air leaders agreed that an invasion of the Continent would not be feasible until the Allies had won air superiority. Despite that consensus, only two percent of Allied bombing had been against oil targets prior to the spring of 1944. Disagreement over target priorities was part of the reason. Another important factor was the lack of long-range fighter escort to accompany the bombers deep into Germany, where most of the oil targets lay. By early 1944, rapidly increasing numbers of P-51s and range extension of other fighters solved that element of the problem.

In the spring of 1944, Lt. Gen. Carl "Tooney" Spaatz, Commander of US Strategic Air Forces in Europe, convinced Supreme Commander Gen. Dwight Eisenhower and the British that oil should be given a higher priority. Knocking out the refineries and synthetic plants would limit the German army's mobility. It also would help in gaining air superiority by depriving the Luftwaffe of aviation fuel and, equally important, by bringing the enemy air force up to defend those vital targets so that Air

Marshal Goering's fighters might be shot down by the increasingly dominant Allied fighter force.

The oil campaign got under way in May 1944. In spite of diversions to support Allied landings in June and the breakout from Normandy the following month, oil production had been cut by nearly eighty percent at the end of September. But oil facilities could be put back in operation in from four to six weeks by the 350,000 workers assigned to that task. The bombing attacks had to be repeated frequently.

One of the largest hydrogenation plants was at Merseburg, near Leipzig, some 500 miles from Eighth Air Force bases in England. On November 2, 1944, the Eighth launched more than 500 heavies against Merseburg-Leuna. Lt. Gen. Jimmy Doolittle's crews had been there before. They knew it was a tough, massively defended target.

One of the units assigned to this mission was the 447th Bomb Group,

based at Rattlesden. The navigator of B-17 L-Love in the 711th Squadron was 2d Lt. Robert Femoyer. That morning, as he sat in the crew briefing taking notes on flak concentrations along the attack and withdrawal routes, he was just another of the nearly 10,000 navigators trained by the AAF. Before the day ended, Lieutenant Femoyer was to earn a place in the pantheon of Air Force heroes.

Near Merseburg, L-Love was hit by three bursts of heavy flak. Femoyer was critically wounded by shell fragments that penetrated his back and side, and the badly damaged B-17 was forced to drop out of formation.

The young navigator, who had been thrown to the floor when he was hit, refused a sedative that would dull the excruciating pain of his wounds. He insisted that it was his responsibility to keep the lone bomber clear of the hundreds of flak guns that lay between Merseburg and the English Channel, and he was determined that his mind remain clear.

Unable to sit at his table, he asked to be propped up on the floor so he could see his charts and instruments. For two and a half hours, as he lay in a pool of blood, Femoyer resisted the pain and nausea that threatened to dominate his mind. Again and again as he grew weaker from loss of blood, he fought back a gray curtain of unconsciousness. Not until they were safely through the maze of flak sites and over the Channel did he give up directing the plane and permit crew members to administer a sedative.

Lt. Robert Femoyer died shortly after his B-17 landed in England. In May 1945, he was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously, one of only two navigators to earn the nation's highest decoration for valor. Through his last agonizing hours, he had remained true to his mission, true to his comrades, and true to his own standard of honor. ■



Though mortally wounded by flak over Germany, 2d Lt. Robert Femoyer refused sedation until his badly damaged B-17 was clear of enemy fire.