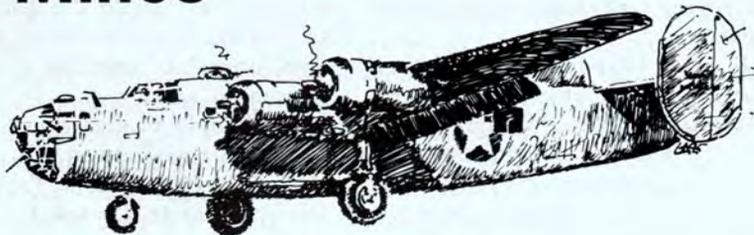


By John L. Frisbee, Contributing Editor

Target: The Linsi Mines

Early in the war against Japan, five B-24 crews were launched in a daring strike 800 miles behind enemy lines in northern China.



TENTH Air Force, established in India in early 1942, was one of the smallest and least celebrated combat air forces of World War II, but it had a primary mission of great importance: protecting the logistics lifeline from India to China. In mid-1942, that air force included the 7th Bomb Group with two heavy and two medium squadrons; two fighter groups; and some transports. Only six of the ten combat squadrons were even marginally operational.

In June 1942, the already feeble Tenth was eviscerated when its commander, Maj. Gen. Lewis H. Brereton, was ordered to the Middle East to help stop Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's drive into Egypt. He took with him most of the command's heavy bombers and its key personnel. The 7th Bomb Group's 436th Bomb Squadron, which was converting to longer-range B-24s, was left in India at scattered locations, far from combat ready. Gradually, replacement crews and aircraft arrived in India, and Tenth Air Force began a slow recovery.

Before his air force came off the critical list, Maj. Gen. Clayton L. Bissell, who had been named commander of the Tenth, was handed a mission unrelated to the protection of the India-China lifeline. Its audacity must have staggered the imagination of the few who were privy to the details.

Far behind enemy lines in the vicinity of Beijing, China, lay the Linsi mines, which produced a major share of coking coal used by the Japanese to produce high-grade steel. These were "wet mines" that could be kept in operation only by continuous pumping, powered by an electric generating plant at the site. If the plant could be knocked out, it was believed, the flooded mines would be useless for perhaps a year. The only bomber

that had the range to reach the mines was the B-24, and even it required staging to bases in west-central China. This would be the first ever strike north of the Yellow River.

Maj. Max R. Fennell, who had gone to the Middle East with Brereton, was recalled to lead the B-24s to Linsi. Fennell had flown in China and was familiar with some of the inevitable problems. He arrived at Karachi on October 8, where he met five B-24D crews of the 436th Bomb Squadron. On October 11, his B-24s and a spare flew to Allahabad in northern India, where they were met by General Bissell. Only the crew members who needed to know were told what their target was.

The General informed one of the crews that if it returned from the mission, the crew members could consider themselves among the luckiest of men. His pessimism was not unfounded. From their forward staging base at Chengdu, they would fly 800 miles into enemy territory without adequate maps, weather forecasts, or fighter escort, and past several Japanese airfields that were believed to be occupied by some 300 enemy fighters. If a crew went down, there could be no rescue attempt.

Major Fennell's flight proceeded from Allahabad over The Hump to Kunming, en route to Chengdu, nearly losing one B-24 to icing as they crossed the Himalayas. On October 20, the B-24s took off from Chengdu on the 1,100-mile flight to Linsi, heavy with bombs and fuel. Over 14,000-foot mountains, they ran into a violent front causing severe icing and were forced to return to Chengdu. The following day, the weather was clear but very cold. On the flight to Linsi, Major Fennell's formation passed seven enemy airfields, none occupied. Apparently, the Japanese

were confident that no American aircraft would penetrate that far behind the lines.

One B-24 had to abort before reaching Linsi. The other five bombed from 14,000 feet, each making two runs over the powerplant. The crews, who encountered light flak, believed they had scored several direct hits. Their photos showed tall columns of smoke rising from the Linsi complex. All returned safely to Chengdu more than twelve hours after takeoff, having completed one of the potentially most hazardous missions flown in China up to that time.

One senior commander recommended that all crew members be awarded the Silver Star for this pioneering mission. Another held that no awards should be made because air combat had not taken place. With the brass deadlocked on that issue, the crews went undecorated.

Seventh Bomb Group Report, WW II says that, according to ground sources, the power station was destroyed and the mines flooded. On the other hand, *The Army Air Forces in World War II* reports that "while the bombs struck in the target area they failed to destroy the objectives." Japanese officials who have been queried replied that records of that mission have been destroyed. The actual outcome may never be known, but the measure of heroism lies not in the success but in the doing. The men of these crews accepted without hesitation a mission from which it seemed they were not likely to return. Their heroism has been recognized by little more than a footnote in history. ■

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