

Lt. Lewis Brings Wounded Fliers And Shattered Bomber In On Last Mission

First Lt. Joyce W. Lewis of Athens, pilot of a B-24 bomber, has completed his fifty-first and last mission in the Italian area, and the mission was almost his last in every sense of the word. The plane was riddled with bullets and only his skillful maneuvering brought it in for a safe landing.

The pilot, with a 15th AAF B-24 outfit in Italy since last March and with missions over France, Germany, Italy and the Balkans behind him, expects to come home soon. Among his most important missions were those over military targets at the refineries at Ploesti, Romania, and the Messerschmitt factories at Weiner-Neustadt, Austria.

He tells of his narrow call on his last mission in this interesting letter to his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Jack Lewis:

"I went to see the boys in the hospital yesterday and last night when we got back I had ten letters, including one from you and the one with the Review article about me, and also one from Ross Sanders in France.

"I guess you've already gotten the letter in which I told you about the boys being in the hospital. Vaughan is all right and walking around. He had a nasty cut in his arm, but it didn't sever any tendons or ligaments so he will be well soon. Our engineer is the only one in a serious condition. and is not expected to live. He has not regained consciousness, but he is alive. He has a brain and head and eye injury. Our assistant engineer-waist gunner lost three toes, his right eye, and was injured in his side. He is taking it like a man and really deserves a lot of credit. With these injuries, he put out a fire in the waist and was bandaging himself up when someone reached him. The tail gunner was blown about fifteen feet out of his turret toward the front of the ship, but was uninjured. The lower ball gunner was hit in his shoulders and leg and they worked about two hours before they got him out and could only raise the turret about half way up. But it didn't interfere with the landing. Our radio operator bailed out and I think, made it all right. Vaughan was hit in the arm and the nose gunner was uninjured. The navigator was only scratched and the pilot (a boy from Amarillo) and myself were not touched.

"We were hit by fighters and they knocked out the rudders, left elevator, all the trim tabs, all radio sets, the hydraulic system, the A-5 pilot, and literally shot the rear of the ship to shreds. The top turret was sheared

completely off and the tail and lower ball turrets were shattered. The left rudder and horizontal stabilizer were without fabric, as well as the left elevator. The ones who looked at the ship said it was the worst shot up ship they had ever seen and it was a miracle we got back. Some say there were more than 1000 holes in it, but I hardly think there were more than 800 or 900, counting the small ones. The engines were untouched, though one propeller had five holes in it. The 20 mm. cannon did the most damage, though they had .30 caliber holes also. We had a large leak in our gas tanks and the fumes were still strong even after opening the bomb bay doors. By the grace of God we didn't explode and made it back. Our gas registered zero before we hit the coast, but we never ran out. The rudders wouldn't budge, so I had to side-slip the plane all the way back to keep on course. The co-pilot really deserves a lot of credit, for both the engineers were shot and he had to run all over the ship checking it and helping doctor the wounded. He cranked down the landing gear, which did not lock until we banked the ship, and kicked down the nose gear and finally pumped down the flaps, which was a life saver. I was in doubt about the flaps coming down.

"We had no radio contact but the runway was clear, with the exception of a B-17 waiting to take off. We missed him all right, and the landing was good. I was dreading the landing as all the controls we had were the ailerons and one elevator. The rudders were out and we had no brakes, so I had to give it left throttle one to keep from angling off into some parked planes. We couldn't ground loop it without rudder or brakes, so there was nothing to do but go straight ahead. We crossed the road, went over a rock wall and into an orchard, but the only damage was a small spot on the tip of the wing that hit a tree. It was really smooth and did not jar a bit, but we had lost most of our speed by then.

"We landed at an alternate airport, where they had hospital facilities, and the ambulance was there in no time. I think they did a swell job, as we had no radio to let them know ahead of time, I was afraid to shoot flares because of the gas leaks. Everyone said it was a swell landing and they couldn't understand how it

flew in that condition, much less land, I would never have attempted a landing if everyone had been all right and could have bailed out. But we had four seriously wounded men and. had popped all the 'chutes to keep them warm. All the 'chutes in the rear but one were full of holes, anyway. We are back, and I think pretty lucky under the circumstances, though of course I hate it about the injured. This was my fifty-first and last mission.

"It probably will be a month or so before I get to come home, but don't worry about me anymore.

"The next day -

"I went to our engineer's funeral yesterday. He died without regaining consciousness and I guess he is better off, for he had fragments in the brain, one side was paralyzed, and he would have been blind in both eyes, The cemetery was really a nice one and so clean, and bordered on all sides by olive trees.

"The rest of the boys are doing fine and are in good spirits. It makes you feel awfully little when they look up and start thanking you for bringing them back. The ball gunner, one of the new men, shook my hand and said, "Thanks for everything, when we started to leave." His crew went down the next day, so I guess he was pretty lucky even if he got hurt with us.

"I got some pictures of the plane, but it doesn't show up the damage very well. There were really more than 800 holes in it and it's hard to see why everyone in the rear wasn't killed. God was really with us!

"Write when you have time. Your letters have made it seem like I've only been over here about a month, and it's hard to realize that I'm through flying. Seems like I ought to be just now starting. The missions still seem like a dream and so unreal, when actually I was over Ploesti five times and the Vienna area six times. These were our two roughest regular targets, although we had quite a few scattering ones."

Lt. Lewis graduated from Athens High School in 1935 and was employed by the L. R. Barron Company before entering the service in March of 1942. He attended cadet schools and was graduated as a pilot and awarded his wings and commission in June, 1943.