

# 31 Trips to Hell and Back

A B-24 Ball Turret Gunners View of the Air War in Europe

November 6, 1944 to April 25, 1945

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The following is a transcript of a 'Mission by Mission Diary' as was kept by **John Zahuranicik**. John served as a Ball Turret Gunner on '**Ralph D. Hendrickson's Crew**' with the 781<sup>st</sup> Bomb Squadron

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John Zahuranicik enjoying his retirement in Rocky River, Ohio  
(I bet he couldn't fit in that ball turret now - let alone spend 8 to 10 hours at a crack in it)



**Ralph D. Hendrickson Crew, L to R**

**Back** - Raymond R. Preszler, Bombardier; Allan L. Arveson, Navigator; Harry Yaroshuk, Co-Pilot; Ralph D. Hendrickson, Pilot.

**Front** - Eugene M. Young, Tail Gunner; John J. Zahurancik, Ball Gunner; John Wroblewski, Nose Gunner; Kenneth T. Pulham, R/O; Dominic Zinobile, Engr.; Aaron Wolfson, Top Gunner.

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## Mission 1

Target - **VIENNA AUSTRIA (ordnance plant)** 1 sortie 1 mission

Date - **November 6, 1944**

Bomb load - 8 RDX - 500#

Flying Yellow "R" 24,000 feet. "2 engines out over Vienna." No. 4 feathered before target. Left formation. No. 2 turbo out over target. Formation keeps passing by. Cannot even keep up with B-17s. Waist & Nose guns, ammo & flak suits dumped to lighten load. Ship unable to maintain altitude. Crossed 15,000 alps at 18,500. Gas low -35°. 0800 –1600. Yellow "R".

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#### Mission 2

Target - **MUNICH, GERMANY (Marshalling yards)** 1 sortie 2 missions

Date – **November 16, 1944**

Bomb load - 6-RDX 500# Boobies

26,000 feet. Spare ship. Fly any position. Heavy overcast over target. Can't see much. Blue "L" just ahead gets direct hit by flak. No cutes. Flak heavy and accurate at 26,000. Blue "K" drops back with No.4 engine feathered. Drop bombs. Scatter back. Join red form. Over Venice, Alps beautiful. Flak holes in tail, martin & above navigator's head. No one hit. -40° 0710-1447 Yellow "G".

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#### Mission 3

Target - **Linz, Austria (oil dumps)** 1 sortie 2 missions

Date – **November 19, 1944**

Bomb load - 6 RDX 500#

Easy. 24,000 feet. Heavy overcast over everything except target. Flak heavy but inaccurate. White "K" drops back with No.1 feathered. White "O" E.R. engine out. Nice view of target, and got hits on target, oil dumps. Almost had 17s piggy back on return to base. Capt. Blankenship is a good pilot. No flak holes in ship. -26° 0715-1436 Yellow "G".

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#### Mission 4

Target - **MUNICH, GERMANY (Communication lines)** 1 sortie 2 missions

Date – **November 22, 1944**

Bomb load - 6 RDX 500

Flying Yellow "R". Able 8. 28,000 feet. Heavy overcast over route & target. Bombed by PFF. Above flak about 4000 flak was at briefed altitude. Unable to open bomb bay doors so Ray drops them through. Most of formation brought bombs & dumped in Adriatic. Passed out when oxygen hose is disconnected without me noticing it. Ken brought me to with oxygen. Wallet & \$85 stolen --7 degrees 7:05 – 2:36 Yellow "R"

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#### Mission 5

Target - **VIENNA Austria (South ordnance plant)** 1 sortie 2 missions

Date – **December 11, 1944**

Bomb load - 10 Incendiarie Clusters

Flying Yellow "H" dog 3. 23,000 feet. Weather gloomy, visibility 10 miles. Flak heavy as hell. Yellow "O" gets controls shot away then makes vertical climb, rolls over & noses down toward ground. They say 10 chutes got out, didn't see any. Flak hits No.4 oil line, No.4 feathered just off target, 1 & 2 smoked all the way, 3 & 4 threw gas on way up, 1 & 2 oil on way up. -37° 0840 – 1545. Smith, pilot. Yellow "H"

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#### Mission 6

Target – **AMSTETTEN, AUSTRIA (Marshalling yards)** 1 sortie 2 missions

Date – **December 15, 1944**

Bomb load - 6 500# GP & 2 500# Boobies

Flying Yellow "D" Able 5. 20,000 feet. Just about made it off cause of heavy undercast which followed us all the way to target and back. Highest peaks of Alps stuck thru undercast. Above cast sky was clear ideal conditions for enemy fighter attack. No flak or fighters seen. Hope for more targets same like this one. 39° 0815 – 1440. Yellow "D"

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#### Mission 7

Target – **BLECHHAMMER, GERMANY (Oil Refinery)** 1 sortie 2 missions

Date – **December 18, 1944**

Bomb load - 8 500# RDX

Flying Yellow "G" Charlie 6 & 3. 24,000 feet. Heavy undercast all way to target, openings over Lake Balaton & slight opening over target. Flak heavy as hell. No. 1 Turbo hit, still pulled a little, hits in tail, rudder, astrodome shot away, just missed No. 3 fuel cell & trim tab on left wing, hole aside ball thru both sides, everyone OK. -30° 0735 – 1515 Yellow "G"

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**Mission 8**

Target - **AMSTETTEN, AUSTRIA (Marshalling yards)** 1 sortie 2 missions

Date – **December 28, 1944**

Bomb load - 36 100# GP 1 Sortie 2 Missions

Flying Y "B" Able 5 & 3 22,500 Clear over field, Alps covered solid in some places & heavy haze in others. Started out to bomb oil dumps just below Brux Czechslovakia, but lead bombardier F.O.'d so we came back to amstetten. Red "Y" lost one engine & had another start burning, made it back ok tho. No flak, sighted some after target about 5 miles to left. Beautiful escort fighter cover. 40 degrees 8:05 – 4:30 Y "B"

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**Mission 9**

Target - **BALZANO, ITALY (Marshalling yards)** 1 sortie 2 missions

Date – **January 4, 1945**

Bomb load - 8 500# GP

Flying Yellow "P" Dog 4. 24,000 feet. Trip uneventful until hitting target which was in the Alps. Target was along Brenner pass route. Flak plenty Ralph hit in eye with plexiglass, just slight, ok. R "H" had big hole in waist no one hit. Dam good fighter coverage above and below. Multi bouno. 40° 0835 – 1530 Yellow "P"

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**Mission 10**

Target – **REGENSBURG, GERMANY (Oil storage yards)** 1 sortie 2 missions

Date – **February 5, 1945**

Bomb load - 16 250# GP

Flying Yellow "J" Able 5. 23,500 feet. Heavy undercast all the way, just like layers of cotton, glad to see it. Saw very little flak, seemed to burst at box ahead, stop for us, then hit box behind. Couldn't drop bombs linkage broken on toggle. Bombs had to be kicked out by Bombardier. Nice run. -35° 0815 – 1600 Yellow "J"

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**Mission 11**

Target – **VIENNA, AUSTRIA (South Ordnance)** 1 Sortie 2 Missions

Date – **February 8, 1945**

Bomb load - 8 500# G.P.

Flying Yellow "G" Dog 3. 25,000. Overcast over most of the route, few breaks along the way, expected to see clean target. Target had overcast with few open spaces, flak was light, expected to see kitchen sink. Missed us. Hit prop wash almost all the way back. Navigator almost passed out for lack of oxygen. 34° 0815 – 1515. Yellow "G"

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**Mission 12**

Target – **VIENNA AUSTRIA (South goods depot)** 1 Sortie 2 Missions

Date – **February 13, 1945**

Bomb load - 8 500# G.P.

Flying Yellow "G" Dog 5. 24,500 feet. Overcast over most of the way expected to have a PFF run. Target clear as a bell. Overcast opened up couple miles before target. Flak heavy as hell, Pappy kept sliding left, flak followed to our right. Missed us, not one flak hole in "Flak magnet". 33° 0840 – 1515 Yellow "G"

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**Mission 13**

Target – **WEINER NEUSTADT, AUSTRIA (M/V and communications)** 1 Sortie 2 Missions

Date – **February 15, 1945**

Bomb load - 8 500# GP

Flying Yellow "G" Baker 3. 22,500 feet. Overcast over field most of route clear with few clouds. Target was supposed to be hit visual, finally hit PFF. Bombardier screwed up. Bombs all over the place. Didn't see any flak, buono. No. 4 turbo was out for a while just before IP. No flak holes. 32° 0905 – 1530 Yellow "G"

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#### Mission 14

Target – **POLA, ITALY (Oil storage)** 1 Sortie 1 Mission

Date – **February 17, 1945**

Bomb load - 8 500# G.P.

Flying Yellow "G" Charlie 4. 20,700 feet. Short run. Field socked in waited till 12:00 for takeoff. Adriatic clear, Yugo had thin layers of clouds till IP. Clear target, flak was multi-close. Flak burst everywhere. Flak magnet escaped with only one scratch close to left front bomb bay door. No one hit. 28° 12:00 – 1630 Yellow "G"

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#### Mission 15

Target – **WEILHEIM, GERMANY (Marshalling Yards)** 1 sortie 1 mission

Date – February 22, 1945

Bomb load - 8 500# G.P.

Flying Blue "H" Charlie 5. 13,000 feet. Supposed to be visual run over Alps. We hit one helluva big front and couldn't get through. Ralph pulls 360 over alps, leaving formation. Lost formation in heavy clouds & vapor trails. Followed another in to field. Brought bombs back to field. 43° at 25,000 feet. 0815 – 1500 Blue "H". No. 15 2-22-45 BIG DEAL. Clarion operation. Every available aircraft to be sent into the blue to disrupt communications throughout Germany

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#### Mission 16

Target – **LINZ, AUSTRIA (Ordnance depot)** 1 Sortie 2 Missions

Date – **February 25, 1945**

Bomb load - 8 500# G.P.

Flying Red "P" Charlie 2. 24,500 feet. Field had 10/10 overcast. Didn't expect to get off. Route most of way up had light haze with few scattered clouds. Target was supposed to be hit PFF. Weather man F.U., dam thing clear as bell. Flak heavy to unbearable. Had only two small holes in wing. 33° 0800 – 1530 Red "P"

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#### Mission 17

Target – **VITIPENO, ITALY (Marshalling yards)** 1 Sortie 1 Mission

Date – **February 28, 1945**

Bomb load - 10 500# GP

Flying Yellow "A" Able 3. 21,200 feet. Missed this target so we hit one 5 miles north of it. Visual run, pulled couple 360's over Brenner Pass waiting for dog & baker box to return from Germany. No flak over target dam bombardiers missed target came back low on gas, No.2 coughing, bone dry. 22° 0950 – 1630 Yellow "A" Dom. Almost knocks out No.2 when trying to feed No. 1, which was low as hell.

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#### Mission 18

Target – **VIENNA, AUSTRIA (Floresdorf oil refinery)** 1 Sortie 2 Missions

Date – **March 12, 1945**

Bomb load - 8 500# GP

Flying Yellow "V" Easy 4. 24,000 feet. Flying "V" on its first mission, dam good ship. Heavy overcast over route except for a few holes most of them being over the Alps. Bombed PFF. Flak was heavy but very inaccurate. Returned low on gas, flew too long at altitude used too dam much. No flak holes. 26° 0910 – 1630 Yellow "V"

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#### Mission 19

Target – **REGENSBURG, GERMANY (Marshalling yard)** 1 Sortie 2 Missions

Date – **March 13, 1945**

Bomb load - 8 500# GP

Flying Yellow "N" Charlie 7. 23,500 feet. Heavy overcast over most of route, saw little flak while scepting Villach. Target was supposed to be hit visual but target was covered 10/10. Saw heavy black smoke come up thru overcast, good hits. Had trouble with No. 3, kept losing oil all the way. 25° 0905 – 1615 Yellow "N" Flew panther ship so we had panther operator, Kenny flew with another crew.

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#### Mission 20

Target – **MUHZODORF, GERMANY (Marshalling yard)** 1 Sortie 2 Missions

Date – **March 19, 1945**

Bomb load - 5 1000# GP

Flying Yellow "P" Charlie 3. 19,100 feet. Flew in Red Force, clear route most of way, few scattered clouds, mostly over the Alps. Bombed M/Y visually, NO FLAK, multi bono fire & smoke all over the place, scrambled hell out of target. Saw caps of oil & gas burst into flame. Panther ship with operator. 28° 0830 – 1510 Yellow "P" Sperry Ball on way back got locked. Couldn't get out. Hydraulics were out. Manual crank clutch wouldn't engage. Ken & Don got me out, by disengaging clutch from the outside.

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#### Mission 21

Target – **VIENNA, AUSTRIA (Marshalling yards)** 1 Sortie 2 Missions

Date – **March 22, 1945**

Bomb load - 40 – 100# GP

Flying Yellow "Q" Dog 2. 24,400 feet. Route all way up 3/10 to 4/10 low clouds, target same, bombed visually, scrambled hell out of target. Flak heavy & very accurate. They picked off Able 1 & Easy 1 before bombs away. Y "X" burned No. 3 engine & blew off right wing. 7 cutes got out. Got out ok, not a scratch on ship. 38° 0815 – 1510 Yellow "Q"

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#### Mission 22

Target – **PRAGUE CZECHOSLOAKIA (Vletnany, Airdrome)** 1 Sortie 2 Missions

Date – **March 25, 1945**

Bomb load - 216 20# Frags.

Flying Yellow "C" Baker 2. 22,000 feet. Route clear all the way up. Expected fighters. Stuck our heads in lion's mouth expected it to snap but didn't. Saw two 109s on the way back, too far off to do any good. Hit target visually. Had some dam good hits in M.P.I. Target was just outside Prague, Czechoslovakia. It was smoke covered, screening and oil smoke from oil storage hit today. 25° 0810 – 1600 Yellow "C"

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#### Mission 23

Target – **VILLACH, AUSTRIA (marshalling yards)** 1 Sortie 1 Mission

Date – **March 31, 1945**

Bomb load - 18 250# GP

Flying Yellow "R" Charlie 4. 24,300 feet. Heavy undercast over most of route. At head of Adriatic heavy front, flew through it for almost an hour. Could just about make out box up ahead. Bombed PFF. Hope we hit something. Didn't see even one burst of flak. Buono flew through front on return trip. 36° 0810 – 1400 Yellow "R"

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#### Mission 24

Target – **GRAZ, YUGOSLAVIA (Marshalling yard)** 1 Sortie 1 Mission

Date – **APRIL 2, 1945**

Bomb load - 10 500# G.P.

Flying Yellow "N" Baker 6 & 4. 21,200 feet. Clear route all way up with slight haze over Alps. Target clear but partly smoke covered from groups hitting before us. Flak was moderate & inaccurate. No. 3 throwing oil. Made it ok though. Mission in support of Russians. 0830 – 1545 25° Yellow "N"

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#### Mission 25

Target – **VITIPENO, ITALY (Railroad bridge)** 1 Sortie 1 Mission

Date – **APRIL 7, 1945**

Bomb load - 5 1000# GP

Flying Yellow "G" Charlie 5. 24,500 feet. Supposed to hit target visually only. Route all way up about 7/10 cloud cover, target had 10/10 so we didn't drop bombs. Saw beautiful vapor trails. Y "N" feathered No. 3 "E.R." Saw flak from one gun at head of Adriatic. Burst or two came dam close, no damage 38° 1130 – 1710 Yellow "G"

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**Mission 26**

Target – **LUGO ITALY (Frontline supplies)** 1 Sortie 1 Mission

Date – **April 9, 1945**

Bomb load - 40 100# G.P.

Flying Yellow "N" Charlie 4. 20,200 feet. Route out pretty cloudy; target clear. Bombed supplies just 1 mile from our front lines. 8 minutes after bombs away British troops were to have started their push toward northern Italy. Saw 25s – 51s – 47s low level bomb and strafe the area after we bombed it. Multi smoke all over the place. 42° 1140 1645 Yellow "N"

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**Mission 27**

Target – **UDINE ITALY (Gdena Mezzocoronal Bridge)** 1 Sortie 1 Mission

Date – **April 12, 1945**

Bomb load - 10 500# GP

Flying Yellow "R" Able 5. 19,200 feet. Over base was clear, enroute over Adriatic we hit weather soup. Didn't expect to get through. Flew through soup so thick that wing man was out of sight for short period. Hit in smoke covered target area. Bridge no more. Saw only one flak burst. Multi buono. 20° 0805 - 1420 Yellow "R"

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**Mission 28**

Target - **BOLOGNA ITALY (troop & gun concentration)** 1 Sortie 1 Mission

Date - **April 16, 1945**

Bomb load - 18 250# GP

Flying Yellow "N" Charlie 4. 22,000 feet. Flew most of route over land, hit Mediterranean above Rome. Most of route up covered with light haze clouds thick as hell over immediate target cloud covered. Front lines are lined with our flak at 15,000. No flak, sweated out gas on return, only had couple hundred gallons left. 20° Yellow "N"

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**Mission 29**

Target – **ROSENHEIM, AUSTRIA (Marshalling yards)** 1 Sortie 2 Missions

Date - **APRIL 19, 1945**

Bomb load - 10 500# GP

Flying Yellow "E" Baker 2. 22,000 feet. Didn't expect to get off cause nose wheel collapsed, changed P.D.Q. Didn't hit primary target cause it was cloud covered so we went to Rosenheim. No flak, not one burst all day. Nice ship, nice day, nice run, want 6 more same. 21° 7:30 – 2:30 Yellow "E"

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**Mission 30**

Target – **PADUA, ITALY (Road bridge)** 1 Sortie 1 Mission

Date – **APRIL 23, 1945**

Bomb load - 5 1000# GP

Flying Yellow "A" Charlie 6. 21,200 feet. Started on Y "N" took off & had cowl flap blow from piece of piston. Hit weather over Yugoslavia - solid undercast. Hit bridge visually, but missed it, left & short. Very little flak, No. 3 and 4 throwing multi oil; feathered No. 4 on way back expected to have no. 3. feathered too, but didn't. 27° 0810 – 1500 Yellow "A"

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**Mission 31**

Target – **LINZ AUSTRIA (Marshalling yards)** 1 Sortie 2 Missions

Date – **APRIL 25 1945**

Bomb load - 10 500# G.P.

Flying Yellow "V" Baker 6. 23,300 feet. Dam near filed my britches when I heard target. Clear as hell too. Clear all way to target. Had heavy smoke screen over target. Flak thick as hell though sure as hell we'd get scragged. Harry sure coached us through O.K. Just had two holes one in engine cowl & one in leading edge. 26° 0845 – 1540 Yellow "V" Wouldn't be here if Harry hadn't coached us. He yells "up, up". Pappy racks her up couple hundred feet and then 3 bursts bust right under us. On rally Pappy stood her up on her ear. Hot pups. Watched one ship get hit; fire in bomb bay but kept level flight long time. Crew bailed out, ship crashed in mountains.

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**Going Home 23 May 1945**

**Left Pantanella, Italy – 0845 Circled field one last time landed at Manduria May 23, 1945 at 1010.**

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**24 May 1945**

Had little excitement today when Yellow "N" jumped chocks and smashed into crew stand knocking hell out of it with prop. 3&4 props bent engineer got front teeth knocked out with flying pipe. We had 6-foot piece of pipe land in back of ship; we were 100 yards away. Yellow "N" looked like she just returned from "flak alley." The jinx does it again.

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