

*From a Sun-Herald article published October 8, 2006.*

The date: August 20, 1944. The target: the German's synthetic rubber plant at Oswiecim, Poland.

Tech Sgt. Ken Schuck, was a 22-year-old flight engineer aboard one of the 140 B-17, Flying Fortresses, based at Lucera, Italy. It was escorted by 50, P-51 Mustang fighters that day. His unit: the 301st Bomb Group, 352nd Squadron, 15th Air Force.

"It was our fifth mission, the one to Oswiecim, when we had our oxygen shot out by flak (from the German's 88-mm anti-aircraft guns) while we were over the target. We also lost two of our engines from flak and had to drop out of formation."

This was the flight he remembered best of the 50 combat missions he flew a lifetime ago. It was his worst combat mission.

The temperature inside the bomber was approaching 60 degrees below zero in formation. The B-17 was forced to drop more than 20,000 feet in altitude in a hurry so the crew could breathe without oxygen. It also made it unbearable because their heated flight suits were not working.

Deep inside German-occupied Poland, Schuck and his crew were a long shot to make it back to base safely. An unescorted allied bomber out of formation was red meat for the German Messerschmitt-109 and FockeWulf 190 fighters that preyed on disabled bombers.

"Our hydraulic system was also knocked out in addition to the lack of an electrical system," Schuck recalled. "Because we had no hydraulics, our wheels dropped down. I had to crank them back up by hand during our return home."

Sgt. Carl Morris, the radio operator aboard the bomber, recalls, "We were flying at 28,000 feet when our oxygen was shot out. We dropped bombs over the target, left the formations and returned alone at 8,000 feet. We were ready to go on the deck in case of attack from enemy fighters.

I remember over Hungary seeing people in the fields shaking their fists at us. Over the Adriatic Sea we dumped everything we could get loose in the bomber. Guns, ammo, even the ball turret we tried to drop over the side but lacked the tools," he said. "We had enough fuel to fill a Zippo lighter when our wheels touched down. We landed at a Polish Royal Air Force fighter base about 25 miles behind the front lines near Ancona, Italy," Morris wrote after the war.

Another big mission for Schuck and his B-17 crew was the one they made to Berlin on March 24, 1944.

"It was our longest mission of the war, nine hours and 45 minutes," he said.

Reports note that 148 Flying Fortress from the 5th Bomb Wing destroyed a tank factory in Berlin with 357 tons of bombs. Their bombers were escorted by 289 fighter planes.

On this mission they saw more Messerschmitt-262 German jet fighters than in any other bombing run during the war. The jets attacked the allied bombers and seven were shot down by American P-51 fighters.

The bombers flamed six of the German jets and two piston-powered Luftwaffe fighters during this raid. They were the last German planes shot down by the 15th Air Force's B-17s during the war.

American forces lost nine Fortresses and five P-51s on that mission.

Schuck flew his last bombing mission April 9, 1945. A month later, on May 8, 1945, Germany surrendered to allied forces and V-E Day - Victory in Europe - was declared.

Looking at his mission log more than 60 years later, the 83-year-old B-17 engineer said, "We were to bomb a troop concentration near Imola in northern Italy, it was a pretty uneventful flight."

By late May, Schuck had taken a troop ship from Le Havre, France and arrived in New York harbor in late May 1945. By then all the big V-E Day celebrations were over. He was just another American soldier coming home, one of more than 15 million who survived the war.

There was no homecoming celebration for Schuck. He simply reported to Fort Dix, N.J. and was discharged from the U.S. Army Air Force. Like millions of other guys who served in WWII he took the G.I. Bill, went to college and after graduation became a station manager for what would eventually become Northwest Airlines.

In 1981, after 34 years with Northwest and its predecessors, Schuck retired. At the time he was in charge of Northwest Airlines' operations along Florida's east coast that included Fort Lauderdale, West Palm and Miami.

He moved to Port Charlotte and has lived in the Riverwood development for the past four years.