

THE LUFTWAFFE STRAFFING ATTACK ON LEISTON AIRFIELD

By Merle Olmsted

The July, 1984 issue of the newsletter contained a request for information and memories on the "big" air raid on Leiston Airfield. This request brought forth considerable comment, and we can now consolidate this material, and give a much clearer picture of what happened that night.

The first area of uncertainty was the date. Although initially we had been unable to find mention of it in official papers, through the diligence of Joe DeShay, the date was found in a copy of 357th Group records from Olmsted's files, for June, 1944. Here it noted, without details, that the raid had taken place on 7 June. Former 357th pilot, Earle Taylor was able to confirm this. He recalls: "I, along with four other pilots, arrived at 66th Fighter Wing Hdqrs, about 9 AM on D-Day morning, June 6th, 1944, just as the 78th Ftr Grp was returning from their 2nd mission of the day. After lunch our orders were cut and the 5 new pilots were assigned to the 357th at Leiston. We arrived at 357th Grp Hdqrs late that afternoon and were billeted in transit officers quarters for the night. Late that night is when the strafing attack on the mess hall occurred. I don't know the exact time of the attack."

Jim Frary, of the 362nd Sqdn, seems to be one of the few to have made any written comments at the time, and this extract is from his diary entry for 8 June: "I was standing outside the orderly room (he was on CQ that night), and there was a red alert on at the time. I heard the plane coming in low from the south. I didn't think about it being German until he reached the edge of the field and I could see him silhouetted against the sky. Just as a precaution, I crouched down in front of the door. About then our AA guns started to fire. Pink tracers were going all around the enemy ship. Just as he got almost out of my range of vision he banked around to the east and cut across the communal site. It was then that he cut loose with his guns, putting three holes in the mess hall and plowing up the baseball field with his .50 and 20 mm guns. The AA outfit fired about 300 rounds of .50 and 8 rounds of 40 mm at him as he crossed the field. They apparently hit him as a gas cap and some scraps of metal were found later.

The time was almost surely around midnight. This is easily seen by the fact that the main mess hall was crowded with men having midnight chow. Apparently a door was left open and the light from this attracted the German pilot's attention. He fired one burst in the direction of the mess hall, and Emery Gael's letter is the best recollection of what happened there: "I was in the mess hall that night, sitting on a bench with Arnicke, having a snack. We heard the plane coming and then a big boom like a cannon, it blew a big hole just below the roof. As all of us hit the deck the benches and tables flew all over and we were hollering at the cooks to shut off the lights, which they did. Lying across my legs was a heavy weight, I tho't

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"it was Karnichke and I kept whispering his name thinking he was hurt. After a bit the lights went on and laying across my legs was a bench. I had a cut on my leg, but that was extent of the injuries."

Out on the flight line, there were small dramas being enacted also. Claude Allen, of the 363rd Sqdn remembers: "At approximately midnight I had been to the mess hall and then to our squadron area to pick up mail and some extra blankets as several of us in "A" flight usually slept out on the line near the ships. I was driving the bomb service truck and a Sgt Van Tine (may be mis-spelled) was riding with me. While returning to the line, we stopped at the radio shack just off the perimeter track and were informed that an alert had been in effect but as all seemed to be clear, I pulled back on the perimeter and headed toward "A" flight area. Suddenly we heard this loud drone overhead which sounded like an aircraft making a sharp turn, coming in from the direction of Leiston and lights started flashing from the aircraft's guns. This is when I went out of the left side of the truck, my partner out the right side. About the time we were flat on the ground the Ack Ack opened up. My partner yelled out "Allen, where are you?" I was on the inside of the perimeter and I was out in the open. He yelled "Come over here". He was where there were accouple of ruts where a plane or truck had run off into the soft dirt. They were as welcomed as slit trenches. When all was clear we found the truck, which had gone only a short distance before stopping, but did not see any damage to the truck. We thought the Kraut had spotted and attack us. (I did not know about the mess hall until later but the Kraut had headed in that direction). We continued on to "A" flight area and were told that a certain Sgt had been hit and was being taken to first aid. The story was out the next day that several fellows were out in the open when the attack began and they dived for cover. This sergeant's carbine was found where he had jammed it into the mud, discharging it, and the gun's back pressure had caused the minor damage to his hand. The Sgt suffered a great deal of ribbing about not getting the purple heart. He is now deceased."

Ken Sylvester, of the 363rd Sqdn, was also on the line that night: "Three or four of us were out on the line on the other side of the field working on one of the aircraft. We had a 2½ ton truck parked alongside the revetment. When we heard the aircraft, we knew it was a jerry as their engines sounded different, like they were running rough. It seemed to me he headed on an angle from where we were diagonally across the field. We could see the tracers from his guns as he went over. We had a ring mounted .50 machine gun on the roof of the truck and as I remember, no one went near it. We all dove under the truck. He made that one pass and got out of there."

Over on the other side of the field, in the 364th Sqdn area, Joe DeShay tells us what happened: "I was out at the flight line working on an aircraft at that hour of the night. I heard the burst of gunfire, and it seemed as though flares lit up the area. I knelt down on one knee near a hard spot, with my Thompson sub-machine gun across my other knees. The enemy aircraft zoomed over me from my blind (back) side and as I looked upward I could see the flame from his exhaust stacks of his engine, and he was mighty low."