

The Saga of the Extra Joker

George Tudor, Pilot—725th Sqdn

Our crew had flown EXTRA JOKER on all of our missions until this one. The plane had been named by our flight engineer while on a stop-over in Marrakech, Morocco. While doing his preflight before we flew on to Tunis, he found a playing card under the plane. It was the extra Joker card. After takeoff he came to the cockpit and told me about finding the card and suggested the name EXTRA JOKER for our plane. We all agreed. I still have the card he found.

EXTRA JOKER was equipped with a Sperry bombsight. Our bombardier, Bob Donovan, told me the Sperry had inadequate "trail or rate" setting capability for dropping the frag bombs we were carrying that day. It so happened a brand new plane was parked on the revetment next to EXTRA JOKER. It had a Norden bombsight which was just what we needed since we were leading our squadron. Lt. R. A. Whiting and crew were scheduled to fly the new plane. We swapped planes and they flew EXTRA JOKER as deputy lead alongside of us.

We had the Group Photographer S/Sgt. Leo Stoutsenberger with us. On the way to the target our waist gunners asked him to take some pictures of our airplane for us. He had just gotten set up for this when the attack by the Germans started. This is how he happened to get these remarkable pictures of the B-24 being destroyed.

The Germans had a diversionary plan of their own for us. I never learned whether our plan worked, but theirs sure did. Our escort, which consisted of 96 P-51s, some for penetration, some for withdrawal, plus 48 P-38s for en route protection. Shortly before reaching the target area a few ME-109s showed up, got the attention of our escort, then dove for the deck with every one of our escort in hot pursuit. Now the main attack came which we estimated at about 75 FW-190s coming at us in waves of 10 to 15. Their 20mm cannon shells hitting us long before they came in range of our 50 caliber bullets. They swept under our formation before breaking off to the right or left. The commander of our group called frantically (his words) for our escort, to no avail. Their being decoyed off was a display of extremely poor judgement which cost us dearly in lives and planes.

The gunners on our plane and on the other planes gave a good accounting of themselves. Our top turret, waist, and tail turret gunners got first crack at the 190s, then the ball turret and finally the nose turret gunner. Our gunners were credited with 6 positive kills and 2 probables. I can still hear the ball turret gunner talking to the nose turret on the intercom—"Moreau, another one coming under us." Almost immediately Moreau's guns started firing and in seconds I'd see a FW in front of us starting to break up.

The main attack continued viciously for several minutes. Both sides were taking

enormous punishment. One of my most vivid recollections is of watching bodies ejecting from planes ahead of us. They seemed to be coming right at us. This was an illusion, it was us flying straight at them. I was sure we were going to plow right into several. Luckily, we didn't. We saw four or five bail out of a plane right in front of us although we couldn't see any evidence of damage to the plane. In fact, the plane flew right on.

We watched EXTRA JOKER go down. There were no chutes. The ball turret guns moved to the straight down position, possibly so the gunner could get out of the turret. The cannon shell holes all over the fuselage indicated probable catastrophic damage inside the plane both to the crew and to vital components such as control cables. The plane went into a tight spin becoming a mass of flames before we lost sight of it.

We were the only plane from our squadron to get back to base that day. This was due to some luck, of course, but more importantly we got home because the gunners on our crew did such a remarkable job of defending us. Too many times they don't get the credit that's due them.

Fortunately, that evening we had the usual movie with the film breaking at least a dozen times plus several in the crowd hollering "FOCUS" more times than that. All of which helped erase the memory of the day's activity where some of us had been to a sort of hell and back.