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Richard Allison, *Operation Thunderclap and the Black March: Two World War II Stories from the Unstoppable 91st Bomb Group*. Philadelphia: Casemate, 2014. Pp. 240. ISBN 978-1-61200-265-1.

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In his first published work, retired attorney and Naval Reserve captain Richard Allison strives to weave together the stories of two airmen from the famed 91st Bomb Group: a copilot who completed his missions requirement and a gunner shot down during his first flight against Germany. As World War II veterans pass away (the youngest are now in their late eighties), there is an urgent need to record their individual experiences. The wartime exploits of Lt. Addison Bartush and Sgt. Paul Lynch should make for compelling reading, but Allison has produced a poorly written, ill-organized account that too often reads like the transcript of a legal deposition. Worse yet, he has attempted to spin the veterans' stories to fit his own vision of their experiences and their feelings about them.

The 91st Bomb Group arrived in England in August 1942 and launched its first bombing raid in November. One of its aircraft, the *Memphis Belle*, is commonly credited as the first American bomber to complete a tour of twenty-five combat missions¹ and was the subject of a feature film.² It had flown with the 324th Bomb Squadron, to which Bartush and Lynch were later assigned.

Although the book's two subjects were originally members of the same crew, their paths diverged because the 8th Air Force typically replaced a new aircraft commander with a seasoned combat pilot for the first few missions; the neophyte pilot then moved to the right seat, and the copilot was assigned to another veteran crew. On their first mission, Bartush's original crew, which he had trained with and grown to trust, was shot down. Three of the men were killed; the others, including Paul Lynch, were taken prisoner.

Bartush later went through a period of angst and self-doubt, a classic case of survivor's guilt, without the aid of the military, which, he said, generally ignored combat stress. As the author correctly notes, the Germans held captured Allied crewmen in Stalag Lufts (camps run by the Luftwaffe and not the SS). Viewed by their captors as elite warriors, part of the fraternity of the air, these prisoners were not generally mistreated or forced into labor battalions. Nonetheless, a class system prevailed: officers and enlisted men were imprisoned in different camps.

Lynch, a Staff Sergeant aerial gunner, went to Luft IV in Poland. When the Russian army in its drive west drew near the camp, the Germans ordered all of the several thousand POWs to march some five hundred miles into Germany in the dead of winter. The "Kriegies" (*Kriegsgefangen*) got little food, inadequate clothing in the extreme cold, and virtually no medical aid. Many were abandoned when they became too weak or ill to walk; survivors carried their fellow prisoners and shared what little food became available, but too often their efforts were not enough. Despite these hardships, Lynch came through the ordeal remarkably well and bore little animosity toward the camp guards and their commandant. Though Allison tells Lynch's compelling story rather matter-of-factly, he sometimes seems to goad him to change his views with leading questions, as in the following awkward exchange: "My question for you, Paul, is this: thinking back, did you harbor any resentment over how the Germans treated you while you were at Stalag Luft IV?" Lynch replies that, while he resented that German prisoners received much better treatment in American POW camps, he still believed his captors had tried to abide by the Geneva Convention (for the treatment of POWs). Allison writes, "Always the contrarian, I shot back: 'If Boston had been laid in ruins by the Luftwaffe, I suppose the German POWs at Fort Devers might have received different treatment, do you agree?'" (201).

1. In fact, the B-17 christened "Hell's Angels," of the 303rd Bomb Group, completed its twenty-fifth mission a week earlier.

2. *Memphis Belle* (1990), dir. Michael Caton-Jones.

This same rather adversarial approach infects his interactions with Addison Bartush. Operation Thunderclap was a joint British-American bombing attack in February 1945 on several major German cities, including the famous old medieval town of Dresden. For four days, hundreds of Allied bombers rained down tons of high explosive and incendiary ordnance, killing thousands of civilians in the resulting firestorms; the exact casualty figures will never be known. Bartush called the scene below his plane “the largest bonfire that I ever saw in my life” (139). The raids have stirred controversy among historians ever since. Some³ have condemned the strikes as barbaric and unnecessary, others⁴ stress that Nazi Germany inflicted far greater miseries on the world than those suffered by the inhabitants of its incinerated cities.

Few writers, however, fault the young men ordered to fly the bombers or believe they should feel personal guilt or suffer public disapprobation. But Allison takes a prosecutorial tone in asking Bartush about his response to the mission: “Did you not have a sense, when you returned that afternoon, that is, February 14, 1945, that what you witnessed was morally wrong?’ ‘I suppose that I didn’t realize that,’ Addison responded. He added: ‘We were in a war’” (144). Though he does write that the bomber crews were simply doing their job, his questions seem judgmental, even condemnatory. This constant intrusion of the author’s attitudes into the stories of Bartush and Lynch is the biggest drawback of the book.

At one point in Lynch’s story of escaping with three friends from the forced march into Germany, he states that they heard the rumble of Tiger tanks and saw four of them on a nearby road. Allison pointlessly elaborates that “The tanks passed close by but not so close that Paul could smell their exhaust fumes” (172). How far off one can smell the exhaust fumes of a tank is not indicated. At another point, the escapees were near a bombed-out Focke Wulf factory. Allison asks Lynch whether the Americans could have fashioned weapons from materials found in the abandoned plant. Lynch responds, “If we possessed anything that looked like a weapon, it might cause us to get immediately shot” (172–73).

In terms of scholarship, the author draws on too little primary source material. As valuable as the interviews with both veterans are, they were conducted, after all, nearly seven decades after the fact. Allison does quote a few letters exchanged during Bartush’s tour in England, but he relies too heavily on online, reader-edited encyclopedias and current magazine articles. And the occasional citations of mission reports are to websites and not the actual documents at the Air Force Historical Research Agency or other repositories.

Despite these serious and distracting faults, the book is to be valued for the interesting personal anecdotes of the two fliers and some perceptive discussions of division-level decisions that directly affected the lives of the flight crews. Bartush, for example, learned during his demanding cadet training that some routines and procedures were more important than others. The commander of the preflight school at Maxwell Field, Alabama, wrote a small booklet for aspiring pilots, in which he urged them to take it all seriously, but to retain a sense of humor. As a way to articulate their thoughts on any action, he suggested that they might subtly blur pronunciations of “serious” and “seri-ass” in such a way as to avoid being disciplined (23).

Allison relates the story of a mission against the Skoda Armament Plant in Pilsen very late in the war. To minimize the loss of civilian lives, leaflets were dropped and the BBC broadcast the target before the B-17s arrived, so that the Czech factory workers could seek shelter. This humane gesture may have cost the lives of American crewmen, since flak batteries were waiting for the bombers. Allison also notes that it was common practice for bombardiers in the lead aircraft to release their bombs when their Norden bombsights indicated they were over the objective; the following planes would then release their loads when they saw bombs tumbling from the planes in front of them. According to Allison, on the Pilsen mission, a bomber near the front of the aerial armada was jolted by anti-aircraft fire and accidentally released its bombs, causing the following bombers to drop theirs as well. Unaware of this, the mission leader ordered a second pass over the target. The other pilots simply refused to expose their crews to continued ground fire and turned

3. E.g., A.C. Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities: The History and Moral Legacy of the WWII Bombing of Civilians in Germany and Japan* (NY: Walker & Co., 2006).

4. E.g., Max Hastings, *Inferno: The World at War, 1939–1945* (NY: Knopf, 2011).

for home. The furious mission commander threatened courts-martial, but the incident occurred so close to the end of the war that the matter was eventually dropped (160-63).

In sum, *Operation Thunderclap and the Black March* is an ambitious and worthwhile book, but readers will have to tolerate its author's inquisitorial interview style to learn of the poignant and inspiring stories of two young American pilots of the Second World War.