

# **The “Memphis Belle”: One Came Home Stories of Those Left Behind**

**Lowell L. Getz**

Bassingbourn, East Anglia, England, home of the 91st Bomb Group (Heavy), 0830 hours Double British Summer Time, 19 May 1943. Briefing over, flight crews begin arriving at their stations for today’s raid on the submarine pens at Keil, Germany. The crewmen professionally go about the routine tasks of checking out their equipment in preparation for taking off. There is the accompanying stomach churning, bladder tightening anxiety and building dread as the crewmen try to suppress what lies ahead for them today. This is difficult to do. Casualty rates are exorbitant during these early months of flying combat missions over the continent. In mid 1943 every mission is a trial by fire. The expectation of returning to base is not high. Approximately one in three crewmen survive the 25-mission quota. Still, the 91st Group has not lost a plane to enemy action on the last two missions. Three missions ago, on the 14th of May, No. 481, “Hell’s Angels”, of the 322nd Squadron went down in the North Sea on her return from a mission to the same target as today. All ten of 1Lt William H. Broley’s crew perished.

Maj William Wyler, while not in any personal danger, likewise is apprehensive as he observes crews readying their aircraft for today’s mission. Maj Wyler and a group of photographers have been at Bassingbourn for the past few months filming air combat from which he will produce a documentary film describing the commitments and dedication of airmen of VIII Bomber Command as they participate in the air war over Europe. The documentary is to feature the first plane and crew in VIII Bomber Command to complete 25 missions. In addition to the film, the Army plans to send the crew and plane back to the States. There they will tour the country as a part of a publicity campaign for War Bond drives and support of the air war.

Maj Wyler originally had planned to focus on No. 070, “Invasion 2nd” of the 401st Squadron, along with Cpt Oscar D. O’Neill and his crew. Unfortunately, “Invasion 2nd” and Cpt O’Neill’s crew were shot down while flying to the Focke-Wulf plant at Bremen, Germany on 17 April. Maj Wyler then selected another plane and crew as the principals of his documentary. After considering planes and crews in the 91st Bomb Group who were approaching their 25th mission, Maj Wyler settled on No. 41-24485, “Memphis Belle” and the crew of Cpt Robert K. Morgan in the 324th Squadron. The cameramen flew more missions to film “Memphis Belle” and her crew in combat.

Two days ago, on a mission to Lorient, France, Cpt Morgan and his crew completed their personal quotas of 25 missions. The crew is now stood down from flying combat. But, “Memphis Belle” is one mission short of 25. Today she is on the mission list to complete her 25th and final mission. She will be flown by 1Lt Clayton L. Anderson’s crew. Much is riding on their successful completion of the mission. If “Memphis Belle” returns safely, Maj Wyler can wind up the final filming and return to Hollywood to edit the documentary. Cpt Morgan and his crew will fly “Memphis Belle” back to the States. If she does not return, Maj Wyler will have to select another plane and crew as “stars” for the documentary. And, additional combat filming will be required. This not only would delay completion of the project, but would subject Maj Wyler and his cameramen to additional danger. Already, one cameraman, Lt Harold J. Tannenbaum, has been lost in the air over Europe while working on the project.

Two missions are being flown from Bassingbourn today. Two squadrons, the 331st and 332nd, of the 94th Bomb Group have been stationed at Bassingbourn for training and flying combat missions since mid April. The Group's permanent airbase at Bury St. Edmunds is being put in order and awaiting arrival of the ground crews. The two other squadrons, 333rd and 410th, of the 94th Group are training with the 306th Bomb Group at Thurleigh. Today, the four 94th squadrons will take off from their separate fields and join up for a raid to the ship-building yards at Flensburg. Maj Ralph H. Saltsman, CO of the 331st Squadron, will lead the 94th formation, with the Group CO, Col John G. Moore, flying as his copilot.

The 91st ground crews have been doing double duty in servicing the 94th planes. Because of the busy schedule of putting up two missions, the air crews at Bassingbourn were awakened at 0245 hours and were at briefing at 0330. Both groups were briefed to depart at 0815 hours. All too typically, an inordinate amount of ground haze necessitates postponement of the mission. Take-off time is reset for 0900 hours and then delayed another hour. For awhile the crews think, as in similar situations, the missions will be scrubbed. Despite the lingering haze, no further delay or cancellation orders arrive at the hardstands. At 1000 hours coarse, wheezing coughs reverberate from dispersal points around the base as Wright Cyclone engines come to life. Puffs of blue smoke spurt rearward of the engines. The low-winged air craft begin rolling away from their hardstands, turning onto the taxiways to snake their way to the end of the runway in readiness for takeoff. The Lead aircraft pauses, its Hamilton Standard props forming shining iridescent pinwheels in the mid morning mist.

Two green flares streak upward from the balcony of the control tower. The first bomber, No. 970, "Connecticut Yankee", of the Lead 324th Squadron, surges forward as the brakes are released and begins lumbering down the long No. 25 runway. At her controls is Cpt Edward D. Gaitley, Jr., with Maj Haley W. Aycock, who is leading the Group today, sitting the copilot's seat. "Connecticut Yankee" struggles free of the runway at 1015 hours, followed at 30 second intervals by the other planes of the Group. Twenty-two 91st Group planes depart the airfield as the mission gets underway. Other planes in the 324<sup>th</sup> Squadron flying today include, No. 480, "The Bad Penny", flown by 1Lt Clyde E. DeBaun; No. 053, "Desperate Journey", 1Lt James M. Smith; No. 857 (No Name), 1Lt John H. Miller; No. 487, "Ritzy Blitz", 1Lt Charles W. Freschauf; No. 031, "Nitemare", 1Lt John S. Jackson; and, of course, No. 485, "Memphis Belle", with Lt Anderson.

The 322nd is sending up No. 483, "Spirit of Alcohol", 1Lt Edwin L. Baxley; No. 511, "Wheel 'N Deal", 1Lt John T. Hardin; No. 724, "Thunderbird", 1Lt William D. Beasley; No. 057, "Piccadilly Commando", 2Lt Paul D. Kahl; No. 712, "Heavyweight Annihilators No. 2", 1Lt Don C. Bader; No. 139, "Chief Sly II", Cpt Bruce D. Barton, with Col William M. Gross, the Strike Force commander, aboard.

From the 323rd Squadron are No. 787, "Billie K", Cpt George P. Birdsong, Jr; No. 524, "The Eagles Wrath", Cpt Charles R. Giaouque; No. 639, "The Careful Virgin", Cpt William E. Clancy; No. 399, "Man-O-War", 2Lt Charles A. Bennett; No. 559, "Stupntakit", 1Lt Charles H. Silvernail; No. 475, "Stric-Nine", 1Lt Norman Retchin.

The 401st puts up only three aircraft, No. 132, "Royal Flush!", 1Lt Marcell E. Fountain; No. 816, "Eager Beaver", 1Lt William H. Wheeler; No. 437, "Frank's Nightmare", 1Lt Donald H. Frank.

The 94th puts up 12 aircraft from Bassingbourn. Two abort back to base while forming up because of mechanical problems. Ten leave to join planes of the other two Squadrons leaving from Thurleigh. A total of twenty-four 94th bombers will form up with 11 aircraft from the 95th Bomb Group and 19 from the 96<sup>th</sup> Group to form the 4th BW for the attack on Flensburg.

By the time the 91st forms up, the haze has cleared. Cloud cover is less than 4/10. The Group has little trouble in making its rendezvous with the other Groups in the 1st Bomb Wing. For today's mission, the 101st Provisional Combat Wing (PBCW) is comprised of the 91st and 306th Groups, along

with a composite Group formed by one Squadron each from the newly deployed 351st Group and the 92nd and 3303rd Groups. The 102nd PBCW, with the 305th Group in front, leads the Strike Force. The 101st PBCW follows, with the 91st Group in the Lead.

As the Group forms up over England, "The Bad Penny", lives up to her reputation of being a "jinx ship" in respect to having unusually frequent "technical problems." The fuel pump to the No. 3 engine goes out while she is at 2,000 feet. "The Bad Penny" immediately returns to base. This leaves twenty 91st aircraft, with 201 men aboard, to accompany "Memphis Belle" and her ten crewmen on her last mission over the continent.

The Strike Force is not hindered by weather as it proceeds across the North Sea, over the Frisian Islands, and onto the enemy coast. By the time the Strike Force reaches the German border, the clouds have dispersed and do not exceed 4/10 cover. Much of the ground haze has also disappeared. The navigators easily pick out check points along the briefed route. The intercom on "Heavy Weight Annihilators No. 2" in the 322nd Squadron goes out completely at 1255 hours, just as she approaches the German coast at 20,000 feet. Lt Bader has no choice but to leave the formation and head back to Bassingbourn. Since they had penetrated the German fighter defense zone, the aircraft and crew are credited with a combat sortie.

Just after crossing over the continent, "Eagar Beaver" losses a supercharger. Lt Wheeler has to drop her down "on the deck" and return to Bassingbourn. On their way back they drop their bombs, with good hits, on an airfield in Holland. The command antennae on No. 437, "Franks Nightmare", breaks off as the aircraft starts over the continent. Unable to receive signals from the Group Leader, Lt Frank has no choice but to leave the formation and return home alone.

German anti-aircraft batteries open up on the 91st formation as it crosses the coast. This is followed by attacks from 50-75 enemy fighters. Several twin-engine German aircraft first attempt to bomb the formation from about 27,000 feet. Each plane drops three heavy bombs that exploded among the fortresses. None of the bombers is hit. Ju 88s then arrive on the scene. The enemy aircraft remain out of range of the .50 caliber guns of the B-17s as they fire cannon shells into the formation. Finally about 35-40 single-engine fighters, Me 109s and FW 190s, make runs on the bombers from head-on, breaking and coming around and attacking from the rear. As the Group turns on the IP to start the bomb run, four more Ju 88s drop bombs on the formation, again with no effect. A Ju 88 flying alongside and at the same altitude as the 91st formation directs flak fire from the IP, a lake 2 Mi NW of Sehestedt, to beyond the target.

Flak over the target is moderate to intense and very accurate. Flak ships anchored in the Kiel harbor add to the fire coming from batteries located around the target area. Additional problems are caused by our own forces. Some of the bombers in the 303rd High Group in the 102nd PBCW, flying ahead of and above the 91st, are loaded with 100 pound clusters of incendiary bombs. Many of these clusters break open as soon as they leave the planes. The 91st finds its flight path filled by falling incendiaries. It is only by skillful evasive action that none of the bombers is hit by incendiaries. Unfortunately, the evasive actions cause the 91st to miss its aiming point. The Lead bombardier, 1Lt John W. Joslin, Jr., has to do the best he can. He releases his bombs at 1330 hours and from 24,700 feet. They fall in the general vicinity of Kiel. None of the bombs fall on the target. The 91st is not alone in missing the target. Few of the other Groups hit their aiming points. Presence of a rather heavy smoke screen, which covered the target area 20 minutes before the first bomber arrived, contributes to ineffectiveness of the bombing. Additional smoke caused by bombs dropped by preceding Groups further obscures the target.

Fighter attacks resume after the target, continuing all along the route home. Once more twin engine aircraft bomb the Strike Force after it leaves the enemy coast. The Germans do not break off

their attacks until the bomber formation is well out over the North Sea. This is one of the most prolonged and vicious attacks the 91st has endured to date. Enemy aircraft attack some part of the Strike Force for an hour and ten minutes.

One 91st plane is lost on the mission, No. 483, "Spirit of Alcohol", of the 322nd Squadron. This is the fourth mission in a row Lt Baxley's crew has flown in the aircraft. Also aboard today is a British war correspondent, Ernest G. Lewis, reporting on the American air war. As the crews were loading this morning, Lewis first went aboard No. 724, "Thunderbird", looking for the ship on which he was scheduled to fly. The radio operator, T/Sgt Robert S. Lammers, invited him to go with them. Lewis declined and left to find his assigned plane, No. 483, "Spirit of Alcohol."

An engine of "Spirit of Alcohol" acted up during the flight to Kiel and she struggled to stay in formation. As the formation approached the target, the aircraft took flak hits causing damage to the plane and wounding the navigator, 1Lt James H. Fulmer, in the right hand. At about the same time, the tail gunner, S/Sgt Harrell H. Thompson, called over the intercom that German fighters were coming in on the tail and that his guns had jammed. At 1320 hours Me 109s sliced through the formation, hitting the No. 3 engine. With loss of the engine, "Spirit of Alcohol" fell out of the formation, aligning itself with a lower Group.

"Spirit of Alcohol" continued on to the IP with this Group and dropped her bombs. Shortly thereafter, more Me 109s came at the aircraft firing additional 20 mm cannon shells into the fuselage. The British correspondent was killed and the plane went out of control. Lt Baxley rang the bail-out bell, but the top turret gunner, T/Sgt Jarvis E. Hall, was the only crewman in the rear of the aircraft able to extricate himself safely from the falling plane. The body of the ball turret gunner, S/Sgt Eugene C. Trimble, was latter found washed ashore from the Kiel Fiord, indicating he may have gotten out before the plane plunged to the water. The body of the waist gunner, S/Sgt William A. Rathgerber, was never found.

Lt Baxley, Lt Fullmer and the copilot, 1Lt James E. Breeden, escaped the falling aircraft through the bomb bays. Lts Baxley and Breeden fell into the Kiel Fiord where they were picked up by a German harbor patrol boat a few minutes later. Lt Fullmer landed on land about half a mile north of Kiel, where he was captured immediately by civilians who turned him over to a German Infantry patrol. He sustained three broken ribs when he landed. The body of the toggler, T/Sgt Arthur L. Poston, Jr., was recovered from the Fiord. It is not clear if he bailed out and was killed or was unable to make it to the nose hatch before the plane went in. "Spirit of Alcohol" crashed into the Kiel Fiord at 1334 hours, exploding upon hitting the water.

The rest of the 91st aircraft made it home to Bassingbourn. Nos. 787, "Billie K", and 399, "Man-O-War", incurred serious flak damage. The remainder sustained only minor damage. The 94th Group was more successful in its attack on Flensburg. Weather conditions were good to the target. The Strike Force encountered only meagre, inaccurate flak along the flight route and over the target. Approximately 25 German fighters came at formation in an unorganized attack. None of the 94th Group bombers was lost. However, one crewman, 2Lt Charles B. Scott, was killed by enemy fire.

Thus ends the combat career of "Memphis Belle". Maj Wyler and his photographers excitedly congratulate Lt Anderson and his crew on bringing her home safely. Her ground crew chief, M/Sgt Joseph Giambrone, and others gather around "Memphis Belle" celebrating the historic moment and successful completion of Maj Wyler's "mission."

Maj Wyler later films Cpt Morgan and his crew to obtain additional film depicting the crew arriving at the "Belle" prior to departure on a mission. On the 13th of June "Memphis Belle" takes off on her "26th mission", to the United States, with Cpt Morgan and his crew. They arrive at National Airport in Washington, D.C., on 16 June where they are feted by members of Congress, the military and

other dignitaries. Then, it is on to Memphis, Tennessee for a three-day “home town” welcoming. Of course, she had never before been in her namesake town.

For the next three months “Memphis Belle” and her crew tour the country in support of the war effort and to stimulate sales of war bonds. Afterwards, the crew splits and the men go their separate ways. Cpt Morgan goes on to lead the first B-29 attack on Tokyo. “Memphis Belle” serves as a training aircraft in the States for the remainder of the war. On 2 July 1945 she is flown to Altus, Oklahoma to await being scrapped. On the 8th of March 1946, within weeks of being sold to be broken up and melted down, the Air Force loans her to the city of Memphis for “historical and educational purposes” for a fee of \$350. She is flown to Memphis on the 17th of July. In August 1977, the city of Memphis relinquishes claim to “Memphis Belle” so that she can be placed on loan by the Air Force to the “Memphis Belle” Memorial Association and put on public display. In mid-October 2005 she was sent to the National Museum of the United States Air Force at Wright-Patterson AFB in Dayton, Ohio. There she is being restored back to her original condition, after which she will be placed on permanent static display in the Museum.

But, what of the other 20 planes of the 91st Group that flew onto the continent with “Memphis Belle” on her way to Keil on 19 May 1943? All remained at Bassingbourn to continue the air war. Seventeen eventually were shot down or crashed while on a mission. Two were so badly battle-damaged, they were placed in salvage. The remaining aircraft simply wore out and was transferred to the Aphrodite program and exploded into bits and pieces in an unsuccessful attack on V-1, “Buzz Bomb”, launch sites.

What follows is the history of 20 B-17s and their crews of the 91st Bomb Group as they went about the deadly business of bombing targets on the continent.

[Note: At the time it had been assumed that the “Memphis Belle” and Cpt Morgan’s crew had been the first to complete their 25 missions. Years later, after the war was over, it was discovered that B-17 No. 41-24577, “Hell’s Angels” and Cpt Irl E. Baldwin’s crew of the 303rd Bomb Group had completed their 25th mission on 13 May. “Hell’s Angels” continued flying missions until she was returned to the States on 20 January 1944, after her 48th mission. The “Memphis Belle” was, however, the first to complete 25 missions and return, with her crew to the States.]

## **324<sup>th</sup> Squadron**

### **No. 031, “Nitemare”**

Following the 19 May mission, “Nitemare” was not sent out again until 10 July. There is nothing in the records to indicate why she did not fly in the interim. Sgt Roger H. McDermott, who flew as her ball turret gunner on the 19th remembered no damage to the aircraft that would require her to be down for so long. Neither did the debriefing report record any damage. Beginning the 10th, “Nitemare” flew four successive missions, 10th, 14th, 17th, and 24th of July, during which she incurred only minor damage.

Her next mission, on the 26th of July, was a different story. For this mission to Hamburg, 1Lt James W. Rendall Jr.’s crew was aboard. “Nitemare” was flying in the No. 2 position of the Lead Element of the Low Squadron. All went well until the Strike Force approached the target. As “Nitemare” went over the Elbe River, the tail gunner, S/Sgt Charles F. Murray, noticed German Me 109 fighters coming up at them. He warned the crew over the intercom as the fighters started into the

formation. None hit "Nitemare" on this pass. As the Group approached the target, flak became intense and the German fighters broke away.

Flak tore into "Nitemare", setting both the No. 1 and 4 engines afire and creating havoc within the plane. With the loss of power from the two outboard engines, "Nitemare" began falling behind the formation. Lt Rendall had the bombardier, 2Lt Robert G. Cadilek, jettison the bombs to reduce the weight. They then were able to catch up with the Squadron by the time it went over the target. Again "Nitemare" was hit by flak. This time she no longer could stay in position and fell away from the protection of the other bombers. Once out of the flak barrage, German fighters, three and four abreast, came in on "Nitemare", causing more damage to the aircraft. Lt Rendall ordered the crew to put on their chutes. While still at altitude, 26,000 feet, those crewmen who were able to do so, began bailing out. The right waist gunner, S/Sgt David V. Ramsey, disconnected his oxygen mask and headed for the waist door. He was on the verge of passing out from the lack of oxygen by the time he went out the door. The left waist gunner, S/Sgt Bryon L. Brunty, followed him out.

Sgt Murray, who had not heard Lt Rendall's bail-out order, saw chutes popping open behind the aircraft. He looked forward into the fuselage from his tail position and saw no one. Assuming it was time to go, he put on his chest chute and bailed out the tail hatch. When the chute popped open, two lugs pulled out of the harness, leaving Sgt Murray to descend supported by only the upper straps. He landed in a wooded area near Rotenberg and was captured immediately by German soldiers. When all who could do so had bailed out, Lt Rendall went down into the nose and dropped through the hatch.

Others in the plane were not so fortunate. The radio operator, T/Sgt John E. Monahan, either had been killed by fighter machine gun fire or so badly wounded he could not leave his position. The Germans found his badly burned body in the radio compartment. The ball turret gunner, S/Sgt Robert L. Oyler, was able to exit the aircraft, but his chute failed to open. He fell to his death from 26,000 feet. Both the navigator, 2Lt George M. Guy, and Lt Cadilek bailed out through the nose hatch and landed safely. However, they were seriously wounded by approaching ground troops while trying to escape. Both died soon afterwards in German hospitals, Lt Cadilek on the 4th of August of inflammation of the peritoneum and sepsis. Lt Guy died on the 12th of August from a wound infection and loss of blood. The remainder of the crew became prisoners of war.

"Nitemare" crashed near Nindorf, 10 miles southeast of Rotenburg, Germany.

### **No. 487, "Ritzy Blitz"**

"Ritzy Blitz" was up on the 21st of May for a mission to Wilhelmshaven. 1Lt John S. Jackson and his crew were with her as she flew Lead of the Second Element of the High Squadron. Heavy cloud cover was expected over the Channel. Under these conditions, the Group would have to fly a rather loose formation. Meteorology predicted, however, the cloud cover would open up at the IP permitting a good run into the target. The Group Lead, LTC William B. Reid, was briefed to make a slow 360 circle before the IP if the formation was too loose. This would allow the Group formation to tighten up before starting the bomb run.

The Group assembled and began the climb to altitude from 13,000 feet to 22,000 feet while moving over the North Sea. Weather was as predicted and the Group formation was not tight. About 5 miles from the German coast roughly 50 Me 109s came out to meet the Strike Force. These attacks caused no major damage to the 91st bombers. Just before the IP, about six minutes from the target, 200-250 German fighters, mainly FW 190s, but including a few Me 109s, charged into the bomber stream. Most attacks were by fighters coming through the formation in waves of 4-8 aircraft at a time.

The first wave of fighters went for the Lead ship of the 91st Group, No. 990, "Dame Satan" with Cpt William E. Clancy as first pilot and LTC Reid, the Group Leader, his copilot. There were two navigators aboard, Cpt Ralph W. Hausman, Group navigator, and 1Lt Harry Ackerman, Cpt Clancy's regular navigator.

Approximately 50 enemy fighters came at the Group as it approached the coast. "Dame Satan" was not hit on this initial pass by the fighters. However, just before she turned on the IP to start the bomb run, "Dame Satan" was jumped by three FW 190s that came in on her from 1200 O'clock level. One shell exploded in the left side of the nose compartment, painfully wounding Lt Ackerman in the right eye, right arm and right leg. He lost sight in the right eye temporarily, but continued to man one of the nose guns, firing at incoming enemy aircraft. Another 20 mm shell exploded right in Cpt Hausman's face, inflicting dozens of wounds to his face, head and body. He was knocked unconscious by the force of the explosion. The bombardier, 1Lt Jack C. Fisher, suffered only minor head injuries from the exploding shells.

"Dame Satan" sustained considerable damage to the fuselage and wings during the fighter attacks. A 20 mm cannon shell went into the No. 4 engine, setting it on fire. The No. 1 engine also was hit, causing a reduction in power. Because of the confusion of the fighter attack and damage to the aircraft, LTC Reid did not make a 360 turn to allow the loose formation to tighten up, as he had been briefed to do. Rather, he turned on the IP and went straight in to the target. Because of the loss of power, Cpt Clancy yelled out over the intercom for Lt Fisher to salvo the bombs so they could stay in formation. This he did and "Dame Satan" continued to lead the Group on into the target.

A few minutes later, Cpt Hausman regained consciousness and, seeing the German fighters continuing their attack on "Dame Satan", seized his machine gun and began firing. By the time the German fighters had been driven off, Cpt Hausman had lost so much blood from the exertion of manning the nose gun, he once more slipped into unconsciousness. He later revived and with Lt Ackerman's assistance navigated "Dame Satan" and the Group safely back to Bassingbourn.

Just as "Ritzy Blitz" turned on the IP, a single FW 190 came directly at her, head-on level, firing 20 mm cannon shells into the bomber. The bombardier, 2Lt Robert H. Davis, Jr., grabbed the nose machine gun and began firing into the attacking fighter at about 300 yards. He fired off 100 rounds as the enemy aircraft closed to within 50 yards, then dropped down and under "Ritzy Blitz", burning fiercely as it went by. The FW 190 went into a spin, headed straight down and was lost from sight.

The copilot, 2Lt David F. Gladhart, was seriously wounded in the left upper forearm by fragments of a 20 mm cannon shell that exploded in the cockpit. Lt Gladhart would not fly again until 16 July. Lt Jackson was also hit in the right eye. He would be back in the air on the 29th of May. The No. 2 engine was knocked out and the bomb bay doors shot up by the attacking FW 190. Although there was intense anti-aircraft fire over the target, German fighters continued blasting through the bomber formation, totally disregarding their own flak. Enemy aircraft continued the running attack for 32 minutes after bombs away. "Ritzy Blitz" received no additional damage on the return trip. Lt Jackson landed her at Bassingbourn without incident.

Eight days later "Ritzy Blitz" was repaired and back in the air. Her ground crew had done its job. This time she was flown by 1Lt Clayton L. Anderson's crew. The mission was routine for "Ritzy Blitz" with only minor flak damage. There followed more than 30 missions through the rest of 1943, during which "Ritzy Blitz" incurred either minor damage or none at all. All this came to an abrupt end on 11 January 1944.

For her 48<sup>th</sup> combat mission, to the Focke-Wulf 190 fighter assembly plant at Oschersleben, Germany, 2Lt Wayne D. Hedglin and his crew flew "Ritzy Blitz". This was Lt Hedglin's sixth mission. The rest of the crew had flown only one or two prior missions. The 91st Bomb Group was Lead Group

of the 1st Combat Wing. "Ritzy Blitz" was assigned the No. 3 position in the Lead Element of the Low Squadron. Soon after crossing over the German coast and approaching Hanover, the Strike Force was attacked by upwards of 400 German fighters, including FW 190s, Me 109s and twin engine Me 110s. This was the most concentrated attack on a Strike Force by the Germans since the 17 August 1943 Schweinfurt mission. "Ritzy Blitz" had been a designated Spare on that mission, but was not needed.

German fighters charged through the formation, with up to eight planes abreast, firing 20 mm cannon shells into the bombers. "Ritzy Blitz" alone was attack by nearly 20 fighters. She took a direct hit in the No. 1 engine knocking it out and setting the engine on fire. Other shells exploded within the fuselage and the radio room compartment. The radio operator, Sgt James Lascu, Jr., was killed instantly. Control cables and instruments were shot away by the cannon fire, causing "Ritzy Blitz" to spin out of formation as Lt Hedglin and the copilot, 2Lt Donald W. Jones, struggled to regain control of the plummeting aircraft. Lt Hedglin rang the bail-out bell and ordered the crew to leave the plane.

The tail gunner, Sgt Stanley E. Lyttle, called over the intercom that he was hit and needed help. Because of the centrifugal force of the downward twirling aircraft and the jumbled wreckage within the fuselage no one could get to him. The top turret gunner, Sgt Cody L. Wolf, although not wounded, was thrown down into the bomb bay by the wildly rotating aircraft as he attempted to move to the front nose hatch. The force of the spiraling plane pinned him among the bombs and shackles of the bomb bay. He was unable to extricate himself, remaining trapped in the falling aircraft.

The right waist gunner, Sgt Walter F. Williams, Jr., struggled to the rear waist door, pulled the release pin and kicked open the door. As a result of the spinning of the plane, instead to flying away in the slip stream, the door was flung back against the fuselage. It hit Sgt Williams in the leg, knocking him to the floor and pinning his leg outside the door. Force of the terrifying gyrations of the plane held him flat on the floor with the waist door holding his leg tightly to the outside of the aircraft. The left waist gunner, Sgt William O. Francisco, tried to remove the door from Sgt Williams' leg, but could not overcome the centrifugal force. In the meantime the ball turret gunner, Sgt George M. Richardson, had come up out of his turret and was standing by watching. Sgt Williams hollered for Sgt Richardson to jump, but he did not. Apparently Sgt Richardson was afraid he would interfere with Sgt Williams' efforts to free himself, if he tried to step over him in getting to the door. All of a sudden the plane leveled off and the door flew off Sgt Williams' leg. He rolled out the escape hatch, followed by Sgt Francisco. Almost at once, "Ritzy Blitz" again began twisting downwards even more crazily, trapping Sgts Richardson, Wold and Lyttle in the falling aircraft. Sgts Williams and Francisco were the only two crewmen of the six in the rear of the aircraft to survive to become POWs.

Lts Hedglin and Jones, the navigator, 2Lt Carey E. Goodwyn, Jr. and the bombardier, 2Lt John W. McKewen, bailed out through the nose hatch. Lt McKewen did not survive. Either his chute did not open or he was killed on the ground by angry civilians. German records indicate his body was found in the wreckage, perhaps a cover-up, because he did bail out. The survivors were rounded up quickly by German military and taken into custody to begin almost 16 months of captivity.

"Ritzy Blitz" fell to earth and exploded about 12 miles southwest of Hanover, scattering wreckage and her five unexploded bombs over a half mile radius.

### **No. 053, "Desperate Journey"**

The next mission for No. 053 was what her name implied, a "Desperate Journey." 1Lt Norbert D. Koll and crew were aboard for the mission to Wilhelmshaven on the 21st of May. Lt Koll was a copilot who had flown seven previous missions with five different pilots. This was his first mission as



command pilot. The ball turret gunner, S/Sgt Robert J. Abt, and right waist gunner, S/Sgt Guy F. Wyatt, had flown 10 and 7 prior missions, respectively, mostly with 1Lt Charles W. Freschauf. Except for the radio operator, T/Sgt Alfredo L. Davila, who was on his first mission, the rest of the crew had flown two to four missions with different crews. The 91st Group was short on navigators on the 21st. 2Lt Joseph H. Ferry, of the 94th Bomb Group also flying from Bassingbourn, was assigned to Lt Koll at the last minute. Lt Ferry's regular 94th Group plane had been shot up badly on the mission to Flensburg the 19th and his crew was stood down, pending repair of their aircraft. Lt Ferry, anticipating no combat flying for a few days, had been to a "Wings for Victory" dance and returned to his quarters just in time to be called out at 0230 hours for breakfast and briefing. This was the first time he had met any of Lt Koll's crew.

Lt Koll was flying Lead of the Second Element in the Low Squadron for this mission. As described earlier, the Group Lead, LTC William B. Reid, was briefed to make a 360 degree turn before the IP if the formation was too loose. However, even though the formation was not tight, the Group turned on the IP and began the bomb run. It was at this point the German fighters came in on the 91st formation in earnest. "Desperate Journey" was immediately forced out of the formation by the German fighters, as a steer being cut from the herd by experienced horsemen. The fighters swarmed in for the kill on the now even more straggling "Desperate Journey", like a bunch of sharks slashing at a lone swimmer. The bombardier, 2Lt Edwin H. Bruton, came on the intercom, trying to calm down the crew, with "Take it easy guys we are not going any place."

As the FW 190s came at "Desperate Journey" from dead ahead and the left side, Lt Ferry grabbed the side nose gun and fired off a burst. The gun jammed immediately, leaving Lt Ferry a spectator to what was transpiring. He was standing with his right hand on the gun breech. A few seconds later a 20 mm cannon shell slammed into the nose, hitting the gun and the back of Lt Ferry's right wrist. When he looked down his hand was hanging by the thumb bone. The same shell burst caught Lt Bruton in the stomach, just above the appendix. Lt Bruton tried to call Lt Koll on the intercom to tell him of their condition, but the intercom was out.

The two officers quickly evaluated their situation. Lt Bruton asked Lt Ferry to get the morphine syrette out of the first aid kit. As Lt Ferry bent down to open the kit, another 20 mm exploded in the nose hitting Lt Ferry in the upper thigh. By this time it was obvious that "Desperate Journey" was on her final journey. Neither of the nose crewman could move to the tunnel to see what was happening in the rest of the ship. They decided it best to get out while the getting was good.

Lt Ferry snapped on his chest chute with his good left hand, but then realized that because his right hand was gone, he could not reach the D-ring of the rip cord. Between the two of them, Lts Ferry and Bruton decided the best chance for Lt Ferry to bail out was to loop the oxygen mask hose through his D-ring, with Lt Bruton holding the hose to jerk open the chute as Lt Ferry fell away from the plane. Lt Bruton was to follow immediately. Lt Ferry managed to open the nose hatch and Lt Bruton pushed him out. Lt Ferry's chute opened as planned, but Lt Bruton did not appear from the falling plane. After the war, upon Lt Ferry's recommendation, Lt Bruton was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, posthumously, for saving Lt Ferry's life.

The radio compartment had taken a direct 20 mm cannon shell hit and was set afire. The bomb bay was also ablaze, and the bombs were still aboard. The only other crewman to escape from the falling aircraft was the ball turret gunner, S/Sgt Robert J. Abt. Wounded, Sgt Abt was forced to leave the flaming aircraft. Sgt Abt made his way to the waist door and bailed out. Apparently the rest of the crew were either dead or seriously wounded. None left the falling bomber.

Although he reached the ground safely, Sgt Abt was shot in the leg by a civilian. Both crewmen were captured in short order and taken to the naval hospital at Sanderbusch, near Wilhelmshaven. There they received excellent medical care.

There is nothing in the German records as to how the other eight crewmen were killed. Neither was the crash site of "Desperate Journey" identified.

### **No. 970, "Connecticut Yankee"**

"Connecticut Yankee" flew again on the 21st to Wilhelmshaven with no damage, followed by ten more missions from which she came home unscathed or with only minor flak hits. Although fighters came up at the formation on most of these missions, "Connecticut Yankee" was not struck by machine gun or cannon fire. On the 11th of June mission to Bremen, when she flew Lead of the Second Element of the High Squadron, two Me 109s flew past on the right side of "Connecticut Yankee", about 600 yards out. As they passed the aircraft, the fighter in the rear broke off and came toward the bomber from 0400 O'clock. Sgt Robert S. Blair, who was manning the right waist gun, fired about 80 rounds into the fighter which then dived down steeply, giving off a large burst of smoke. The fighter did not fire at "Connecticut Yankee."

On the 25th of June, while returning from a mission to Hamburg, the electric glove of the left waist gunner, T/Sgt J. R. Carlson, shorted out, burning his hand. In trying to get his hand out of the glove, Sgt Carlson accidentally fired his machine gun, shooting up the left stabilizer. "Connecticut Yankee" returned to base safely.

"Connecticut Yankee" ran out of luck on the 6th of September mission to Stuttgart, her 38th trip over the continent. 2Lt William G. Pegram and his crew were flying their second mission in "Connecticut Yankee", as No. 3 of the Lead Element of the Low Squadron. The aircraft took flak damage over the target, knocking out an inboard engine. Gas consumption was high in the remaining engines, causing two to run dry while over the Channel. "Connecticut Yankee" made landfall on one good engine, but was losing altitude. The final engine cut out as its tank emptied. Since there was still enough altitude to do so, Lt Pegram ordered the crew to bail out.

The chute of the navigator, 2Lt Robert S. Cosgrove, would not open when he pulled he rip cord. He had to tear off the canvas cover as he fell through the air to get the canopy released. The chute of the left waist gunner, Sgt Frederick E. Hutchinson, opened inside the fuselage as he jumped, leaving him dangling outside the plane. The ball turret gunner, S/Sgt Hans W. Wobst, gathered up the chute and pushed it out, saving Sgt Hutchinson's life. The rest of the crew, except for Lt Pegram, bailed out safely. Lt Pegram put "Connecticut Yankee" down in a wheels-up dead-stick belly landing in a swamp near Winchelsea. Although the muddy swamp acted as grease, allowing a smooth landing, she was badly damaged structurally. Because of the combined damage from flak and the rough landing, "Connecticut Yankee" was declared salvage and did not fly again.

### **No. 857**

No. 857 was back in the air on the 21st. For this mission, 1Lt John H. Miller was again first pilot. Except for the left waist gunner, S/Sgt Curtiss B. Pope, who was flying in place of S/Sgt Edward F. Simon, this was the same crew who had flown her on the 19th. Sgt Simon flew this mission with 1Lt Leonard L. Cox in No. 527, "Great Speckled Bird." Sgt Simon will be killed on 22 June while flying with 1Lt Joseph E. Slattery, Jr. in No. 998 on a mission to Huls. Six of the crewmen aboard today are from Lt

Miller's original crew who arrived at Basingbourn on 3 April. Two others, S/Sgts Robert J. Abt and Guy F. Wyatt, are flying with 1Lt Norbert D. Koll, in No. 053, "Desperate Journey." Sgt Abt will be one of only two crewmen to survive when "Desperate Journey" goes down on this mission. Sgt Wyatt will be killed. The other original crewman, T/Sgt David F. Fishburn, will also be killed when Lt Slattery and No. 998 go down on the 22nd of June.

No. 857 flew in the No. 2 position of the Second Element of the Low Squadron, on the right wing of No. 053, "Desperate Journey." No. 816, "Eager Beaver" was the No. 3 plane in the Second Element. As described earlier, the 91st formation was loose as the Group turned on the IP and started the bomb run. As she approached the target, Me 109s and FW 190s made head-on attacks on No. 857. The No. 1 and 2 engines were set on fire. With the loss of power from two engines and the resulting fire engulfing the left wing, the crew began bailing out. The flight engineer, T/Sgt William D. Spofford, went to the front of the bomb bay. The copilot, 2Lt Roscoe V. Black, Jr., handed him his chest pack chute which Sgt Spofford kept behind the pilots' seats. When Sgt Spofford bailed out, Lt Black was still standing at the front of the bomb bay. The radio operator, T/Sgt Oscar L. Stuart, was standing on the catwalk at the aft end of the bomb bay. Neither got out of the plane.

Apparently the gas tanks caught on fire and melted off the left wing. No. 857 flipped upside down, trapping most of the rest of the crew in the aircraft. She exploded at 15,000 feet. Of the other crewmen, only the bombardier, 2Lt David F. Snow, the ball turret gunner, S/Sgt Francis R. Trahan, and the tail gunner, S/Sgt Newell R. Lane, escaped the floundering bomber. All survivors became POWs.

No. 857 crashed on the mainland near Wilhelmshaven.

## **322<sup>nd</sup> Squadron**

### **No. 724, "Thunderbird"**

"Thunderbird" was back in the air again on the 21st to Wilhelmshaven. 1Lt William D. Beasley and his crew were once again flying the aircraft, this time in the No. 2 position in the Second Element of the High Squadron. The mission proved to be a wild one for Lt Beasley's crew and for "Thunderbird". As the Group passed the IP and began the bomb run, German fighters streaked in on the bombers with the intent of breaking up the loose formation. They were successful. Seven or eight attacks were made during the bomb run, which, when combined with an intense and very accurate flak barrage over the target, succeeded in scattering the formation. This caused the bombs to be dropped over a wide area, most of which missed the target.

"Thunderbird", in particular, came under heavy fighter attack, beginning at 1243 hours, one minute before bombs away. The first fighter, a FW 190, came in from 1100 O'clock level. The navigator, 1Lt Robert H. Bowcock, engaged the fighter with the left nose gun 800 yards out and continued firing until it broke away only 50 feet from the nose of "Thunderbird." The prop of the FW was slowly wind-milling as the aircraft fell over on its back out of control and went down under the bomber in a flat spin, smoke pouring from its engine.

Two minutes later two Me 109s charged "Thunderbird", one from 1100 O'clock level, the trailing fighter from 1000 O'clock level. The left waist gunner, S/Sgt Clyde R. Burdick, locked on the first attacking aircraft as it came out from under the left wing of the bomber. He put 15-20 rounds into the fighter, which broke away at 0600 O'clock, went out of control and blew up about 1,500 feet below the tail of "Thunderbird." The bombardier, 1Lt Olan L. Hubbard, fired from the left nose gun at the second Me 109 from about 1,000 yards out until it broke away at 0700 O'clock when within 50 yards of

the bomber. He saw tracers going into the engine, which started burning, enveloping the cockpit with flames. The fighter fell away in a flat spin.

Thirty seconds later, yet another fighter, this time a FW 190, came at "Thunderbird" from 1100 O'clock level. Sgt Burdick fired on the fighter as it came in under the wing of the bomber. About 20 rounds went into the enemy aircraft. It broke down and out at 0700 O'clock and exploded about 2,500 feet below "Thunderbird." At the same time another FW 190 was about 400 yards out lining up to make a run on the following Group. Sgt Burdick swung his gun onto this fighter and fired off 150 rounds. The aircraft continued on to about 0830 O'clock and 500 yards out where it burst into flames, went into a glide and exploded about 1,000 feet below the bomber.

Another 30 seconds later a FW 190 approached "Thunderbird" from 0500 O'clock high. As it passed on the right side of and 600 yards from the bomber, the right waist gunner, S/Sgt Roberto Gonzales, put 50 rounds into it. The enemy aircraft went down trailing flames and heavy smoke, exploding when 1,000 yards beyond the bomber. After this concentrated action there was a two and a half minute respite before the next fighter, a Me 109, attacked "Thunderbird", once again from 1100 O'clock level. The top turret gunner, T/Sgt John L. Barrett, picked him up at 800 yards and squeezed off 100 rounds before the enemy aircraft broke down and away at 400 yards, heading out at 0600 O'clock. The fighter went on down below the bomber. The pilot bailed out as plane caught on fire. There was another quiet period of five minutes before the final fighter attack, a single FW 190 that came in at 0630 O'clock level. The radio operator, T/Sgt Robert S. Lammers, engaged the enemy aircraft at 800 yards, firing 150 rounds as it approached to within 300 yards. The cowling came off the engine of the fighter and it stopped firing at 400 yards. The enemy aircraft went right over "Thunderbird", flared up on its nose, stalled out at 0800 O'clock high and exploded.

Even though all these enemy aircraft were firing their 20 mm cannons as they came in on the bomber, not a single hit was made on "Thunderbird." An extremely intense eleven minutes of action for the crew of "Thunderbird." The crew was credited with six destroyed aircraft, three by Sgt Burdick, one probable and one damaged. Flak had done a much better "job" on "Thunderbird." The fuselage at the left waist gun position looked like a sieve there were so many holes in the skin. The rest of the trip home was routine.

Because of the flak damage, "Thunderbird" was not able to mount another mission until the 11th of June when she started out for Bremen with 1Lt Milton A. Green's crew aboard. The weather over the target was poor. The Strike Force dropped on some airfields and a military installation. This was a much less hectic mission than her previous one. Still, from seventeen until nine minutes before the target the aircraft took flak hits that shot up the Plexiglas in the nose and knocked holes in the left wing and No. 1 engine cowling. The bombardier, 2Lt Herbert F. Egender, had glass fragments blown into his eye by the shattering nose glass.

Nine minutes before the target a single Me 109 came in at "Thunderbird" from 0100 O'clock high. Lt Egender opened fire as the enemy aircraft got to within 500 yards of the bomber. He saw tracers hitting the fighter in the nose and cockpit before it broke off and started spinning downward. Flames and large pieces of metal streamed from the falling fighter, which exploded before hitting the water. "Thunderbird" dropped on the target and returned to base without further incident.

On her next, and final, mission, the 28th of June, 1Lt Edward T. Brodnax, Jr. was her pilot. Lt Brodnax had been copilot on 1Lt James D. Baird's crew. For the past two missions he had been flying as a first pilot with make-up crews. On the 28th he flew No. 3 in the Second Element of the High Squadron, on the left wing of Cpt Donald E. Sheeler in No. 139, "Chief Sly II."

"Thunderbird" took a flak hit in the No. 4 engine just before bombs away. The ball turret gunner, S/Sgt John J. Smith, was wounded by several flak shards as they went over the target. The

aircraft was spewing out smoke and dropping back of the formation at a rapid rate as she lost altitude. After the Group had dropped on the target, the formation made a slow right turn and descended to 7,000 feet as it went out over the Bay of Biscay. "Thunderbird" was even lower. When about five miles from the coast, two fighters made a run at the struggling bomber as she disappeared into the low haze. "Thunderbird" was last seen at 1647 hours 20 miles west to Isle de Quessant, with the No. 4 engine feathered and the crew unloading guns and ammunition to lighten the aircraft.

Lt Brodnax ditched the bomber in the Channel. Several of the crewmen scrambled into rubber dinghies before the plane sank. They were not picked up before darkness set in. During the cold windy night a combination of chilling and fatigue resulted in crewmen losing consciousness and falling into the choppy waters. By dawn only the left waist gunner, S/Sgt Virgil R. Anderson, and Sgt Smith remained alive. They were picked up by French fishermen and taken ashore and turned over to the Germans.

### **No. 511, "Wheel 'N Deal"**

The next mission for "Wheel 'N Deal" was the 29th of May when 1Lt William D. Beasley's crew took her to the submarine pens at St. Nazaire, France. They flew in the No. 2 position of the Lead Element of the Lead Squadron. In addition to the regular crew, Cpt William H. Clothier, one of the Hollywood photographers working with Maj Wyler, flew along to get some final combat film for the "Memphis Belle" documentary.

Although St. Nazaire was one of the most heavily defended targets on the continent, "Wheel 'N Deal" suffered no battle damage on the 29th. Five German fighters came at the formation, but did not make a run on "Wheel 'N Deal." Unfortunately, one of the two 2,000 pound bombs she was carrying hung up and did not drop on the target. After they were out of the flak and free from fighter danger, the flight engineer, S/Sgt Clyde R. Burdick, went down to the bomb bay and unsuccessfully tried to loosen the bomb shackle with a screwdriver. The bombardier, 2Lt William O. Deal, came back to attempt to release the hung-up bomb, also unsuccessfully. After the formation was over the Channel and had dropped to a lower altitude, Sgt Burdick went back to the bomb bay again and discovered the ordinance men had loaded the bomb with the sear in the wrong direction. He reached in with a screwdriver and tripped the release, allowing the bomb to drop free into the Channel below.

When Lt Deal earlier had tried to salvo the bombs, the bomb bay door retracting screws did not fully extend. The doors had to be extended by hand so the latch between the screws and door fittings would engage enabling the electric motors to retract the doors. Sgt Burdick asked the right waist gunner, S/Sgt Roberto Gonzalez, to bring him the crank and extension handle from the radio room so he could crank down the extending screws. When Sgt Gonzalez handed the crank to Sgt Burdick, the crank fell off the handle and dropped through the open bomb bays into the Channel. Lt Beasley had to land the aircraft with the bomb bay doors down. He did so with no damage to the aircraft.

"Wheel 'N Deal" was not put back into the air until 24 July. She received no serious damage on that and the ensuing four missions. The fifth mission on 17 August, to the ball bearing plants at Schweinfurt, more than made up for the prior safe ones. On the 17 of August VIII Bomber Command mounted its most ambitious undertaking of the war to date, a double mission deep into Germany. One was to the Messerschmidt fighter plane factory at Regensburg, the other, the main force, to the ball bearing factories at Schweinfurt. The 91st was the lead Group of the Schweinfurt Strike Force. 1Lt Leroy B. Everett, Jr. and his crew were aboard "Wheel 'N Deal", flying in the No. 2 position of the Lead

Element of the High Squadron for this historic mission. German fighters began swarming in on the Schweinfurt Strike Force almost as soon as it crossed over onto the continent. Me 109s and FW 190s came at the formation in groups of 15-20, flying wing-tip to wing-tip. 2Lt Don S. von der Heyde's crew in No. 225, "V-Packette", was the first to go down, only 20 minutes into Belgium.

Most of the attacks were frontal. Both the bombardier, 2Lt Capen R. Simons, and the navigator, 2Lt William H. Turcotte, were manning nose guns and firing at incoming fighters. All other gunners on "Wheel 'N Deal" were firing at enemy aircraft. The floor of the nose soon was littered with a deep layer of hot spent machine gun shell casings. A small fragment of 20 mm cannon shell hit Lt Turcotte on the wrist but did not break the skin. One Me 109 passed so close to the nose of the bomber as it darted over the left wing tip, Lt Turcotte could see clearly the pilot's face and the white neck scarf he was wearing. When the Squadron Lead aircraft, No. 453, "The Bearded Beauty-Mizpah", along with 2Lt Everett L. Kenner's crew went down, Lt Everett moved "Wheel 'N Deal" up into the Squadron Lead

The fighter attacks let up as the bombers went through the flak barrage over the target, but picked up again as soon as they were out of the flak. Head-on attacks going out were just as ferocious as they had been on the way in. None of the crew expected to survive. Lt Everett figured they were not going to make it and lifted a wing in a deliberate attempt to ram one of the German fighters streaking by. He missed and "Wheel 'N Deal" did make it back to Bassingbourn. Still, "Wheel 'N Deal" was riddled with 20 mm cannon fire, one round of which wounded the right waist gunner, S/Sgt Leonard Waldron, in the knee.

"Wheel 'N Deal" was one of the lucky 91st Bomb Group ships on that mission. The Group had suffered the greatest percentage loss (55%) it would incur during the entire airwar. Ten of the twenty 91st planes that went over the continent were shot down. Another, No. 172, "My Prayer", was salvaged after crash-landing at a base away from Bassingbourn.

"Wheel 'N Deal" was repaired and ready to fly again on the 24th of August. The entire Group was called back from this mission because of cloud cover over the continent. Nothing unusual happened to "Wheel 'N Deal" on the following seven missions. The mission on 9 October to the fighter aircraft assembly plant at Anklam was another wild ride for the crew of "Wheel 'N Deal." 1Lt Robert S. Gerald and his crew had been flying her since the 3rd of September. On the 9th of October he had aboard a new navigator, 1Lt Thomas J. Cannon, radio operator, S/Sgt Paul E. Baker, and copilot, 2Lt Charles L. Early. These were all on their first combat missions. For this mission Lt Gerald was flying Lead of the Second Element of the Lead Squadron. 1Lt Charles B. Pinning, in No. 711, "Chief Sly III", was on his right wing and 2Lt James, "Don", Judy and his crew in No. 178, "The Old Standby", in the No. 3 position. 1Lt Leroy E. Everett, Jr. in No. 804, "Hell's Halo", with Cpt Donald E. Sheeler flying as his copilot and Squadron Leader, led the Lead Squadron, and thus the Group. At 1002 hours, one hour and forty-five minutes before the target, the intercom went out on No. 794, the No. 2 plane in the Lead Element. 1Lt William R. Cox had to abort the mission.

The Strike Force was attacked by swarms of enemy fighters as soon as it crossed the Danish coast. Among the attackers were twin engine Me 110s, firing rockets into the formation from the rear. Two rockets went over the right wing of "Wheel 'N Deal", exploding just ahead of the aircraft. The explosions gave the crew, including Lt Gerald, quite a scare. "Chief Sly III" was hit by 20 mm cannon fire and had to drop out of the formation. Lt Pinning headed for Sweden, but went down in the Baltic. All ten crewmen were lost. Up ahead in the Lead Element, the left wing plane, No. 778, "Green Fury", with 2Lt Alexander W. Stewart's crew, was knocked out of the formation by a head-on attack from a FW 190 just before the IP. Four of the ten crewmen survived to become POWs. Lt Judy moved "The Old Standby" up into the space vacated by "Green Fury."

As she went over the target, "Wheel 'N Deal" took several flak hits, one of which wounded Sgt Baker, in the forehead. Except for flak holes in the fuselage at the left waist gun position and in the left horizontal stabilizer, along with a few small ones in the wings, "Wheel 'N Deal" was relatively undamaged. She dropped on the target at 1144 hours. As the formation came off the target and cleared the flak, the fighters swarmed in again. Between 200 and 300 enemy aircraft of all types hit the returning Strike Force. Lt Judy's ship, "The Old Standby", was hit by several fighters and went down.

Me 110s continued firing rockets into the formation while Me 109s and FW 190s came through the formation in groups of 8-12 aircraft. Lt Gerald could see 20 mm shells from the frontal attacking fighters bursting in a line as they headed for him and could swerve "Wheel 'N Deal" slightly to avoid the exploding cannon fire. Cannon fire streaming in from behind he could not see. Lt Gerald relied on the tail gunner, S/Sgt David A. Stone, to yell over the intercom when to dodge. Some were bursting so close it seemed the bomber would be blown out of the sky. B-17s all around them were afire and going down. Lt Gerald said several prayers as fought the controls, often having to use his knee to help move the columns when his arms became tired.

Fifty-two minutes after the target, a twin-engine Me 110 came in at "Wheel 'N Deal" from 0730 O'clock slightly above level. The top turret gunner, T/Sgt Buford C. Swango, engaged him at about 400 yards. Tracers started going into the engines of the enemy aircraft at 250-300 yards out. Sgt Swango continued firing into the fighter as it came to within 150 yards of the bomber where it rolled upside down and burst into flames. One of the crewmen bailed out, his chute opening. The Me 110 spun down and blew up. The rest of the trip home was uneventful. In spite of almost three hours of continuous attacks by enemy fighters to and from the target, "Wheel 'N Deal" was hit by 20 mm cannon fire only in the rudder. She made it back to Bassingbourn relatively unscathed, except for some tired, sweaty and very grateful crewmen.

This had been another bad day for the 91st Bomb Group. Five of the fifteen bombers that made it over the continent were shot down. Once they were on the ground, Maj Sheeler, rushed up to Lt Gerald and grabbed him around the neck and said "Pappy (his nick name for Lt Gerald), I thought you were gone." He assumed he had lost his entire squadron. Maj Sheeler asked Lt Gerald why he did not move up onto his left wing when Lt Judy went down. Lt Gerald replied "I wasn't about to come up on your wing, everybody who came up there was shot down."

"Wheel 'N Deal" was soon to run out of luck. She aborted her next two missions, 14 October and 26 November. On the former mission, both inboard superchargers lagged excessively and the No. 2 induction system was cracked. All were repaired that night. Still, "Wheel 'N Deal" was not put back in the air until the 26th of November. On this mission the oxygen system went out and several of the crew, including the ball turret gunner, Sgt Morris Schendleman, who passed out, suffered from lack of oxygen before the pilot, 2Lt John T. Wennerberg, could drop down below 10,000 feet. The mission of 1 December, to a secondary target, Solingen, Germany (the primary target, Leverkusen was clouded over) was not an abort. For this mission, most of Lt Wennerberg's crew were with him. 2Lt Robert A. Dickson was flying as copilot, filling for 2Lt William F. Myers, and S/Sgt Nick J. Nicoletti was radio operator in place of S/Sgt Charles W. Grubb, Jr. Sgt Nicoletti was on his second combat mission.

"Wheel 'N Deal" was designated as a "Spare" for the mission and was supposed to be the first in sequence to fill in for a plane having to abort from the Group formation. As the Group started coming together over the base, No. 767 aborted. 2Lt Leonard F. Anderson for some reason or other moved No. 794, also a Spare, into the vacated slot before Lt Wennerberg could slide over. Twelve minutes later, No. 187, "Buckeye Boomerang", with 1Lt John D. Davis' crew aboard, aborted from the No. 3 position of the Second Element of the High Squadron. Lt Wennerberg pulled "Wheel 'N Deal" into that position and flew on with the Group.

The American fighter escort had to turn back before the target leaving a 20-minute window of no coverage before the next escort group arrived. After the American fighters left, German fighters started harassing the formation. "Wheel 'N Deal" took a 20 mm shell in the No. 3 engine on the first pass by the enemy aircraft. A second attack shot up the batteries, putting the two turrets out of commission. The gunners could not rotate to track the fighters charging by. They could only fire when the fighters intersected the field of fire of their stationary guns. Only the waist and tail gunners could follow the enemy aircraft maneuvering around the bomber. The fighter escort finally arrived and two P-47s pulled up alongside "Wheel 'N Deal" to protect her from further enemy attacks.

No. 794, which had moved into the slot "Wheel 'N Deal", should have filled, was hit by fighters half way between Koblenz and Cologne on the way to the target. Part of a wing came off and she went down. Lt Anderson and the other nine crewmen were all killed.

Just as the formation turned on the IP and began the bomb run, "Wheel 'N Deal" was hit by flak, knocking out more of the electrical system and setting the fuel tank for the No. 2 engine afire. The top turret gunner, Sgt Squire Baker, was reloading his .50 caliber machine guns when the flak hit. He had just lifted the cover plate with his right hand when a shard of flak slammed into the gun causing it to move back crushing his left hand and arm. An 88 mm shell went up through the bomber just behind the left side pilot's seat and on out the left side of the top turret. It did not explode.

The tail gunner, Sgt William E. Roller, apparently was hit by one of the early fighter passes and was struggling in his attempt to bail out. When a German fighter came in from the rear and went under the bomber, Sgt Baker had called to Sgt Roller to watch for him to come back up at them. There was no answer from the tail position.

Because of the flak damage, "Wheel 'N Deal" dropped out of the formation and down to about 13,000 feet. The bombardier, 2Lt John W. Temple, tried to jettison the bomb load to lighten the plane. With the outage of the electrical system the bomb bay doors only partly opened. The first bomb crashed into the doors, jamming them in place. Lt Temple went back to the bomb bay and Sgt Baker, smashed hand and all, came down from his turret to help. Sgt Baker disconnected his oxygen hose and climbed down in the bays and kicked open the doors. The two crewmen then pulled the auxiliary bomb release behind the pilot's position and released the bombs. More German fighters came in on the bomber. This time the No. 2 engine was knocked out and the No. 4 engine set on fire. There was a hole in the right wing so large you "could drop a horse through it." "Wheel 'N Deal" was doomed.

Lt Wennerberg kept telling the crew over the intercom "You better get out." Lt Temple and the navigator, 2Lt Eugene C. Cohalan, went out through the nose hatch. The ball turret gunner, Sgt Morris Schendleman, came up out of the turret when he heard the bail-out bell. He helped the radio operator, Sgt Nicoletti, out of his flak suit. Sgt Schendleman went back to the waist to get his chute and signaled the waist gunners to leave. He then went back past the radio room and dropped out the bomb bay. Sgts Baker and Nicoletti dropped through the bomb bays, as did the Lts Wennerberg and Dickson.

Sgt Baker's chute would not open so he had to pull it out by hand until the wind caught the pilot chute and pulled out the main canopy. Except for Sgt Roller, the rest of the rear crew bailed out through the side door. The two waist gunners saw Sgt Roller start crawling towards the tail escape hatch and try to drop out. As Sgt Cole went out the door, he saw Sgt Roller's head and feet hanging out of the tail hatch with the rest of his body wedged in the plane. Either he was caught in the hatch or was dead. His body was found in the wreckage. The rest of the crew landed safely to begin their ordeals as POWs.

"Wheel 'N Deal" went down in the Rhine River between Dusseldorf and Duisburg, Germany.



## **No. 057, "Piccadilly Commando"/"Blonde Bomber"**

No. 057 was called "Piccadilly Commando" when flown by 2Lt Paul D. Kahl's crew with "Memphis Belle" on 19 May, a name she retained while flying seven more missions through 17 July. During the first six she incurred no major damage.

On 21 May, "Piccadilly Commando" was loaned to the 323rd Squadron to be flown by 1Lt Charles H. Silvernail's crew. She incurred only slight flak damage and had a 20 mm cannon shell hole behind the navigator's compartment. Back with the 322nd, "Piccadilly Commando" was flown to Bremen on the 11th of June by 1Lt John T. Hardin, but dropped on an alternate target. One of the two bombs she carried hung up when the bombardier, 2Lt William O. Deal, toggled. Three minutes after the target a FW 190 went past "Piccadilly Commando" at 0200 O'clock to attack a straggler B-17 below. S/Sgt Leroy C. Sheehan, right waist gunner, opened up when the enemy aircraft was 600 yards out. He fired 75 rounds into the fighter as it passed in front of "Piccadilly Commando." The fighter went about 1,500 yards below the bomber where the left wing came off and the aircraft crashed into the sea. On the trip home, Lt Deal was able to jettison the hung-up bomb in the North Sea.

1Lt James D. Baird took "Piccadilly Commando" out on the next two missions, 22nd and 28th of June. However, he had to abort on the 28th when a waist gun and the top turret guns gave out. F/O Winston M. Cavaneau's crew took "Piccadilly Commando" on missions on 4 and 10 of July. On the 10th, the No. 2 propeller ran away early into the mission, forcing Lt Cavaneau to return to base before the rest of the Strike Force was recalled because of dense cloud cover over the target.

On the 17th of July, with 2Lt Jack A. Hargis's crew on board for a mission to Hanover, she sustained 20 mm cannon fire damage and was stood down for repairs until the 28th of July. During this interval her name was changed to "Blonde Bomber." Following the mission on the 28th of July, "Blonde Bomber" flew six more missions with only minor damage. On the 23rd of September the 91st went to Nantes. 1Lt Robert E. Wine and his crew flew "Blonde Bomber." They flew the No. 3 position of the Second Element of the High Squadron, on the left wing of 1Lt Robert S. Gerald, in No. 511, "Wheel 'N Deal." A few fighters came up at the formation and moderate, but accurate, flak was encountered over the target. The left waist gunner, T/Sgt Ovila S. Corbiere, got excited during one of the fighter passes and fired into the left stabilizer of "Blonde Bomber." The aircraft also was hit hard by flak over the target, damaging the left side of the nose, next to the navigator's position. "Blonde Bomber" made it back to England, but because of the battle damage and increasing problems in maintaining control of the aircraft, Lt Wine decided it best to land at St. Mawgan. "Blonde Bomber" was not put back in flying condition until 14 October.

The mission on 14 October was back to the ball bearing factories at Schwienfurt. Because of the late arrival of the 305th Group at the 40th Combat Wing rendezvous point, leaving only two groups in the Wing, there was confusion regarding which Bomb Wing, and Group, would lead the Strike Force. The briefed Lead 92nd Group, of the 40th Combat Wing, passed the Lead over to the 1st Combat Wing, which was led by the 91st Group. Thus, for the second time, the 91st led the Strike Force to Schweinfurt. This was another very rough mission for VIII Bomber Command, with 60 bombers lost.

Planes from the 91st Group began taking off at 1045 hours. 1Lt William R. Cox and his crew were in "Blonde Bomber" flying the No. 3 position of the Lead Element of the Low Squadron. Of the fourteen planes put up by the 91st this day, eight made it to Schweinfurt, the others aborting back to base. Only four remained in formation as they went over the target. Two of the three 322nd bombers turned back early, No. 794 with 1Lt James L. Griffin's crew and No. 511, "Wheel 'N Deal", 1Lt Robert S. Gerald. Lt Griffin headed back at 1205 hours when the fuel transfer from the bomb bay tank failed.

The superchargers on engines No. 2 and 3 of "Wheel 'N Deal" lagged and all the guns froze up. Lt Gerald left the formation at 1230 hours to return to Bassingbourn.

No. 714, from the 323rd Squadron, with 2Lt Robert M. Slane's crew aboard was lost to enemy fire. No. 714 was hit hard by flak over the target, knocking out an engine. The tail gunner, Sgt Claud J. Smith, was hit in the chest and killed at his position by a 20 mm cannon shell. Lt Shane kept the aircraft in the air for another 45 minutes until they were jumped by 12 German fighters. Two more engines were shot out. With loss of three engines, No. 714 could not stay airborne. Lt Shane and the copilot, 2Lt Joseph A. Johnson, made an emergency landing south of Metz. The navigator, 2Lt Arthur G. Foster, evaded capture, escaping to Switzerland, and eventually returning to England. The rest of the crew became POWs.

Although "Blonde Bomber" made it over the target, it was a rough ride for her and the crew. Almost every type of fighter in the Luftwaffe harassed the Strike Force from the time it entered the continent until the bombers were back over the Channel. Although bombers from other Groups were going down all over the sky, "Blonde Bomber" was spared serious attacks on the way in to the target. "Blonde Bomber" was the only aircraft from the Low Squadron to go over the target. She formed on the left wing of No. 484, "The Bad Egg", of the 401<sup>st</sup> Squadron for the bomb run.

Flak became intense and accurate as the Group turned on the IP. Flak bursts jammed the bomb controls of "Blonde Bomber", causing two of her bombs to hang up. The rest dropped on the target. As "Blonde Bomber" left the target, fighters were at her again. She took a hit in the No. 2 engine fuel tank, which started leaking gas badly and caught on fire. Then, 20 mm shells took out the intercom system and hit the left waist gunner, S/Sgt William H. Evans, in the right leg, shattering the bones below the knee. In spite of the seriousness of his wounds, Sgt Evans stood on his good left leg and remained at his position, continuing to fire his machine gun at attacking enemy aircraft.

The flight engineer, T/Sgt Lester B. Schlaich, had Lt Cox feather the No. 2 engine. He then began transferring gas out of the No. 2 tank. As this was being done, Sgt Schlaich went down from his top turret position to the nose and asked the bombardier, 1Lt James E. Harlow, to try to jettison the two hung up bombs. He got back to the bomb bays just in time to see the two bombs plus the extra fuel tank being carried in the bomb bays drop away! By this time the No. 2 tank had been emptied of gas and the fire was out.

"Blonde Bomber" dropped out of formation because of the loss of power from the No. 2 engine. The German fighters noticed the No. 2 engine was feathered and knew "Blonde Bomber" was a cripple and came at her with vengeance. She was attracting a lot of attention from German fighters, who concentrated on lone aircraft. Lt Cox twisted "Blonde Bomber" through all sorts of corkscrewing maneuvers to throw off the aim of the fighters. The enemy aircraft stayed with him. Lt Cox unfeathered the No. 2 engine, letting the prop windmill so the fighters would think it was pulling power. This relieved a little of the pressure from the attacking fighters, who had plenty of other stragglers to go after.

In the midst of all this action, the oxygen supply to the right waist gunner, S/Sgt Paul DeMidio, failed and he passed out. The ball turret gunner, S/Sgt Ernest J. Koger, came up out of his turret to man Sgt DeMidio's waist gun. The electrical suit of the tail gunner, William B. McCrae, shorted out and his right hand and right foot became frostbitten. When he saw the fire from the No. 2 tank and felt the gyrations of the aircraft, Sgt McCrae thought "Blonde Bomber" was going down. He opened the tail hatch and was ready to bail out, but decided to stay with her awhile longer, finally realizing the aircraft was still air worthy.

Fifteen minutes after the target a Me 109 came directly at "Blonde Bomber" from 1200 O'clock level. Lt Harlow, opened fire with a nose gun when the enemy aircraft was about 500 yards away. He

put 100-150 rounds into the approaching fighter, tracers going into the fuselage and wings. As the fighter went down under the bomber, the crew saw the engine smoking and part of the left wing fall away. Thirty-five minutes later a FW 190 came in on "Blonde Bomber" from 0500 O'clock low, sailing up and over the bomber and heading away at 0630 O'clock. Sgt Schalich engaged the fighter with his top turret twin .50 caliber machine guns as it approached to about 500 yards. After he had fired 50 rounds, the fleeing aircraft exploded in a ball of fire.

Lt Cox eventually brought "Blonde Bomber" back to Bassingborn, battered and low on gas, but surviving to fly another day. For their efforts in bringing the aircraft back safely, Lt Cox and Sgt Schailch were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. Sgt Evans was awarded the Silver Star for remaining at his position, even though severely wounded. This was Sgt Evans' first and final mission.

Because of the extensive battle damage sustained on the 14th of October, "Blonde Bomber" was not back on flight status until the 5th of November. Starting the 5th she flew six missions through the 7th of January, receiving very minor damage. Her next mission, on the 11th of January, was the last "Blonde Bomber" would fly. For this mission, to the Focke-Wulf assembly plane at Oschersleben, 2Lt Wayne E. Murdock was flying as first pilot. "Blonde Bomber" was in the No. 3 position of the Second Element of the Lead Squadron.

The bomber stream was hit by fighters almost as soon as it crossed over onto the continent. Fighters, Me 109s and FW 190s, bore in on "Blonde Bomber" from 1200 O'clock high, pumping 20 mm shells into her as they came. Some of the enemy aircraft came so close, the nose crew of the bomber could see the determined expressions on the faces of the pilots as they flashed by. The bombardier, 2Lt Robert R. Case, and the navigator, 2Lt George F. Young, Jr., fired the nose guns at the incoming fighters. The fighters were closing on the bomber so fast, it was difficult to track them with machine gun fire. Lts Case and Young tried to spray out a square pattern of machine gun fire where they thought the fighters would come in. "Blonde Bomber" took a number of 20 mm cannon fire hits, one of which exploded in the radio room, setting it afire and killing the radio operator, Sgt Teddy J. Morris. Lt Case was hit over much of his body by flying pieces of aluminum and flak as well as shards of Plexiglas that were driven into his face. One piece of metal grazed his left arm at the level of his heart. Lt Case was more mad than scared and continued firing despite the pain from the wounds. Soon the floor of the nose compartment was deep in spent shell casings

Most of the controls also were shot away by the cannon fire screaming into all parts of the plane. Lt Murdock struggled to maintain position in the formation to the target as the plane became a fiery inferno. The waist gunners, Sgts Walter T. Romanofski and Russell B. Hoover, and the ball turret gunner, Sgt Thomas H. Rogers, figured the plane was going to explode any second and bailed out through the waist hatch. During one of the early attacks, a 20 mm shell blew away part the left foot of the tail gunner, Sgt Julius R. Sobieski. Sgt Sobieski bound his bleeding foot and stayed at his position. The rest of the crew also remained aboard to the target.

After bombs away, Lt Murdock could no longer hold "Blonde Bomber" in position. Engulfed in flames, she immediately fell out of the formation. Knowing the plane was doomed for certain, the rest of the crew began bailing out. Lts Case and Young went out the nose hatch, Lt Case checking out the flight deck to make certain the pilots were OK before leaving. The copilot, 2Lt Kenneth L. Manson, and the top turret gunner, Sgt Arlo L. Rosewell, dropped through the bomb bay. Sgt Sobieski finally bailed out through the rear hatch. As they fell away from the aircraft, both Sgts Sobieski and Rosenwall saw Lt Murdock leave the plane, but did not see his chute deploy. His body was found near the fragmented remains of "Blonde Bomber." Either his chute was shot up and failed to deploy, or Lt Murdock was hit and killed on the catwalk over the bomb bay, his body then falling free.

As Lt Case floated downward, a Me 109 came at him. The plane circled Lt Case's chute, the pilot dipped his wing toward the chute, smiled and waved at Lt Case before zipping away. All eight of the surviving crewmen became long-term "guests" of the German Luftwaffe as POWs. Lt Case and Sgt Sobieski received excellent medical care from the Germans.

"Blonde Bomber" went to the ground in the vicinity of Oschersleben, Germany.

### **No. 139, "Chief Sly II"**

Cpt Bruce D. Barton and "Chief Sly II" were back in the air again to Wilhelmshaven on the 21st, completing the mission with only minor flak damage and one encounter with a FW 190. The enemy aircraft came at the bomber from 0700 O'clock level thirteen minutes after the target. The top turret gunner, T/Sgt Richard L. Hare, fired a short burst into the fighter, which peeled off to the right trailing smoke from the engine.

No further damage was incurred on missions on 29 May and 11 and 13 June. On the 28th of June the 91st went to the submarine pens at St. Nazaire. Cpt Donald E. Sheeler flew "Chief Sly II" as Lead of the Second Element of the High Squadron for this mission. The bombardier, 2Lt Herbert F. Egender, was a member of 1Lt James E. Breeden's crew. Lt Breeden had been shot down on the mission to Kiel on the 19th of May, while flying his first mission as copilot with 1Lt Edwin L. Baxley, in No. 483, "Spirit of Alcohol." Two days later, the navigator of Lt Breeden's crew, 2Lt Morris L. Floyd, also went down on his first mission, to Wilhelmshaven, while flying with 1Lt Norman Retchin's crew in No. 657. Since then the rest of Lt Breeden's crew had been flying missions together with several different pilots. On the 28th of June, Lt Egender was flying with Cpt Sheeler. Five of his crew were flying on the left wing of "Chief Sly II", with 1Lt Edward T. Brodnax in No. 724, "Thunderbird."

As "Chief Sly II" went over the target a shard of flak blasted a large hole in the left inboard wing resulting in loss of power in both the No. 1 and 2 engines. Many of the electrical instruments were knocked out, as was part of the copilot's window. Cpt Sheeler kept "Chief Sly II" in the air across the Channel, but landed at an alternate airbase at Pontneath, in southern England, rather than risk going on to Bassingbourn. "Thunderbird" with five of Lt Egender's original crewmen aboard went down in Channel. Eight of the ten crewmen, including four of Lt Egender's crew mates were killed. The other two crewmen became POWs.

"Chief Sly II" was finally repaired. She was back flying again for a mission to the marshalling yards at Flushing, Holland on 15 August, this time with 2Lt William R. Cox and his crew. The next day 1Lt Joel W. Gatewood's crew flew her to the LeBourget Airfield near Paris. She came through both missions unscathed. The following mission for "Chief Sly II", to Schwienfurt on the 17<sup>th</sup> was her last. Lt Gatewood and his crew were aboard once again, leading the Second Element of the High Squadron. This was Lt Gatewood's fifth mission, his third as first pilot. Three men aboard were new to his crew. The waist gunners, right, Sgt George F. Hite and left, S/Sgt Thomas A. Parfitt, were replacements for waist gunner, S/Sgt Joseph J. Kominak, who had suffered frost bite on a mission to Gelsenkirchen on the 12th and for tail gunner, S/Sgt Floydstone F. Bryant, who had died from anoxia when his oxygen system went out on the 12th. Lt Gatewood's regular waist gunner, S/Sgt Frederick F. Pearce moved into the tail gun position for this mission. T/Sgt Daniel J. Butler replaced the radio operator, T/Sgt Jack H. Schaeffer, who also had suffered frost bite on the 12th.

Wave upon wave of German fighters came at the Strike Force from the time the bombers entered over the continent. FW 190s and Me 109s were coming at the Squadron Lead planes in flights of 15-20 aircraft. About ten miles from Aachen, "Chief Sly II" was hit hard by head-on attacking

fighters. The electrical system to the left wing flaps was knocked out making it hard to control the plane. It took all of Lt Gatewood's strength to hold the plane level. Lt Gatewood struggled for about ten minutes to hold up the wings and keep the plane in level flight. He finally hollered at the copilot, George E. Riegel, to set the autopilot to give him more control of the bomber. At that instant a 20 mm cannon shell from a Me 109 slammed into the cockpit killing Lt Riegel. The flight engineer, T/Sgt Raymond F. Canada, who was standing behind the pilots assisting them in controlling the aircraft, slumped down dead from the exploding cannon shell. The rest of the controls were shot away by the same round, causing the bomber to go into a downward spin. With no purpose to remaining at the useless controls, Lt Gatewood made his way down to the nose where the navigator, 2Lt Daniel A. Downey, and bombardier, 2Lt Harold H. Hammond, were standing up in the compartment. Lt Gatewood opened the hatch and said "Let's go!" Lt Hammond bailed out, followed by Lts Gatewood and Downey.

In the back, Sgt Parfitt squeezed out the waist window, but found himself plastered to the side of the fuselage by the force of the spin. He thought he "was a goner", but the aircraft lurched and he came free. Sgt Parfitt opened his chute and landed safely. None of the other crewmen was able to escape the spinning aircraft.

Lt Hammond pulled the rip cord of his chute almost as soon as he was out of the plane as he wanted to make certain it was open before he ran out of oxygen and passed out. As he floated down, a Me 109 approached Lt Hammond's chute. At first he thought the pilot was going to fire at him, but he merely circled Lt Hammond a few times and took off. The plane came so close on one pass that Lt Hammond could see that the pilot was wearing a dress uniform.

Lts Downey and Gatewood free-fell for some time trying to get low enough to reduce the time anyone on the ground would have to shoot at them. "Chief Sly II" kept circling around them as she settled down, coming closer to them on each pass. As she came at them a third time, both crewmen opened their chutes so as to slow their rate of fall and let the bomber pass under them. "Chief Sly II" crashed below the airmen as they floated down. Lt Gatewood settled into a tree, in which his chute hung up, about 100 feet from where "Chief Sly II" had crashed and was burning. Ammo was going off so Lt Gatewood unsnapped his chute and clutched the back side of the tree to protect himself from the exploding shells. About that time a bomb went off, throwing Lt Gatewood out of the tree. Lt Downey, seeing him struggling to get up, came over and helped Lt Gatewood into the woods. Lt Hammond was captured immediately. The other three crewmen joined up and wandered free for 10 days before being captured by civilians to begin their 20 month stay as POWs.

### **No. 712, "Heavyweight Annihilators No. 2"/"My Prayer"**

"Heavyweight Annihilators No. 2" was stood down from flying until the 11th of June, when 1Lt Don C. Bader flew her on the Bremen mission that diverted to Wilhelmshaven. She flew again on the 13th and 22nd of June, after which she was down until the 17th of July. She did not experience serious damage on any of these missions. There then followed five successive aborts for a variety of malfunctions. It was not until the 15th of August that No. 712 flew a successful mission, with 2Lt James D. Judy and his crew aboard. Sometime during this period, the name and nose art, a provocative reclining woman with yellowish brown-hair, attired in a skimpy dark blue silky negligee, was painted over and replaced by a scroll with an abbreviated derivation of the 23rd Psalm and, in script, the name, "My Prayer." Lt Judy's second mission aboard "My Prayer", on the 17 of August, would be her last.

Four of the 322nd Squadron planes, including "My Prayer", flew in the High Squadron. Lt Judy started the mission flying in the No. 2 position, on the right wing, of the Lead Element.

The bomber stream came under almost constant fighter attack from the moment they crossed over onto the continent. Planes began going down immediately. The first to go down was No. 225, "V-Packette", of the 323rd Squadron of the 91st Group. One of the two survivors, the Navigator, 2Lt Edgar J. Yelle, had arrived at Bassingbourn only the night before and was on his first combat mission--20 minutes over enemy territory.

The fighter support turned back at about 1410 hours. With no American fighters to contend with, the German Me 109s and FW 190s had a field day. Bombers were dropping like flies. Twenty-two of the B-17s in the Schweinfurt Strike Force had gone down by the time the bomber stream had reached Frankfurt and turned to the east, to head for Schweinfurt. By this time "My Prayer" was flying on the right wing of No. 511, "Wheel 'N Deal", with 1Lt LeRoy E. Everett's crew aboard. The surviving planes were shifting positions to tighten up the formation for better defense against the attacking German fighters.

At 1430 hours, about 15-20 miles southwest of Frankfurt, a fighter came directly at "My Prayer" in a head-on attack. Three 20 mm cannon shells struck the base of the left wing, just below the pilot's compartment, causing a large explosion. The hydraulic and oxygen systems were set ablaze, engulfing the cockpit with fire and smoke, which blinded Lts Judy and Layn. The control cables to the elevators and rudder and all the controls to the tail were severed by the cannon fire, as were many of the electrical wires. The batteries were hit, knocking out much of the electrical system. Lt Judy lost control of the aircraft and "My Prayer" went into a slow downward spin.

Lt Judy rang the bail-out bell and ordered the crew out. Lts DeCoster and Allen, opened the bottom hatch in their forward compartment and bailed out. The opening caused a rush of fresh air through the plane that cleared the smoke from the pilots' compartment. However, the wind also provided a good draft for the fire, which became a blazing inferno engulfing the interior of the fuselage. As Lt Judy fought to regain control of the downward spinning plane, Lt Layn went aft to help the remaining crew with their parachute harnesses and to assist them in bailing out before the plane exploded. Lt Judy was able to bring "My Prayer" out of her spin after falling about 6,000 feet. He jettisoned the bomb load by pulling the emergency bomb release handle in the cockpit. At this time they were attacked once again by enemy fighters, taking hits that caused the oxygen system to explode and severed the remaining electrical connections to the instrument panel. Most of the instruments were now nonfunctional. When all but Sgt Cherry were out, Lt Layn saw that Sgt Cherry's chute was too badly burned for him to bail out. In addition, Sgt Cherry had been hit six times by shrapnel, with especially bad leg and chest wounds. He also had pieces of Plexiglas imbedded in an eye.

Lt Judy refused to abandon the plane when he learned Sgt Cherry had no means with which to save himself. Lts Judy and Layn made a quick decision to remain with "My Prayer." Since all four engines were still running, they decided to try to take her back to England. While Lt Judy flew the plane, Lt Layn and Sgt Cherry fought the fires. With the smoke cleared from the aircraft, they could locate and attack the source of the fires. In spite of his injuries, Sgt Cherry put out the fire in the cockpit with a fire extinguisher. Then he went after the large fire behind the cockpit, beating it out with his gloves, in the process seriously burning his hands. In the meantime, Lt Layn worked on the other fires, eventually bringing them under control.

While Sgt Cherry and Lt Layn were fighting the fires Lt Judy dropped "My Prayer" down to within 50-100 feet of the ground to make her a more difficult target for the German fighters still coming at them. Two fighters followed them down. Sgt Cherry, who also was manning

the nose guns in between fighting fires, and Lt Layn, who was on the waist guns, fired short bursts at them. The fighters broke away without firing, either they were out of ammunition or low on fuel. "My Prayer" was not bothered again by German fighters.

Lt Judy took evasive actions in an attempt to avoid ground fire as he headed for England. Still, "My Prayer" was hit several more times, resulting in additional damage. Since his navigator had bailed out, Lt Judy had to set his own course for England, all the while fighting the almost control-less plane to keep it in the air and attempting to avoid anti-aircraft batteries. Short-circuits in the electrical system and smoldering fires in the insulation combined to cause an additional 10-12 fires to flare up on the return trip. The smoke from these fires resulted in Lt Judy being blinded much of the time. Sgt Cherry and Lt Layn fought and put out the fires, then returning to their guns in case additional German fighters should appear. Lt Judy would relate later "We came home at 210 miles per hour, buzzing cities, factories and airfields in Germany. It was the first legal buzzing I had ever done."

The aircraft skimmed low across Germany, past Belgium and over the English Channel. In Germany, people on the ground scattered when they saw the plane, in Belgium, they waved and saluted. By the time "My Prayer" arrived at the English Coast, two engines had given out and Lt Judy had very little control of the plane. Sgt Cherry had lost so much blood Lt Layne placed him in the copilot's seat to assist Lt Judy in landing. Lt Judy headed for the nearest airfield, the RAF fighter base at Manston in Kent. As he approached the field they discovered the bomb bay doors were down and could not be closed, the ball turret guns were in a locked position pointing straight down, the foot brakes were completely out and the emergency brakes only one fourth effective, the landing flaps would not come down, the aileron trim tabs were jammed in an up position, the main inverter that supplied alternating current for many of the controls was out, none of the controls to the tail surfaces would function, and the landing gear controls were not working. Lt Layn cranked the landing gear down by hand while Lt Judy made a circle over the field. Becoming hot from the exertion, Lt Layn shucked off his flight jacket and tossed it into the radio compartment. The jacket immediately was whisked up and out of the open top hatch. Someone in England got a souvenir leather A-2 jacket.

The Manston Airbase was partially under repair, with many holes in the main runway. By this time "My Prayer" was barely staying in the air. There was no time to search for another airfield. After the gear were locked in position, Judy managed to put "My Prayer" down in a skidding landing on the grass at 1610 hours. It had been just an hour and forty minutes since "My Prayer" began her solitary flight back from Frankfurt. There were over 500 holes in the aircraft. She would never fly again. But, Lt Judy had brought his two remaining crewmen home safely. For their actions on this mission, all three crew members were put in for the Congressional Medal of Honor. Lt Judy eventually was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, the second highest award for valor. Lt Layn and Sgt Cherry were awarded Silver Stars, the nations third highest award. Sgt Cherry was also credited with one Me 109 shot down.

## **323<sup>rd</sup> Squadron**

### **No. 639, "The Careful Virgin"**

The next mission for the "The Careful Virgin" was on the 29th of May. Cpt William E. Clancy's crew was aboard as she led the High Squadron to the submarine pens at St. Nazaire, France. This mission was much less traumatic than Cpt Clancy and his crew had experienced on the 21st when they flew in No. 990, "Dame Satan", to Wilhelmshaven. "The Careful Virgin" received no serious damage on the 29th. She flew nine more missions through the 16th of August, only a few of which resulted in even minor damage to the bomber.

All this changed on the next mission, to the ball bearing factories at Schweinfurt on 17 August. For this mission, "The Careful Virgin" was loaned to the 401st Squadron. Recently promoted Cpt Harry T. Lay and his crew flew her as Lead of the Low Squadron, a Composite Squadron comprised of crews from the 322nd and 323rd Squadrons as well as the 401st. Cpt Lay had an experienced crew aboard. Cpt Lay and his crew had completed their 25 missions earlier, but had been asked to fly an additional five missions owing to a severe shortage of experienced crews. The war over Europe during this period was swallowing up planes and crews almost as soon as they went into the air. Cpt Lay and his crew agreed to continue flying while new crews were breaking in. All survived the additional bombing missions. Cpt Lay then trained as a P-51 fighter pilot and returned to combat. He was killed on his second fighter mission, on 17 July 1944, near Sompius, France.

When Cpt Lay's crew was being organized in Boise, Idaho in 1942, Sgt William A. Gottschalk, trained as a radio operator, was assigned to the crew. After he reported in, the crewmen that had arrived earlier told him "we already have a radio operator, T/Sgt Donald F. Robertson." But, there was no designated ball turret gunner. So, Sgts Gottschalk and Robertson tossed a coin. Sgt Robertson won. He remained as radio operator and Sgt Gottschalk became the ball turret gunner.

The Luftwaffe came at the Schwienfurt Strike Force in vengeance as soon as it crossed over onto the continent and continued their attacks all the way to the target and back out. Fighters swarmed in on the Low Squadron and planes began falling like "autumn leaves." Everywhere the crew looked they saw blazing bombers going down, some blowing up in mid air before hitting the ground, others disintegrating in large boiling black clouds as they impacted and exploded. Sgt Gottshalk saw one wounded B-17 make a complete loop as it started down. A few chutes came out. In spite of the intense action and hard charging German fighters sweeping through the squadron, there were only two small bullet holes into the left side of the fuselage of "The Careful Virgin."

Well before the target, the tail gunner, S/Sgt Clarence W. Clark, called Cpt Lay over the intercom and asked "Why are we flying down here all by ourselves?" From his vantage point in the rear of the plane, he saw that the rest of the Low Squadron was gone. 1Lt Robert E. Wine in No. 311, "Local Girl", had aborted over the Channel. No. 712, "My Prayer" had been hit so hard, Lt Judy had to turn back home. Lts Bennett (No. 559, "Stupentakit"), Accaro, (No. 524, "Eagles Wrath"), and Von Der Hyde, (No. 225, "V-Packette") had been shot down. Cpt Lay looked up and saw only two planes were left in the High Squadron. He jerked "The Careful Virgin" upward to move into Lead of the remnants of the High Squadron, No. 497, 2Lt Cleo C. Struble, and No. 511, "Wheel 'N Deal", 1Lt Leroy B. Everett, Jr.

Cpt Lay and the surviving aircraft continued on, dropping on the target as they went over. On the way back, "The Careful Virgin" incurred no additional damage from the swarming enemy aircraft. After the intensity of the attacks had slackened off, Cpt Lay called for a check of the crew over the intercom. When Sgt Robertson did not answer, he asked the rear crew to check him out. Sgt Gottschalk got out of the ball turret and with the two waist gunners, S/Sgt Louie R. Rivera and Sgt Ole Loken, went to the radio compartment. The door was jammed shut. When the crewmen pushed the door open, they found Sgt Robertson's body wedged against it. The two bullets that had gone into the fuselage had hit Sgt Robertson in the throat, killing him instantly. "The Careful Virgin" landed back at Bassingbourn at 1754 hours.



There followed three much less traumatic missions on 27 August and 6 and 15 September, and an abort on the 26th of September. On the next mission on the 8th of October, to Bremen, "The Careful Virgin" failed to live up to her name. She flew as Group Lead plane, with Cpt John T. Gladstone as first pilot and LTC Clemens K. Wurzbach, the Group Leader, in the copilot's seat. The Group navigator, Cpt Monroe W. Williams, along with the crew's regular navigator, 1Lt Robert N. Paulson, were in the nose. Lt Paulson was flying his 25th, and final, mission. The mission progressed routinely until the Group approached the target. The Lead bombardier, 1Lt Edward J. Reynolds, Jr., could not see the target, the submarine pens, because the entire area was covered by a combination of a heavy smoke screen and hazy weather conditions. So he headed the Lead aircraft, with the rest of the Group following, to where the smoke was most dense, assuming this would be the most critical area. Unfortunately, this took the formation over the very heavily defended center of Bremen itself. The flak barrage was intense. "The Careful Virgin" was hit in the No. 2 engine, knocking it out. Flak also smashed the accumulator between the cockpit and bomb bays, resulting in loss of all hydraulic fluid to the brakes and cowl flaps.

Once over the target, a Me 109 attacked "The Careful Virgin" from 0900 O'clock level. The top turret gunner, T/Sgt Boyd W. Veager, opened fire at 800 yards. When the enemy aircraft was about 400 yards out, Sgt Veager saw his tracers going into the engine. The fighter stalled out, burst into flames, nosed over and fell away out of control.

Cpt Gladstone, had no problem in flying "The Careful Virgin" back to Bassingbourn. Landing her was a different story. Since he had no brakes, Cpt Gladstone came in on the shorter north-south runway so as not to block the main runway should he crash. As soon as the aircraft slowed somewhat on landing, the pilots ground-looped the plane to lose speed. With the No. 2 engine out and the main power from the No. 3 and 4 engines on the right wing, they had to loop to the left. In so doing, the aircraft slammed into No. 591, "The Shamrock Special" which was being worked on by her ground crew. "The Careful Virgin" went into the tail of the "The Shamrock Special" causing extensive damage to both aircraft.

Lt Paulson heard a hissing sound when "The Careful Virgin" finally came to a stop. Fearing the worst, a fire and explosion, he dived for the nose escape hatch. Cpt Williams had the same fear and idea and acted as did Lt Paulson. The two navigators hit the hatch at the same time, becoming stuck in the opening. Lt Paulson pulled away to let Cpt Williams drop out and then followed, both hitting the ground on the run. The rest of the crew lost no time in exiting "The Careful Virgin."

One of the ground crewmen for "The Shamrock Special", Sgt Jack Gaffney, had been working in the rear of the fuselage. Tired and in need of a smoke, he went out through the side hatch and had walked only a few feet from the plane when he saw "The Careful Virgin" coming at him and plowing into "The Shamrock Special", smashing the fuselage where he had just been working. Neither plane caught fire, but the rear section of "The Shamrock Special" had to be completely replaced. "The Careful Virgin" was in the repair shop for almost a month, but she was put back in flying condition.

"The Careful Virgin" was back in combat on the 3rd of November. No damage. She was then stood down for a little over three weeks, getting back in the air for a mission on the 26th with no damage, only to be stood down again until the 22nd of December. She was beginning to wear out. The battering from flying combat and the ground wreck had taken its toll on the various systems of "The Careful Virgin." Finally she was deemed airworthy again and was in the air routinely following the 22 December mission, flying seven missions through the 6th of February, receiving only minor damage on all except the 29th of January when she took several large flak hits.

A mission to Oschersleben, on the 20th of February proved to be the last time "The Careful Virgin" would carry a crew over "Fortress Europe." 2Lt Spencer K. Osterberg's crew was aboard for

her final mission as she flew in the No. 3 position of the Lead Element of the Low Squadron. German fighters came at the formation just as it left the IP and engaged the bombers again as they broke off the target. Flak bursts over the target knocked several large holes in the fuselage and wings and hit the No. 4 engine propeller. Fighters came at "The Careful Virgin" head on, further damaging the No. 4 engine prop and hitting the left wing between the fuselage and the No. 2 engine with 20 mm cannon fire. In spite of considerable damage to the aircraft, Lt Osterberg brought her safely back to Bassingbourn for the last time.

This time the Group Maintenance Officer decided she had seen more than her share of combat flying. "The Careful Virgin" was one of the last B-17F models still flying combat in the 8th Air Force. After more than 50 combat missions and considerable battle damage, it was obvious that it would be counter-productive to attempt to send crews out in her again.

But, the war was not over for "The Careful Virgin." On the 18th of March she was transferred to 2nd Strategic Air Depot. There she was stripped down, had the cockpit cut away and an open windscreen put in place. Radio controls were installed. She was then assigned to the highly secret "Aphrodite" program. Aged bombers so modified were packed with 20,000 pounds of Torpex explosive and used as flying bombs. A crew of two would take the planes into the air and bail out after reaching altitude. A control plane would take over the "Aphrodite" and guide her on to crash the explosives onto the target.

On the 4th of August, "The Careful Virgin" was stuffed with explosives and flown to a V-1, "Buzz Bomb, launch site at Mimoyecques, France. Unfortunately, she crashed short of the designated target, harmlessly blowing herself to pieces. Thus, "The Careful Virgin" did to herself what no German flak battery or Luftwaffe fighter had been able to do in 13 months of flying combat over the continent.

### **No. 399, "Man-O-War"**

"Man-O-War", on loan to the 324th Squadron, aborted on the 21st when the electric suits of three crewmen shorted out. She then successfully completed five missions through the 26th of July, sustaining only minor damage. On the 30th of July 2Lt Keene C. McCammon took her out on a mission to Kassel. This was his crew's third mission. They flew in the No. 2 position in the Second Element of the Low Squadron. The Strike Force was first hit by German fighters 15 minutes before reaching the enemy coast. "Man-O-War" escaped the wrath of the Luftwaffe and made to the target without incident. Her luck ran out on the bomb run. She took flak hits over the target that knocked out the No. 1 engine. Lt McCammon was able to keep "Man-O-War" at altitude and in position, even with reduced power, as far as the Wal River in Holland. There flak hit them again, taking out the No. 3 engine. The plane started falling out of formation.

Lt McCammon knew "Man-O-War" could not stay up much longer. He rang the bail-out bell and told the crew they had to get out. The crewmen started arguing with Lt McCammon over the intercom for him to try to keep the plane in the air and make it back on two engines. About this time two FW 190s hit "Man-O-War" with 20 mm cannon fire, knocking out the intercom and setting the bomb bay on fire. The crewmen were still arguing with Lt McCammon and calling out attacking enemy aircraft when the intercom went dead. Flames began raging upwards into the forward part of the plane. The controls also had been shot out. The aircraft no longer was responding to Lt McCammon. She was going down.

Lt McCammon and the copilot, 2Lt John P. Bruce, realizing they had only a few moments before the plane might explode, made their way through the fire down into the nose. The two pilots

and the bombardier, 2Lt Daniel V. Ohman, bailed out through the nose hatch. Lts McCammon and Bruce landed safely in the suburbs of Boxley, Holland. Lt McCammon was captured immediately by German infantry men. Lt Bruce was taken into custody an hour later by German police who turned him over to the military. Lt Ohman fell to his death through the roof of a house. Either he delayed too long in opening his chute or it failed to open. The other seven crewmen remained trapped in the falling aircraft. None survived.

“Man-O-War” crashed to the ground near Opijnen, Holland.

### **No. 787, “Billie K”**

“Billie K” was sent out again on the 21st of May with Cpt George B. Birdsong, Jr. and his crew. Although four fighters made a run on the bomber, none was hit by the gunners. Nor did “Billie K” sustain serious damage. On the 29th she was loaned to the 322nd Squadron for 1Lt Don C. Bader’s crew to take her to St. Nazaire. While over the target a flak burst knocked a small hole in the cockpit window, but neither pilot was wounded. On the 11th of June she was back in the 323rd formation. 1Lt Jerold D. Kethley and his crew flew her in the No. 3 position of the Second Element of the High Squadron. Ten minutes before the alternate target, Wilhelmshaven, “Billie K” came under attack by enemy fighters. A Me 109 made a run at the bomber from 0800 O’clock high, crossing under her and heading out at 0300 O’clock low. The right waist gunner, S/Sgt Wilfred R. Bacon, opened fire as the fighter approached, putting about 180 rounds into the plane. The fighter burst into flames and spun out of control down to the ground.

Two minutes later a FW 190 attacked from 1200 O’clock low. S/Sgt Harold V. Stokes, in the ball turret, started firing when the fighter came to within 1,000 yards. It appeared that the pilot was hit. Tracers were seen going into the nose and fuselage. The fighter spun out and went down immediately, exploding upon hitting the ground. “Billie K” was not hit during either pass by the enemy aircraft. She and her crew returned to Bassingbourn with no further action.

Lt Kethley then took her up on eight successive missions through the 30th of July. They aborted on 25th of June and 17th of July. The 28th of June, on a mission to St. Nazaire, “Billie K” sustained a large flak hole in the right wing between the No. 3 and 4 engines, but returned safely. On the other five missions she was not damaged.

On 30 July Lt Kethley’s crew was aboard for a mission to the aircraft plant at Kassel, Germany. “Billie K” led the Second Element of the Low Squadron. Over the target the bombs did not release because of an electrical failure. The bombardier, 2Lt James J. Cullen, had to salvo the bombs causing them to drop late and miss the target. As the formation came off the target, the Group Lead aircraft, No. 639, “The Careful Virgin”, made a violent, quick left turn. This threw the tail end of the formation, including the entire Low Squadron, out of position. The Lead aircraft kept making rapid left turns as the Group moved away from the target. As a result, “Billie K” ended up 1,000 yards below and slightly behind the rest of the formation. The out-of-position “Billie K” was jumped from the low rear by 12-14 FW 190s and Me 109s flying in an echeloned line. The ball turret gunner, S/Sgt Harold V. Stokes, began firing at the nearest plane, a Me 109, when it was about 800 yards out. The enemy aircraft slowed to a stall at 200 yards. The prop stopped turning and the fighter fell off to its left and went down. The rest of the fighters went on by without damaging “Billie K.” Lt Kethley brought her on back to Bassingbourn without incident.

On the 12th of August luck ran out for Lt Kethley’s crew and “Billie K.” On this day they flew Lead of the Second Element of the Lead Squadron, Deputy Group Lead, on a mission to the synthetic oil plant at Gelsenkirchen. Soon after passing over the Dutch coast the formation was attacked by German

fighters, both FW 190s and Me 109s. On the first pass "Billie K" was hit by 20 mm cannon fire, knocking out the No. 1 and 3 engines and showering the cockpit with glass from a shattered windshield. The No. 3 prop started windmilling and then the engine ran away. Lt Kethley felt a tap on his shoulder and looked around to see the top turret gunner, S/Sgt Robert C. Danielson, standing behind him with his face a mass of frozen blood, obviously seriously wounded about the head. "Billie K" was dropping out of formation as she lost speed. Lt Kethley told the copilot, 2Lt Ennis Cox, to take Sgt Danielson down to the nose hatch and get him out of the aircraft. Before Lt Cox could do so, more enemy fighters came through the formation, this time knocking out the No. 4 engine. The pilots tried to restart engines No. 1 and 3, but to no avail. With only one engine pulling power, "Billie K" started falling rapidly. Almost immediately thereafter yet another group of fighters came at the struggling bomber, knocking out her remaining engine. The B-17 was never intended to be a glider. Lt Cox took Sgt Danielson down to the nose and assisted him in bailing out. He put the D-ring of the chute in Sgt Danielson's hand told him to count to three before pulling the cord and pushed him out.

"Billie K" kept going down at a steep angle with German fighters still after her. Lt Kethley saw only forest below and knew he could not crash-land the aircraft. He rang the bail-out bell and told the crew over the intercom to "get out." Lt Kethley stayed at the controls until he thought everyone had time to leave the plane. He was starting to get up to leave himself when the flight engineer, T/Sgt Alfred J. Bragg, who was manning a waist gun on this mission, touched him on the shoulder and asked "Did you say bail out?" Sgt Bragg had been disconnected from the intercom. Continuing to make ready to go to the nose hatch, Lt Kethley said "Boy, you better go, because I'm gone!" Sgt Bragg went back in the fuselage past the bomb bay and bailed out the waist door, along with the rest of the rear crew, except for the tail gunner, S/Sgt John E. Burke. Sgt Burke dropped through the tail hatch.

In the nose, the bombardier, 2Lt James J. Cullen, had his intercom connection broken by an exploding 20 mm shell. He turned around and saw the navigator, 2Lt Robert D. Sternberg, putting on his, Cullen's, chute. Lt Cullen plugged back into the intercom and asked Lt Kethley if they were bailing out. Lt Kethley told him "Yes man, we're going down. You'd better get out." Lt Cullen grabbed his chute from Lt Sternberg, snapped it on and dived through the nose hatch. His boot caught in the hatch leaving him dangling outside the plane by one foot. Lt Cullen's chest pack chute came loose and was hanging over his head. He thought it had fallen off and tried unsuccessfully to pull himself back into the plane. He then saw the chute was only over his head so slipped his foot out of the boot to fall free. He landed safely, but it was a month before he could walk on the foot that had been caught in the hatch. By the time Lt Cullen finally broke free of the aircraft, Lt Sternberg had put his own chute on and dropped out after him. Lt Kethley made his way to the nose and followed them through the hatch. All the crew landed safely.

Sgt Danielson was picked up by the Germans and taken to a hospital, where he remained for about a year. He was repatriated back to the States before the war was over. Sgt Danielson lost one eye and required over 50 operations to get all the metal out of his head, neck and shoulders. Years later a small washer from the turret still remained imbedded in his cheek.

"Billie K" crashed near Goch, Germany.

## **No. 559, "Stupntakit"**

1Lt Charles H. Silvernail continued flying "Stupntakit" for eight more missions, through the 12th of August with no serious damage. On the 11th of June Lt Silvernail took her out on a mission that started out for Bremen, but switched to the alternate target, Wilhelmshaven, when Bremen was found

to be clouded over. A FW 190 dropped a bomb from about 2,000 feet above "Stupntakit" while crossing over the bomber from 0730 O'clock. The blast rocked the wings, but did no damage to the aircraft. The only damage on this mission was from shell casings spewing out of B-17s above them. The pilot's windshield and the nose glass were shattered and holes punched in the left horizontal stabilizer.

On the 4th of July, with Lt Silvernail's crew again aboard, a Me 109 came at the "Stupntakit" from 1200 O'clock high eight and one half minutes before the target, Le Mans, France. The enemy aircraft went right over "Stupntakit", but only the tail gunner, S/Sgt Richard Robinson, was able to lock onto the plane. He started firing when the fighter was 50 yards past his tail position and continued pumping shells into the fleeing fighter until it was more than 500 yards out. The plane fell downwards out of control, exploding when it hit the ground. Four minutes later a Me 109 that had just shot down a B-17 from the 533rd Squadron of the 381st Bomb Group, No. 928, flown by 1Lt Olef M. Ballinger's crew, came diving down through the 91st formation and under "Stupntakit". The ball turret gunner, S/Sgt Emmitt R. Wilson, fired on him as he went under the bomber. The fighter pulled out of the dive, burst into flames and broke into three pieces.

On her next mission, the 25th of July, to Hamburg, "Stupntakit" was hit hard by flak over the target, knocking large holes in the left outer and right inner wing panels. Lt Silvernail once more brought her home safely. 2Lt Keene C. McCammon's crew started out with "Stupntakit", as a Spare, on the 29th of July, but was not needed in the formation and returned to base. "Stupntakit" was attacked by four German fighters on the 30th of July. On this mission to Kassel, Lt Silvernail was flying "Stupntakit" as Lead of the Low Squadron. Enemy aircraft started coming at the Strike Force when about 15 minutes inland from the coast. At 0958 hours a FW 190 made a run at "Stupntakit" from 0500 O'clock low on the first attack. From his ball turret position, Sgt Emmitt R. Wilson, began firing at the approaching aircraft at 1,100 yards. The fighter barreled in directly at "Stupntakit", as if intent on ramming the plane. When within 50 yards of the bomber, the fighter fell over on its right wing and went straight down in a spinning circle. Sgt Wilson lost sight of the falling fighter at about 10,000 feet. The fighter did not fire a shot as it charged the bomber.

At 1030 hours four FW 190s dived down in a "T" formation from 0800 O'clock high on a B-17 straggler flying 200 yards behind "Stupntakit." All at once one of the enemy aircraft peeled off and came onto the tail of "Stupntakit." The tail gunner, S/Sgt Richard Robinson, started firing at him at 150 yards. When 75 yards out the FW blew up in a flaming blast, with wings, wheels and the pilot flying out in different directions. The other three fighters took out the straggling B-17.

Seven minutes later, two more FW 190s dropped down on "Stupntakit" from 0500 O'clock high. The radio operator, S/Sgt William J. Barrett, started firing on the lead plane with the radio room gun when they were 1,000 yards out. By the time the enemy aircraft was within 700 yards, flames were coming out the cowling as it rolled over and went straight down past the tail at 0600 O'clock. The second plane broke off at 700 yards, circled and came back alone, but did not get close enough for any of the gunners to fire at him. "Stupntakit" and Lt Silvernail completed the mission without sustaining any damage from the enemy aircraft.

Lt Silvernail flew one more mission on "Stupntakit", the 12th of August. This was Lt Silvernail's final mission as well as that of the flight engineer, S/Sgt Charles W. Neal, ball turret gunner, Sgt Wilson, and tail gunner, Sgt Robinson. The crew and "Stupntakit" completed the mission without incurring any injuries or damage.

With the departure of Lt Silvernail, his copilot, 1Lt Charles A. Bennett, moved over to the left seat and took the remainder of the crew, with replacements filling in as copilot and for the other three

crewmembers who had completed their missions on the 12th. They flew to Le Bourget without incident on the 16th of August and were back in the air again on the 17th, to Schwienfurt.

For the Schwienfurt mission, "Stupntakit" started out flying Lead of the Second Element of the Low Squadron. The formation began coming apart as soon as it crossed the enemy coast when it was attacked by swarms of enemy fighters. Four bombers, including No. 225, "V-Packette" with 2Lt Don S. von der Heyde's crew aboard, flying on the right wing of "Stupntakit", had gone down by the time the Strike Force was only a few minutes into Germany.

Ten minutes after crossing into Germany a single enemy aircraft came at "Stupntakit" from below. For some reason or other the ball turret gunner, Sgt John F. Greager, did not fire at it. The top turret gunner, T/Sgt Ford C. Cowherd, kept calling for him to fire, but to no avail. The fighter hit the No. 2 engine with 20 mm cannon fire, knocking it out. Because of the loss of power, Lt Bennett had to pull "Stupntakit" out of formation and head back. He tried to drop down to "the deck" to avoid the fighters swarming around the Strike Force.

By the time he had dropped only a few thousand feet, two twin-engine Me 110s came in on the tail of "Stupntakit." The two fighters played "hide and seek" with Sgt Cowherd around the tail. They would come up, fire and then drop back of the tail where he could not shoot at them with his twin .50s without hitting the vertical stabilizer of "Stupntakit." The Me 110s knocked out the No. 3 engine and hit the tail gunner, S/Sgt Edward P. Troy, in the face, putting out his left eye. The tail guns were still working and in spite of his wounds and profuse bleeding, Sgt Troy remained at his position firing at other fighters that came at them. After running out of ammunition, Sgt Troy remained at his position, calling out attacking fighters. When the war was over and Sgt Troy released from POW camp, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, the Nation's second highest medal for valor, for his actions on this mission.

Another Me 109 came in on the aircraft from above. It hit the top turret with 20 mm cannon fire, knocking Sgt Cowherd out of the turret, but not wounding him. Other shells went into the fuselage under the pilot's and copilot's seats. The area was completely gutted by exploding 20 mm shells. The right waist gunner, S/Sgt Thomas J. Hunt, was killed instantly when his stomach was torn open by a 20 mm cannon shell during one of the fighter passes. The radio operator, T/Sgt William J. Barrett, was also killed when cannon fire turned the radio room into a mass of wreckage. Lt Bennett sent the copilot, 2Lt Stanley A. Dahlman, back through the bomb bay to the radio room to see if he could do anything for Sgt Barrett. He could not. When he returned to his copilot's seat, Lt Dahlman appeared to be in a daze. The left waist gunner, S/Sgt Robert G. Gaynor, manned both waist guns after Sgt Hunt went down.

"Stupntakit" continued fighting off enemy fighters, but she was doomed. Lt Bennett rang the bail-out bell. Sgt Cowherd came into the pilots' compartment and handed Lt Dahlman his chest pack chute. Lt Dahlman was sitting in his seat staring into space. Sgt Cowherd left the chute in his lap. He then snapped on Lt Bennett's chute since he was busy keeping the plane in the air. Sgt Cowherd went back to the bomb bay, salvoed the bombs and dropped through the open bay. Sgt Troy went out the tail hatch, while the ball turret gunner, Sgt John F. Greager, came up into the fuselage and tumbled out the waist hatch. Sgt Gaynor was getting ready to bail out when the ship exploded, blowing him free of the falling wreckage.

After believing the rest of the crew were out of the aircraft, Lt Bennett left the cockpit. Lt Dahlman was still sitting in his seat in a stupor. Lt Bennett pulled him down to the nose. The bombardier, 1Lt Maurice J. Sullivan, and navigator, 1Lt Adrian T. Van Bommel, had already bailed out through the nose hatch. Lt Bennett saw that Lt Dahlman's chute was attached by only one strap, so he snapped the other strap and started to push him out. Before he could do so, "Stupntakit" exploded. Lt

Bennett was small and was simply blown right through the open nose hatch. Lt Dahlman did not make it out of the plane.

“Stupntakit” crashed about a mile west of Diest, Belgium.

### **No. 524, “The Eagle’s Wrath”**

Cpt Charles R. Giauque and his crew were back aboard “The Eagle’s Wrath” for the mission to Wilhelmshaven on the 21st of May. The 91st was leading the Strike Force for this mission. “The Eagle’s Wrath” was leading the Second Element of the Lead Squadron, thus Deputy Lead for VIII Bomber Command.

The Group assembled without incident and began the climb to altitude from 13,000 feet to 22,000 feet while moving over the Channel. About 5 miles from the German coast roughly 50 Me 109s came out to meet the bomber stream. These fighters inflicted little damage on the bombers. However, the next attack, by at least 200 enemy aircraft, was a different story. This attack was mounted as the bombers approached the IP. As described previously, the first wave of fighters went for the Lead ship of the 91<sup>st</sup> Group, No. 639, “The Careful Virgin”, with Cpt William E. Clancy as first pilot and LTC William B. Reid, the Group Leader, his copilot. “The Careful Virgin” took 20 mm cannon fire in the No. 4 engine, setting it afire. Cpt Clancy feathered the engine and continued leading the Group over the target.

As “The Eagle’s Wrath” approached the target, a shell went right under the arched body of the bombardier, 1Lt William C. Butler, as he bent over the bomb sight. Close! The Group dropped on the target and headed back for the coast, with the German fighters continuing their attacks. Three minutes after bombs away, a Me 109 broke away from a group of ten fighters and came at “The Eagle’s Wrath” from head on. Lt Butler fired 150 rounds from the twin-mounted .50 caliber nose guns at the fast closing aircraft from 200 yards out until it was within 25 yards of the bomber. The enemy aircraft broke away to the left, spinning downward with fire in the right wing and engine. During the attack a shell came through the nose compartment, missing Lt Butler by “a hair.” Close again! Thirteen minutes later, as the Group was moving out over the North Sea, another Me 109 turned on the bomber from about 100 yards out and 1100 O’clock level. Once again Lt Butler grabbed the nose guns and began firing at the on-charging enemy aircraft. He fired 100 rounds at the fighter before it turned off to the left, with the engine smoking, and spun downward. A wing fell off as it went into the water below. Enemy fighters broke away once the Strike Force was out to sea. No one on “The Eagle’s Wrath” had been wounded and the aircraft received no serious damage in spite of all the fighter attacks. This was Lt Butler’ 25th and final mission. There was a thankful bombardier at the Officer’s Club that night.

Cpt Giauque flew one more routine mission in his ship on the 29th and his tour was finished. Beginning the 4th of July, a number of different crews attempted to fly a total of eight missions in “The Eagle’s Wrath.” On the 4th, with 1Lt Charles A. Bennett’s crew aboard, a red-nosed FW 190 came at “The Eagle’s Wrath” from 1200 O’clock low four minutes before the target. It broke off and went under the bomber, pulling over and going out at 1030 O’clock, then doubled back, turned and flew alongside “The Eagle’s Wrath” about 350 yards out. The ball turret gunner, S/Sgt Harold K. Michaud, fired 120 rounds into the enemy aircraft as it went by. The fighter started smoking, rolled over and went about 1,000 feet straight down, when flames appeared. The fighter was still going straight down when last seen by the other crewmen, left waist gunner, S/Sgt Stanley Chmielwski, and tail gunner, S/Sgt Frederick J. Maynard.

On three missions "The Eagle's Wrath" had to abort because of oil pressure problems. Two other missions were called back when the Strike Force ran into impenetrable cloud cover over the continent. The three successful missions were "milk runs."

The 17 August Schweinfurt mission was not a milk run. 1Lt Anthony G. Arcaro's crew, who had flown her to Le Bourget the day before, was back aboard. They started out on the left wing of 1Lt Charles A. Bennett in No. 559, "Stupntakit", who was flying Lead of the Second Element of the Low Squadron. 2Lt Don S. von der Heyde, in No. 225, "V-Packette", was flying the right wing of the Second Element. While the Squadron was forming up over England, No. 111, "Local Girl", with 1Lt Robert E. Wine as first pilot, flying No. 3 in the Lead Element had to abort back to base, leaving five planes in the Low Squadron.

German fighters began their relentless attack as the Group started over the enemy coast. "V-Packette" was the first to go down, soon after crossing over into Belgium. Shortly thereafter Lt Bennett and "Stupntakit" went down. Lt Arcaro moved "The Eagle's Wrath" up into the position vacated by "Stupntakit." Fighters continued to swarm in on the Strike Force from every direction. One Me 109, flying on its back, the pilot hanging upside down in his harness, came directly across the nose of "The Eagle's Wrath." The fighter went by so fast none of the gunners on the bomber had time to fire on it.

About 20 miles south of Frankfurt "My Prayer", with 2Lt James D. Judy's crew, dropped out of the formation with the fuselage engulfed in fire. Lt Arcaro moved "The Eagle's Wrath" up into his space. Now only the Lead Plane, "The Careful Virgin", with Cpt Harry T. Lay as pilot and "The Eagle's Wrath", flying on his left wing were left in the Low Squadron. Lt Arcaro tucked his left wing right up against "The Careful Virgin" and followed every evasive action taken by Cpt Lay. Even with continuous all-out fighter attacks, "The Eagle's Wrath" had not yet incurred any damage.

This soon was to change. A few minutes after moving up with Cpt Lay, four enemy aircraft came at "The Eagle's Wrath" from 1100 O'clock high. Cannon fire streamed into the bomber. The oxygen system below the pilots' seats was set afire, the navigator, 2Lt Harry K. Warner, was seriously wounded and the ball turret gunner, S/Sgt Harold K. Michaud, was hit twice in the chest and head and killed. Sgt Michaud's body was hanging half-way out of the turret, his hands frozen on the controls, causing the turret to slowly orbit. The left waist gunner, S/Sgt Elmer F. Lindholm, tried to get him out of the turret, but saw it was useless. Sgt Michaud was beyond help. The top turret gunner, T/Sgt James F. Jones, was killed at his position. He was hit as he tried to salvo the bombs to reduce the weight of the aircraft.

Lt Arcaro knew he could not keep "The Eagle's Wrath" in the air. The intercom was shot out and there was no bail-out bell in the aircraft. He sent the copilot, 2Lt Roman Niemczyk, to the rear to tell the crewmen to leave the aircraft. Sgt Lindholm and the right waist gunner, S/Sgt Ralph E. Dearth, went out the waist hatch. The tail gunner, S/Sgt William G. Golden, dropped from the tail hatch. The radio operator, Sgt Delmar E. Kaech, tried to bail out through the bomb bay, but it was completely engulfed in fire. He then wiggled out through the upper gun port in the radio compartment and rolled off, hoping he would miss the vertical and horizontal stabilizers. Miraculously, he did.

Lt Arcaro waited a couple minutes for the crew to have time to leave the ship. The fire in the fuselage continued to increase in its fury. Lt Arcaro set the autopilot, snapped on his chute and literally dived through the raging fire from the flight deck straight down through the open nose hatch. Lts Niemczyk and Warner and the bombardier, 2Lt William F. Glover, also bailed out through the nose hatch. Unfortunately, Lt Warner's chute apparently malfunctioned and he did not survive the fall.

"The Eagle's Wrath" crashed to the earth a third of a mile from Worms, Germany.

## **No. 475, "Stric-Nine"**



"Stric-Nine" did not fly another complete mission until the 4th of July when 1Lt Jerold D. Kethley and his crew flew her to Le Mans, France. On her next, and last, mission to the airfield at Villa Coublay, near Paris, on the 10th of July, 1Lt Leland E. Forsblad's crew was aboard. This was their second attempt to fly "Stric-Nine." She had been assigned to them on 22 June, but they had to abort over England when the No. 2 engine began running hot. Lt Forsblad's regular plane, No. 225, "V-Packette", had been damaged on the 4th of July mission and was stood down for repairs on the 10th. On the Vill a Coublay mission "Stric-Nine" was assigned No. 3 in the Lead Element of the Low Squadron. Five crewmen on this mission were replacements for Lt Forsblad's original crewmen. His copilot, 2Lt Richard C. Rodman, had been taken off the crew to become a first pilot. He will be killed when his plane, No. 523, "L'il Audrey", is involved in a mid-air collision with No. 816, "Eager Beaver", on 31 August. The navigator, 2Lt Walter H. Sypherd, flew as a fill-in on 1Lt Lawrence J. Starks' crew and was killed on 13 May when his plane No. 642, "Vulgar Virgin", was shot down by German fighters. His tailgunner, S/Sgt Enio Jule Valerio, also was killed on the same day when assigned to 1Lt Homer C. Biggs' crew in No. 406. They, too, fell victim to German fighters. Lt Forsblad's engineer, T/Sgt Basil W. Nichols, was badly wounded on the mission to Wilhelmshaven on 11 June and was sent home. The bombardier, Sam Slateon, was pulled from the crew to train as a lead bombardier. He survived his tour.

Between 50 and 75 German fighters, mostly FW 190s and a few Me 110s began hitting the Strike Force as soon as it crossed over the French coast on the 10th. The bombardier, 2Lt John W. Cheshire, reported over the intercom that his nose gun was firing single rounds only. The bombers ran into heavy cloud cover over France and the mission was recalled. German fighters kept up their attacks on the bomber stream until the bombers had crossed back over the Channel on their way out. As "Stric-Nine" was making her turn to head back home after the recall, FW 190s came in from all directions. The No. 1 engine was set afire. Lt Forsblad was able to extinguish the fire, but could not feather the prop. At this time nearby anti-aircraft artillery bursts threw shards of flak through the skin of the ship.

A few minutes later, the fire flared up again in the No. 1 engine. The carbon dioxide extinguisher was now empty and Lt Forsblad could not smother the fire. The bomb load was jettisoned. Flames began erupting from the wing behind the engine. "Stric-Nine" dropped out of formation because of loss of power and failed controls. Lt Forsblad set the autopilot to fly the aircraft, hoping somehow to struggle back to base. He soon saw that the left wing could burn through any second and the gas tanks explode. He rang the bail-out bell and ordered the crew out. From the corner of his eye Lt Forsblad saw the top turret gunner, T/Sgt Herman W. Balzer, head for the bomb bay. At same time a stick of 20 mm cannon shells exploded around the aircraft, showering it with fragments. "Stric-Nine" was now down to 5,000 feet. It was time to get out. Lt Forsblad told the copilot, 1Lt John J. Bennett, to bail out, but he just looked at him and said "You go first." Lt Forsblad went down into the nose where the navigator, 2Lt Richard W. Gill, who was on his first mission, was just standing there. Lt Forsblad grabbed him by the seat of his flying suit and told him to "Get out of here." Lt Forsblad went to open the nose hatch door, but the emergency handle broke off. He removed the red hinge pins by hand and kicked the door open. At that instant "Stric-Nine" blew up.

Lts Forsblad and Bennett were blown free of the aircraft. Both landed in the Channel. After two and one half hours a French fishing boat picked up Lt Bennett. The same boat fished Lt Forsblad from the waters a half hour later. Lt Bennett told the boat crew he thought he had seen a couple chutes from "Stric-Nine." A search of the area turned up no one else. The two pilots were given dry clothing and taken back to port where the German military took them into custody.

## 401<sup>st</sup> Squadron

### No. 816, "Eager Beaver"

The next mission for "Eager Beaver", the 21st of May, was a rough one for her. 1Lt William H. Wheeler's crew was aboard as she flew No. 3 of the Second Element of the Low Squadron. The mission was relatively uneventful for "Eager Beaver" for most of the trip into the target. But, this all changed as they approached the IP. As described earlier, the 91st formation was somewhat loose as it made the bomb run. "Eager Beaver" was even more conspicuously vulnerable as she made the run onto the target.

Just before the IP, a lost B-17 from the 96th Bomb Group, in attempting to form up with the 91st, forced "Eager Beaver" out of the formation. Evasive action by Lt Wheeler in keeping away from the intruding plane put his aircraft about two minutes behind the rest of the formation. A FW 190 made a pass at the out-of-formation "Eager Beaver" from 0200 O'clock level while she was still three minutes from the target. The bombardier, 2Lt Denver E. Woodward, opened fire from the side nose gun when the fighter was about 700 yards out. The enemy fighter went up and over the top of the bomber. As it did, the aircraft began burning and the pilot bailed out.

"Eager Beaver" continued on and dropped on the target. As he hit the bomb release, Lt Woodward sung out "Bombs Away!" and Lt Wheeler, mockingly, said over the intercom "Heil Hitler." At that very instant a 20 mm cannon shell from an oncoming fighter exploded in the cockpit. Splinters of glass from the windshield were driven into the face, arms and legs of the copilot, 2Lt Arlynn E. Weieneth. Another shell exploded in the nose of the aircraft, but wounded neither Lt Woodward nor the navigator, 2Lt Joseph B. Newberry. At about the same time, flak also pierced the skin of the plane in a number of places and damaged both the No. 3 and 4 engines.

As they cleared the target, another FW 190 came at "Eager Beaver" from 1200 O'clock low. Lt Woodward grabbed his gun again and began firing at the enemy aircraft. The fighter's engine started smoking as the plane arched over into a dive down and under the bomber. Nine minutes later three more FW 190s came at the still out-of-formation, slightly lower than the rest of the Group, "Eager Beaver." They attacked in a row from 0100 O'clock high. The top turret gunner, T/Sgt Bayne P. Scurlock, opened fire on the trailing fighter at 300 yards. Tracers went into the propeller and nose. The enemy aircraft peeled off to the left and rolled over, the pilot bailing out as it rolled. In spite of loss of power from No. 3 and 4 engines and being out of formation, Lt Wheeler guided "Eager Beaver" safely back to Bassingbourn.

The subsequent eight missions flown by "Eager Beaver" were much less traumatic. Lt Wheeler's crew took her out on five of them. On the 17th of July, Lt Wheeler again in the first pilot's seat, "Eager Beaver" started out for Hanover, flying Lead of the Second Element of the Low Squadron. The weather deteriorated rapidly and nine of the thirteen 91st Bombers, including "Eager Beaver", had to turn back soon after crossing the continent into Holland. But, they did not escape the wrath of the Luftwaffe.

German fighters charged into the returning planes while they were heading back over the North Sea. At 1040 hours and 15 miles off Gravenhage, a FW 190 came at "Eager Beaver" from 0700 O'clock low. The tail gunner, S/Sgt James F. McBride, took him on at 800 yards, firing 40 rounds in two short bursts as the enemy aircraft darted to within 600 yards of the bomber. It burst into flames and nosed straight down, crashing into the water. Ten minutes later a Me 109 also came at "Eager Beaver"

from 0700 O'clock level. The bombardier, 2Lt William J. Warose, started firing the nose gun at the fighter when 700 yards out, squeezing off 100 rounds as the fighter carried to within 250 yards of the bomber. It dived under the aircraft, began weaving heavily, and disappeared into the clouds.

"Eager Beaver" sustained shell holes in the right wing from the fighter attacks, but Lt Wheeler had no trouble bringing the ship on in to Bassingbourn. When the ground crew was repairing the damaged wing, they discovered a 20 mm shell had lodged in the No. 3 engine wing tank, but did not explode--a dud. Had it not been a dud, "Eager Beaver" most likely would have become a fiery mass of aluminum fragments fluttering down into the North Sea with her crew thrown to the winds and water. The margin of death and life.

Lt Wheeler had "Eager Beaver" in the air again on the 26th, but aborted over the North Sea when a turbocharger went out. That was the last time Lt Wheeler flew in the aircraft. The next three missions did not result in any major damage to "Eager Beaver", including miraculously the 17 August Schwienfurt mission. 2Lt Buster Peek and his crew flew this mission, carrying four boxes of leaflets in addition to ten 500 pound bombs. In spite of the massive fighter attacks, "Eager Beaver" sustained only minor damage to the No. 4 engine prop. Running low on gas, Lt Peek put her down on an emergency air strip between Ordfornessa and Ipswich at 1740 hours. They took off after refueling and landed back at Bassingbourn at 2100 hours.

Lt Peek flew her again on the 27th of August, once again with minimal damage. The next mission, on the 31st was a different story. This mission, to the Romilly Airfield in France, closed the final chapter on "Eager Beaver", with tragic consequences. Once more Lt Peek's crew was on board. The original take-off time for the 91st on the 31st was 0700 hours. There were three stand-downs because of weather problems over the continent, with the Group finally departing late afternoon. The Group had formed up and was going up to altitude, 25,000 feet. "Eager Beaver" was flying on the right wing of the Lead plane of the Lead Element of the Lead Squadron, No. 484, with Cpt Harry T. Lay and his crew aboard. As the formation moved out over the Channel, "Eager Beaver" started lagging behind and dropped out of her assigned position. 1Lt Richard C. Rodman, flying in No. 523, "L'il Audrey", a Spare from the 323<sup>rd</sup> Squadron, flying in the No. 4, "diamond" position, of the Lead Element of the Low Squadron, began moving to her right towards the position vacated by Lt Peek. Apparently Lt Rodman thought "Eager Beaver" was aborting the mission and he was going to fill in her position. As "L'il Audrey" started drifting over, "Eager Beaver" began moving ahead and back into her assigned slot. "L'il Audrey" kept edging over. She slid right into "Eager Beaver", poking her wing through the fuselage and into the radio room and bomb bay. "Eager Beaver" broke in two and the wing of "L'il Audrey" crumpled up and was torn away. Both planes fell apart, wreckage cluttering the sky. Debris from the collision hit No. 511, "Wheel 'N Deal", with 1Lt Robert S. Gerald. "Wheel 'N Deal" was damaged so badly Lt Gerald had to leave the formation and return to Bassingbourn.

The tail gunner, S/Sgt Charles E. Allen, saw the right wing of "L'il Audrey" coming into the left side of "Eager Beaver" and felt his ship start to fall. He went to put on his chute, but the plane started spinning downward. Ammunition in the tail compartment was flying all over Sgt Allen and the centrifugal force of the whirling plane prevented him from snapping on his chute. The plane had fallen for some time before he could get his chute on. Sgt Allen grabbed the release handle on the tail hatch, but the door was jammed shut. He then tried to crawl through the passageway into the fuselage where he could bail out the waist hatch. When he looked forward, however, Sgt Allen saw that he was all alone. The tail had broken off from the rest of the plane and was floating down by itself. He also saw he could not get out of the wreckage that way because the sides of the fuselage were smashed up against the tail wheel.

Sgt Allen then went back to the tail hatch and finally was able to kick it open. Although scared to jump, he knew he had to get out immediately so stuck his head and shoulders through the hatch. Sgt Allen's hips got stuck in the hatch and it took a lot of wiggling and pushing before he broke free. He fell for about 500 feet and opened his chute. Wreckage from the two falling ships was all around him. He landed in the water, just off Beachy Head on the Sussex coast, detached his chute and began swimming. A British patrol boat picked him up in about 10 minutes. Sgt Allen was the only survivor of the 20 crewmen on the two planes. This was Sgt Allen's 17th mission. He was not asked to fly combat again and was transferred to ground duties.

### **No. 132, "Royal Flush!"**

"Royal Flush!" flew only three complete missions, while aborting twice, following the Keil raid. 1Lt Marcell E. Fountain and his crew flew all three. On the 21st she accompanied the 91st to Wilhelmshaven where she was hit by 20 mm cannon fire in the No. 4 engine as five fighters came in on her from 1200 O'clock level. The exploding shells knocked off a rocker box, the cover over the engine cylinders. Still, the engine kept going, albeit pulling only partial power. Lt Fountain kept the engine running so as to reduce drag, even though not providing much help in keeping "Royal Flush!" in the air. They made it safely back to Bassingbourn.

Lt Fountain's crew took her out again on her next mission, the 11th of June, starting for Bremen, but diverting to Wilhelmshaven. She flew No. 3 of the Lead Element of the Lead Squadron. Prior to the target and while still over the North Sea, a Me 109 came in at "Royal Flush!" from 0100 O'clock high. The navigator, 2Lt Maurice J. Herman, manned the nose gun and began firing bursts into the German fighter from about 750 yards out. The enemy aircraft continued up and over the bomber breaking away at 0500 O'clock. Just as it cleared the rear of "Royal Flush!", the fighter made two spins and dived down vertically to the water, 26,500 feet below. The only damage to "Royal Flush!" was a 20 mm hole through the vertical stabilizer. She landed safely back at Bassingbourn.

Lt Fountain flew "Royal Flush!" on her final mission, to the synthetic chemical plant at Huls, Germany on 22 June. This was the first deep penetration into Germany by VIII Bomber Command. "Royal Flush!" flew Lead of the Second Element of the Low Squadron. As the Strike Force flew along the Ruhr River it started taking flak from the concentrated anti-aircraft defenses along the valley, "Happy Valley." The Group was making its turn onto the bomb run when flak bursts knocked out the No. 3 engine, which Lt Fountain feathered. No. 2 engine was also hit and started spewing oil back across the entire left wing. The pilots could not feather No. 2, which was putting a serious drag on the plane. "Royal Flush!", struggling as she was, remained with the formation and dropped with the rest of the Group. As they came off the target, eight German fighters pounced on the Group formation and "Royal Flush!" The ball turret gunner, S/Sgt Harold E Miller, and the tail gunner, S/Sgt Roland A. Carlson, were both wounded. "Royal Flush!" could not maintain her position in the in the formation, leaving her unprotected from the enemy aircraft. Lt Fountain said "To hell with this, we're going down to the deck. Boys, clear your ears, we're going down." Lt Fountain pushed the control column forward as he took "Royal Flush!" down. He pulled the bomber out of the dive just above 2,000 feet and ordered the crew to jettison all loose equipment to lighten the ship. During all the confusion of dropping down and tossing out equipment the left waist gunner, S/Sgt James E. Pratt, tapped the right waist gunner, S/Sgt Albert J. Rukas, on the shoulder and pointed to the floor. A spare ammo box on the floor was on fire and the shells going off--sounding like "popping popcorn." It had been hit by a tracer.

No. 2 engine was acting as a brake and even with the lightening of the load, the pilots could not keep the aircraft in the air. Lt Fountain came back on the intercom and told the crew "I can't keep

the nose up--we've got to get the hell out of here. If we get down to 2,000 feet, better bail out." When they did drop to 2,000 feet, Lt Fountain went on the intercom and said "you should get out." Seven of the crewmen bailed out, leaving only Lt Fountain, the copilot, 1Lt Oscar E. Diederling, and the flight engineer, T/Sgt Fred E. Sneed, aboard the floundering aircraft. It seemed for awhile that the skeleton crew could keep "Royal Flush!" in the air so they stayed aboard and headed towards England. At the coast she took more flak hits and then FW 190s dived in on the bomber, finishing her off. "Royal Flush!" slowly settled lower and lower until she was barely skimming the waves. The pilots tried to pull her up, but she hit the top of the waves, bouncing in the air. Again, she settled down to the waves, once more going airborne. Finally, about 15 miles off the coast, "Royal Flush!" floundered down onto the Channel waters. Even though riddled with holes, "Royal Flush!" remained afloat long enough for the three crewmen to escape. The plane's dingy failed to inflate when the crew pulled the release handle. Only shredded fabric came out. The dingy had been riddled by enemy fire. The three crewmen had to inflate their May West life jackets to remain afloat. They soon were picked up by French fishermen who turned them over to the Germans to join the rest of the crew as POWs.

### **No. 437, "Frank's Nightmare"**

1Lt Donald H. Frank continued flying "Frank's Nightmare" for the next three missions. On the 21st of May, a FW 190 came at "Frank's Nightmare" from 1000 O'clock high five miles from the target. The left waist gunner, Sgt Nelson G. Sanschargin, opened fire at 1,000 yards. Tracers were seen entering the front of the cockpit. Black smoke and flames began pouring from the engine. The enemy aircraft went on down into the water. Starting the 4th of July, 1Lt Harry T. Lay's crew took her out on four missions, returning with minimal damage.

On the 26th of July "Frank's Nightmare" was assigned to 2Lt Eugene D. Cook's newly arrived crew. After the crew arrived at Bassingbourn, the copilot, 2Lt William B. Smith, was removed from the crew to become a first pilot with his own crew. There was a shortage of first pilots in the Group at this time. Lt Smith's place was filled by 1Lt Arlynn E. Weieneth. Lt Weieneth arrived at Bassingbourn in late May as an unassigned pilot. He had flown as copilot on two missions with 1Lt William H. Wheeler and two with 2Lt Robert A. Pitts. He had also flown one mission, on the Group Lead plane with 1Lt Earl F. Riley as tail gunner and formation coordinator. Because he outranked Lt Cook, Lt Weieneth was listed as the command pilot. However, since he had flown his previous missions as copilot, Lt Weieneth felt more comfortable flying in the right hand seat. He continued to fly there with Lt Cook's crew.

"Frank's Nightmare" long had been considered a "jinx ship" because of her frequent aborts. She continued to have problems, aborting on four missions and experiencing a number of engine and other equipment failures on the others. In addition, "Frank's Nightmare" was a real gas hog. And, she had no Tokyo tanks. Thus, she experienced frequent fuel supply problems.

Lts Weieneth and Cook flew "Frank's Nightmare" on July 26, 29, 30 and August 12, 15, 16. They aborted on the last mission, returning to base before crossing out over the Channel. The crew also flew in No. 487, "Ritzy Blitz", on 28 July. The ultimate "nightmare" for No. 437 came on the 17th of August. Lts Cook and Weieneth were back on board "Frank's Nightmare" for the mission to Schweinfurt. On this mission, the regular tail gunner, Sgt Edward J. Conrecode, was stood down. His place was taken by S/Sgt Robert H. McDonald, on loan from the 324th squadron. The 17th was the 22nd birthday of S/Sgt Vernon E. Lamplot, the right waist gunner.

For the Schweinfurt mission, "Frank's Nightmare" and five other 91st bombers were assigned to a Composite Group along with six, each, aircraft from the 351st and 381st Bomb Groups. "Frank's

Nightmare" was No. 3 in the Lead Element of the Low Squadron, led by 1Lt William H. Wheeler in No. 069, "Our Gang."

The Strike Force was subject to continuous fighter attacks from the time it crossed over the enemy coast. In addition, the bombers were hit by flak as they passed over anti-aircraft defense zones. "Frank's Nightmare" was hit by flak at Woenschrecht, Belgium, knocking out the No. 4 engine. An 88 mm shell went up through the engine, not exploding until several hundred feet above the aircraft. But, it took out the engine as it passed through. Soon afterwards, a Me 109 came in on "Frank's Nightmare", knocking out the No. 1 engine. Another 88 mm shell came up through the fuselage directly behind the pilots' seat, exiting in front of the top turret position. It, too, exploded above the aircraft. This shell cut control cables as it passed through the bomber. Everything was out--no throttle control, no prop control, flight control surface cables gone, as were aileron, rudder and elevator controls. Lt Cook set the autopilot, but that did no good. "Frank's Nightmare" was simply wallowing along in the sky.

Just before the shell came up through the fuselage, a 20 mm cannon shell had hit the top turret, wounding the gunner, T/Sgt Charles E. Reidy, in the left hand. Lt Eugene D. Cook, sent him back to the radio room to get first aid. He had barely cleared the bomb bay when the shell came through the fuselage. Sgt Reidy called up to the pilots to tell them he was OK. Unfortunately, the top turret mechanism was frozen in a position such that no one could get past it. During one of the fighter passes, the oxygen line to the ball turret was shot out. Because of all the fighter action, the other gunners could not leave their positions to try to save the ball gunner, S/Sgt Joseph D. Hall. Sgt Hall died from anoxia.

Lts Cook and Weieneth saw that they had no control over the floundering aircraft and that "Frank's Nightmare" was going down. Lt Weieneth said to Lt Cook "Let's get out of here." Lt Cook tried to contact the crew over the intercom, but it was out. He then tried to ring the bail-out bell, but he could not tell if it were working. The pilots made their way to the nose compartment where the navigator, 2Lt Clarence H. Blackmon, and the bombardier, 2Lt William J. Warose, were standing by the closed nose hatch, shell-shocked from all the flak and fighter action. Lt Cook got down on his hands and knees and opened the escape hatch. He started to back up so as to drop through when someone put a foot in his back and shoved him out. The next thing he remembered, he was floating in the air about 5,000 feet from the ground with his chute open. "Frank's Nightmare" snapped upward out of the formation and half fell into a tight spin, the spin becoming tighter and tighter as she fell to the ground. No other chutes appeared from the falling aircraft.

Lt Cook landed in shrubs next to a road with woods on the opposite side. He started to cross the road when two German soldiers on motor cycles stopped him. He put up his hands as they approached with pistols drawn. One asked if he were an American. When Lt Cook said "Yes", the soldier shot him in the hip and abdomen, got on his cycle and took off. The other soldier came over to see if had a weapon and finding none, also drove away. Lt Cook was left bleeding on the ground beside the road. Several civilians arrived and stood around looking at him, but did nothing for his wounds. A fire marshal in uniform drove up and told Lt Cook he had to go to a fire, but would be back for him. He appeared about three hours later. Lt Cook was still lying beside the road. He was put on a stretcher and taken to a small village where he was paraded up and down the street with civilians spitting and throwing gravel on him.

Eventually the civilians put him in a dentist's office. Later a truck with five or six other wounded American flyers came by and picked up Lt Cook. The first hospital they stopped at would not take the airmen. At another, a Catholic Sister came out and gave Lt Cook, who was drifting in and out of consciousness, a pain killer shot. He passed out completely, awaking the next day in a hospital bed.

None of the other nine crewmen on "Frank's Nightmare" survived.

## The Final Accounting

The twenty bombers who went over the continent with “Memphis Belle” flew an average of 11 missions, each, following the Keil raid before being shot down or removed from flying combat. Seventeen were shot down, two were so badly damaged they were placed in salvage and one simply wore out.

Of the crewmen aboard these planes on their final missions, 86 were KIA, 84 became POWs. Of the 211 91st Group crewmen who flew on the 19th of May, 39 eventually were KIA and 50 became POWs, 42% casualties. Those crewmen who accompanied the “Memphis Belle” on her last mission and who were subsequently killed in action were:

### 322nd Squadron

**No. 139, “Chief Sly II”:** 2Lt John C. Kaufmann, Jr. **No. 483, “Spirit of Alcohol”:** T/Sgt Arthur L. Poston, S/Sgt Eugene C. Trimble, T/Sgt William H. Peeler, Sgt Arthur I. Berkovitz, S/Sgt Harrell H. Thompson, Sgt William A. Rathgeber.

### 323rd Squadron

**No. 524, “The Eagles Wrath”:** T/Sgt Alfredo L. Davila. **No. 399, “Man-O-War”:** S/Sgt Herman W. Balzer, T/Sgt Bernard W. Zimmerman, S/Sgt John W. Stephenson, Sgt Joseph E. L. D’Ovidio. **No. 559, “Stupntakit”:** T/Sgt William J. Barrett. **No. 475, “Stric-Nine”:** 2Lt Stanley A. Dahlman, S/Sgt Joseph O. Wing.

### 324th Squadron

**No. 970, “Connecticut Yankee”:** 1Lt John W. Joslin, S/Sgt Mark W. Margason, T/Sgt Herbert H. Harvey, S/Sgt Jearld H. Jones, S/Sgt Sidney L. Kohn, S/Sgt Willard O. Simpson. **No. 053, “Desperate Journey”:** 1Lt Philip S. Fischer, Sgt Elmer L. Frederick, Sgt Elwyn J. Roberts. **No. 857:** 1Lt John H. Miller, 2Lt Roscoe V. Black, 2Lt John P. Ragsdale, Jr., T/Sgt Oscar L. Stuart, S/Sgt Ronald Taylor, S/Sgt Edward F. Simon. **No. 485, “Memphis Belle”:** S/Sgt Robert W. Cole. **No. 487, “Ritzy Blitz”:** 1Lt Charles W. Freschauf, 2Lt Rollin P. Ball, 2Lt Edwin H. Bruton, T/Sgt William G. Dickson, S/Sgt William L. Caligan, Jr., S/Sgt Guy F. Wyatt.

### 401st Squadron

**No. 437, “Frank’s Nightmare”:** T/Sgt Irving E. Narter, T/Sgt Wade H. Boggan.



No. 487, "Ritzy Blitz", on a combat mission. "Ritzy Blitz" was shot down on 11 January 1944 on a mission to Oschersleben. The pilot, 2Lt Wayne D. Hedglin, and four others of the ten man crew survived. (Joseph Harlick)





Harold H. Beasley crew. Left to right. Front row: T/Sgt Jay M. Franklin, radio; S/Sgt Edward G. Jedniak, ball turret; S/Sgt James L. Branch, waist gunner; S/Sgt Johnnie D. Cagle, tail gunner. Back row: S/Sgt Everett L. Creason, waist gunner; 1Lt Harry D. Sipe, navigator; 1Lt Harold H. Beasley, pilot; 1Lt Oscar E. Diedering, copilot; T/Sgt Mark L. Schaefer, flight engineer. The bombardier, 2Lt Mathew Michaels is not in the picture. 1Lt Walter L. McCain, Jr. replaced Lt Diedering on the 17 April 1943 mission. Lts Beasley and McCain were killed when No. 172, "Thunderbird" was shot down on 17 April. (Edward Jedinak)



Leland E. Forsblad crew. Left to right. Front row: S/Sgt Harold K. Olsen, tail gunner; Sgt John L. Fielder, waist gunner; S/Sgt Joseph D'Ovidio, waist gunner. Back row: S/Sgt John Stephensen, ball turret; Sgt Bernard Zimmerman, radio; S/Sgt Herman Balzer, engineer; 2Lt John W. Cheshire, bombardier; 2Lt Richard W. Gill, navigator; 1Lt John J. Bennett, copilot; Lt Leland E. Forsblad, pilot. Only Lts Forsblad and Bennett survived when No. 475, "Stric-Nine", exploded in mid air on 10 July 1943. (Steve Perri)



Joel W. Gatewood crew. Left to right. Front row: Sgt Floydstone F. Bryant, tail gunner; T/Sgt Jack H. Schaffer, radio; S/Sgt Stanford Adams, ball turret; S/Sgt Joseph J. Kominack, waist gunner; S/Sgt Frederick E. Pearce, waist gunner; T/Sgt Raymond F. Canada, flight engineer. Back row: 2Lt Joel W. Gatewood, pilot; 2Lt George E. Riegel, copilot; 2Lt Harold H. Hammond, bombardier; 2Lt Daniel A. Downey, navigator. Sgt Bryant died from anoxia when his oxygen line was cut by flak on 12 August; he was replaced by Sgt George F. Hite. Sgts Schaffer, and Kominack suffered frost bite on the 12<sup>th</sup> and were replaced by T/Sgt Daniel J. Butler and Sgt Thomas A. Parfitt. Lt Riegel, and Sgts Adams, Canada, Butler, Hite and Pearce were killed when No. 139, "Chief Sly II" was shot down on 17 August 1943. (Joel Gatewood)



No. 524, "The Eagles Wrath", with her ground crew (unidentified). "Eagles Wrath was shot down by German fighters on the 17 August 1943 Schweinfurt mission. Three crewmen were killed. The pilot, 1Lt Anthony G. Arcaro, and six others survived to become POWs. (Joseph Harlick)



Keene C. McCammon crew. Left to right. S/Sgt Herman D. Poling, tail gunner; S/Sgt Royce H. Sparks, waist gunner; S/Sgt George R. Krueger, waist gunner; 2Lt John P. Bruce, copilot; 2Lt Keene C. McCammon, pilot; 2Lt Daniel J. Ohman, bombardier; S/Sgt Mike A. Pirrota, ball

turret; T/Sgt Douglas V. Blackwood, radio; T/Sgt Americo Cianfichi, engineer. Lt McCammon's navigator, 2Lt Richard W. Gill, was killed when he went down with Leland Forsblad's crew on 10 July 1943. 2Lt Robert U. Duggan replaced him on the crew. Only Lts McCammon and Bruce survived when No. 399, "Man-O-War", went down on 30 July 1943. (John Bruce)



Jerold D. Kethley crew. Left to right. Front row: 2Lt Robert D. Sternburg, navigator; 2Lt Ennis Cox, copilot; 1Lt Jerold D. Kethley, pilot; 2Lt James J. Cullen, bombardier. Back row: S/Sgt Robert C. Daniels, flight engineer; T/Sgt Conrad E. Desault, radio; T/Sgt Alfred J. Bragg, waist gunner; S/Sgt Harold V. Stokes, ball turret; S/Sgt John E. Burke, tail gunner; S/Sgt Wilfred R. Bacon, waist gunner. (James Cullen)



Eugene D. Cook crew. Left to right. Front row: S/Sgt Edgar A. Roe, waist gunner; S/Sgt Joseph D. Hall, ball turret; S/Sgt Edward J. Conrecode, tail gunner; T/Sgt Charles E. Reidy, flight engineer; T/Sgt John J. Halloran, radio; S/Sgt Vernon E. Lamplot, waist gunner. Back row: 2Lt Eugene D. Cook, pilot; 2Lt Joseph R. Herbert, Jr., copilot; 2Lt William J. Warose, bombardier; 2Lt Clarence H. Blackmon, navigator. Lt Herbert was replaced by 1Lt Arlynn E. Weieneth and Sgt Conrecode by Sgt Robert H. McDonald for the 17 August 1943 mission to Schweinfurt. Only Lt Cook survived when No. 437, "Frank's Nightmare", was shot down. (Joe Lamplot)



No. 639, "The Careful Virgin", forming up over England for a mission. "The Careful Virgin" was removed from bombing missions and transferred to the "Aphrodite Program." She was blown to bits in an unsuccessful attempt to destroy a V-1 rocket bomb site in France. (Joseph Harlick)