The Caterpillar Club

D. PHILLIPS, LT., USAC

qualified as a member of The Caterpillar Club, his life having been saved in an emergency jump by use of parachute equipment.

IRVING AIR CHUTE CO., INC.

Signed ..... President

IRVIN Air Chute

Life Preserver of the Air

On September 6, 1943, Don Phillips and the rest of his 10-man crew had to bail out of their B-17 Bomber over occupied France.

This is their story, in their own words, from evasion reports.

# August 17, 2022

Dear Reader,

You are about to enter the world of a WWII bombing mission which started in England by the 8th American Army/Air Force on September 6, 1943, and its aftermath for the 10-man crew. The crew had to bail out of their plane, a B-17, over enemy territory. Seven of these men became evaders, escaping from the enemy. Three of them became prisoners of war captured by the Germans.

This writer has struggled with how to tell the story with so many missing parts. Thus, it is fact and fiction. It is told mainly from the point of view of the person I know the best, Don Phillips, my uncle, who was navigator on this mission. When I do not know what Don knew, I have guessed. When I think the reader might need to know more and does not want to take the time or effort to look it up, I add a note, indented, in the narrative.

When there are documents available to see, there will a graphic of same. When I have heard authentic stories of other bombing veterans, I have used them. When I think we can talk between writer and reader, I bring us together to do so.

What I do know is my uncle wanted me to know about this day by subtle actions and words he made in his later life. This day clearly seemed as important as the day he was liberated from P.O.W. camp on April 29, 1945, by General Patton's troops.

I want to understand not only my uncle and his crew, but for all of us who have lived a world etched out by those who made the world as it is since WWII. These were the crucial years that defined a century. They are worthy to understand.

Given all that, take yourself back to September 6, 1943, and live this mission with these men, much in their own words from their evasion reports. Just their first names will be used with their correct position in the plane. Put yourself in that time frame, their time frame. Buckle up and be ready to use oxygen when needed. It will be needed. Clearly, courage is already aboard.

# DON AT THURLEIGH AIRFIELD IN ENGLAND

Don woke, startled. He had been dreaming. He was back in downstate Illinois on the F-20 tractor in the fields with his father and brother-in-law, Raymond, working every day after his regular job in construction. The extra hands were needed during this time of the year. He was glad to do it.

Still startled and sleepy and not really awake, Don wondered where he was.

Then he snapped to reality when a soldier burst into their quonset hut, the semicircular shelter made of corrugated metal, and yelled “bombing mission day.” He said it twice, even louder the second time. Don was at Thurleigh Air Base in England. He was about to go on a bombing mission on this sixth day of September, 1943.

He had lost track of days, as every day seemed like a flying day.

It was his fourth combat mission after several training missions last month. Yesterday had been a training mission with a pilot named Shingler. He had a different pilot for every training mission. At least it gets one use to working with different pilots Don thought. He was a navigator and had a lot of communication with the pilot.

No time for Illinois dreaming nostalgia now. It was time to get up and get ready.

The bombing crews were separated in the quonset huts by rank. There were four officers in each bombing crew, and six enlisted men. Each quonset hut housed 12 people. Officers in one crew stayed together in a quonset hut and enlisted men in the same crew stayed together in a hut.

Don was in a quonset hut with 11 other officers, from 3 different crews. The six enlisted men in his crew were in another quonset hut with one other crew. This is how the base worked. Officers from 3 crews in one quonset hut. Enlisted men from 2 crews in separate quonset huts. Each B-17 air crew had four officers and six

enlisted men. Quonset huts filled the base. There were a lot of men here. Ready to fly. For every man in the air, there were 20 people on the ground crew servicing them.

Don's crew did not know each other well. He had heard of crews getting together in the states to train. No time for that now. They were all mostly replacements for the casualties occurring in the U.S. 8th Army/Air Force, the first over Germany by air on July 4, 1942. He was proud of that fact and belonged to the 306th Bomb Group, 368 Squadron.

The last few weeks had been a whirlwind. Don received his wings at the end of June, 1943, at San Marcos Army Air Field, Texas, part of the very first class of graduating navigators at that school. He had done well in his training.

Then to New York to get on a ship carrying thousands of troops to England. He arrived before his 25th birthday on August 1 and wrote his first letter home to his parents, not being able to tell them where he was or what he was doing.

Don did know the casualties were heavy with all air crew. A bombing raid on August 17, 1943, to Messerschmitt fighter factory at Regensburg and the ball-bearing plants at Schweinfurt, Germany, caused heavy damage at both places but 60 of the 376 bombers were shot down and more than 600 Airmen were missing. The names of the men killed or missing were getting back to all the air bases.

Don's first training missions started three days after this raid. Many bombers and crew members had not returned to his air base. Most were still MIA's at this point, but probably some had been killed. Maybe most. Or so many thought. What Don knew is fellow men at the base talked about some men being in their quonset hut in the morning, and not returning later in the day.

Don heard these stories. Everyone heard these stories. They did not discuss it much. The recent CO at Thurleigh had been legendary at calling a spade a spade. Words like, imagine you are already dead. Stop feeling sorry for yourself. This is a fighting war. Some of you will die. Fear is normal. Stop making plans. Get over it and get out there. Even feeling despair did not seem to be an option.

No one at the base said much about tomorrow or the future. There was always today to face. Usually it was combat or training. Most days were flying days.

Illinois seemed so far away in so many ways.

What were they doing here? Don and all the rest of them understood that the U.S. Army/Air Force daytime aerial bombing was to cripple German's production at many levels. If military production was halted or stopped then Allied ground troops could mop up the job. The American bombing in 1943 was already successful enough that Germany had to move more of their fighter efforts from Russia and Italy to Western Europe. Keep them on the run.

But how were the targets chosen for each day's bombing? To no surprise the day's weather had great effect on the choices made by the upper echelons of Bomber Command personnel. Knowing the weather, they could choose the targets for the day based on the priorities of the German industrial and military targets. Knowing the targets then decisions could be made on type of bombs to be used. The bombs could range from small incendiary bombs dropped by the hundreds to individual bombs weighing 100 pounds to 500 pounds to 1000 pound bombs. A B-17 airplane could carry 8000 pounds of bombs for short missions to half that amount for longer missions.

If everything holds up through all the levels of scrutiny, the call is made: Mission Tomorrow, Maximum Effort.

Then the well-oiled machine moves forward. Routes chosen, IP (Initial Point) designated, how to avoid German fighters, how many planes and crews are available (considering recent damage), and then the field order sent.

This day, September 6, 1943, was to be a bombing day with primary and secondary targets. The primary target would be the industrial areas of Stuttgart, Germany.

Now to get airborne ready. The ground air field crews started to work on all the airplanes that will be involved and made bomb ready. Already thousands of people have been involved. Now more will be added.

At this point Don and his crew knew nothing about the day's mission. That was about to change.

It was 3 a.m. and all around England American air crews are being roused as had just happened to them and told there is a bombing mission. Get up and get ready. Breakfast in one half hour. Briefing later.

Don shook Wes, the pilot. A veteran of 23 bombing missions, Don figured Wes might not be as concerned as he was about the day. Two more missions and Wes could go home, at least for a while and train others to come to this never never land. Don's three previous combat missions were flown with Wes.

He liked Wes. He trusted Wes. That was important.

Then Don checked to see if the bombardier, August, was up. Navigators and bombardiers sat together in the nose of the plane below the pilots and are the most vulnerable for frontal attack. They needed to help each other in a mission. The co-pilot, Ed, was up. All four officers now up and the day was started.

It would be a long day. They all knew that.

They dressed for breakfast, not combat flying, and went to the mess hall. All told over 3500 Army/Air Corps men from various air bases would go on this mission in B-17s. In Don's mess hall he could tell those on their first mission. They were different somehow. That difference came after just one mission. It only took one.

Don remembered what a fellow navigator said to him when he asked before his first mission what it was like. His response, "you'll know soon enough." Now he knew.

Now Don had the look and actions of knowing.

After breakfast they went to the briefing room. It was filled. Clearly this appeared to be a maximum effort already. Their 10-man crew sat together in one row without really talking much to each other.

There were all the standard things: a black sheet uncovered to give the primary and secondary targets of the day and why they were chosen, a general gasp when they understood, the route maps, extensive weather information along the route both going and coming back, how to deal with anti-aircraft fire, where they each plane would be in formation, told what time to board the plane after checking with the ground crew chief, the amount of bomb load for each plane, reminded not to take along any personal effects to help the Jerries if they were captured, and a reminder as a navigator that the bombardier had to tell him when he dropped bombs so he could report the exact location of same. The briefing ended with synchronizing of their watches. All men looked down at their left hand, moved both clock hands, and in unison put themselves on the same time.

War time.

Per usual the CO had a few words to say at the end of the briefing. The thing he said that made the most sense to Don was be successful today so you don't have to go back to this bombing site. He also said there would be a lot of flak. Just expect it and don't let it break up your formation. If you have to break out of formation, you become an easy target.

Then Don went to his separate specialized briefing for navigators. They were always very technical. His training was holding up well. They focused on map planning, where flak might come, and developed the full flight plan.

In the meantime the ground crews were still working as dawn was breaking. They were getting the planes air ready and the ordnance men were getting the bombs ready.

Today's mission seemed huge to Don, and to everyone else in the large briefing room and the smaller navigation briefing. The fear was palpable, although not expressed outwardly in any fashion, but you could smell it in the air.

This would be the deepest penetration into Germany since the ill-fated Schweinfurt/Regensburg mission of August 17, 1943, where so many B-17s were lost. The round trip to the target was 1300 miles, a maximum range for any of these B-17s. Every plane needed every drop of fuel they had abroad.

The total number of B-17's going today was 338, split into two elements.

Don and his crew were traveling with the first element of the Bomb Wing, 181 B-17's from 9 different bomb groups. The second element would have 157 B-17s from 7 different bomb groups.

There was a third element, not B-17's, but 69 B-24s from four bomb groups who would fly as a diversion.

Don rejoined his crew after they all had separate briefings by position and went to crew room to don the gear for the day.

Don started by putting on his wool underwear and wool socks. Next came the electrically heated blue Bunny Suit needed in the -40 degrees F temperatures for the day to come above 25,000 feet in the uninsulated, unpressurized plane cabin.

Then more layers. Three layers of gloves, 2 layers of footwear, one more layer of pants, jacket, silk scarf, and harness for the parachute. Headgear, including helmet and goggles, came last. Oxygen was needed to survive at that altitude along with the mask and tubes that made that available. Portable oxygen was also there for walk around in the plane.

For communication the helmet contained receivers, there was a throat mic for interplane communication, and a push to talk switch which was on a cable around his neck.

There was more, but by now the crew had the gear set up down and could do it within minutes. Add to that a Mae West vest of inflatable rubber bladders covered in khaki cloth in case of a bailout over water.

Last, they got their escape kit if needed which included foreign money, maps, matches, chocolate, first aid kit, and other things that might be useful if they had to evade. Hopefully you could bring it all back and it is given to future crews. You never wanted to have to use it.

Don thought even his mother would not recognize him after he was ready to go to the plane. To go to combat. Combat, what a horrible word. Hell, he did not even recognize himself in the mirror in many ways. But he was ready.

At a moment like this he was glad he did not have a brother, something he always thought he would have liked. Having three sisters right now seemed just fine. The look in his mother's eyes as she briefly wore his navigator wings before he left was all he needed to know of how she felt. Having two or more sons away would be too much. He had a first cousin in the Pacific and friends many places. All too many men were away in the path of danger. Everyone had someone, somewhere, in danger.

Don looked over at one of the crew members from another plane. He remembered him from his quonset hut last night. Clearly he was newer to this and was still having trouble getting everything on quickly. He was like that just a month ago. He had not engaged him in conversation last night or this morning. Didn't know if he would see him after the day was over and he returned to the quonset hut.

Don had heard the story of the officer who had been in the hospital for two days with yellow jaundice. He came back to his quonset hut and the 11 other beds of his fellow officers were all stripped. His was the only one there. While he was gone, his crew and the other two crews had all been downed. He did not know the particulars, crashed or shot down, either way, they did not come back to his quonset hut. His CO heard the story, gave him a bottle of Scotch, and said he would find him another place to stay that night. Don did not want a night like that. Ever.

Some of the crew members went to see the base chaplain before the day's mission. Don did not.

While the crew got dressed the final acts of loading the bombs happened at their plane. Ordnance were notified as to the amount of bomb load needed for the mission. The bombs went through a standardized procedure to get them to each plane and then loaded. Since this was a long-range mission probably around 4000-5000 pounds were loaded, using 500 pound bombs in all probability. Thus, 8-10 bombs were abroad. The bombs had two lugs at each end which were then

attached to a metal clip called a shackle which hooked to the bomb rack. When released the shackle disengaged from the ends of the bombs.

There could be as much as two tons of .50 caliber ammunition also boarded. The gunners set up their own guns upon arrival to the plane.

Now both the crew and plane were ready for the day.

A day of bombing inside Germany.

(a copyrighted picture to be removed later.)

Don joined up with the bombardier, August, and pilot and co-pilot Wes and Ed. They were getting to know each other some. Don never asked Wes about his former navigators or bombardiers on other bombing runs. Stats told him that those at the nose of the plane, the navigator and bombardier, were the most vulnerable to frontal attack and being killed. He knew that. They all knew that.

Fear was not an option.

Co-pilot Ed was from Chicago, pilot Wes from Minnesota, and bombardier August from Chico, California. They were ready to head to the field to get to their ship. They did not know all the enlisted men well on this mission.

When they were fully dressed they were taken out to their planes by truck. Each crew in a separate truck.

Finally some banter in the truck as they went out to their plane. Don sat by George, the left waist gunner. They had talked before and knew they lived very near each other in Illinois. Don had also gone through gunnery training, like all the crew, and knew the equipment George would be using. On his other side was Bill, the radio operator. He had trained in Illinois. There were a lot of Illinois connections on this crew. Another Bill sat across from him. He was the flight engineer and top turret gunner. He was from Gary, Indiana.

'Where are you from' was a common first question. Anything to have a moment away from what was heading their way today.

Doug, the tail gunner, was also from Chicago like Ed. The right waist gunner, another Bill, was from Ohio. It was basically a Midwest crew. The person who talked the least going out to the plane was Fred, the ball turret gunner. He was small, so he fit well in the ball turret located at the underbelly of the plane. Don did not know where he was from. He said nothing.

Don made a mental note. Here was his crew today in case he ever had to come up with all their names and positions. He knew that might be a possibility and hoped it would never come. Evasion procedures had been discussed if downed, but that was not top of his mind now. For now, it was just knowing who was here today, September 6, 1943.

Repeating to himself, three men named Bill. One was the radio operator, one the flight engineer /top turret gunner, and the last Bill was right waist gunner.

Then George was the left waist gunner, Doug the tail gunner, and Fred the ball turret gunner.

The officers were Wes and Ed, pilot and co-pilot, and August the bombardier.

And he was the last officer— the navigator.

Ten men. Ten positions. One crew.

All 10 were ready for the day at least as far as being there and having all the right clothes on.

There was one other member of the crew. That was the plane. Unlike most planes it had no jazzy name painted on it. It was 'no name.' It had a number. It was B-17 Flying Fortress #42-30163. It was delivered to Thurleigh on May 5, 1943, and assigned to the 368BS/306BG, Don's bomb group and squadron. It was built by Boeing and had a production number of B-17F-90-BO Fortress.

After the crew and plane were ready, the final briefing occurred when all ten assembled outside the plane—good old 'no name'. There were no pictures. Wes was in charge of discussing the details of the mission. They were no longer 10 separate men, they were a crew all depending on each other to get through the mission.

One last clothing item was the anti-flak vest and apron which was brought out to the plane by the ground crew and put in the plane at each crewman's position. The flak armor alone weighed 25 pounds.

The ground crew reminded them one more time what a gas guzzler they had in 'no name' and told them to watch that fuel.

As they boarded the plane, Don went through every aspect of the briefing earlier in his head. He immediately went to his small table behind the bombardier at the nose of the plane and at a desk right below the cockpit. He had all his tools he needed which included EB6 computer, Weems plotter, triangles, pencils, maps, plotting charts, and logbook. A cheek gun, a single .50 caliber machine, was at his left to use for defense. Like all the rest of the crew he had general knowledge of the entire operation of the whole airplane.

Don was at his desk. Ready for what comes next which is getting into formation.

All the rest of the crew were also at their positions and double checking everything as they had been trained to do. The waist gunners were putting in their own guns

and the ground crew were putting in the turret guns. Then a final visual inspection was taken by the pilots and crew chiefs and the ground crew left.

Next came the complicated, but choreographed dance, that if all planes completed their Do Si Do steps correctly, they would end up in defensive formation and ready to go. These were the steps to get into formation.

At 6:30 a.m. all engines started on the air field. The synchronizing watches worked.

They all took their positions for take off on the runway. It was taxi time.

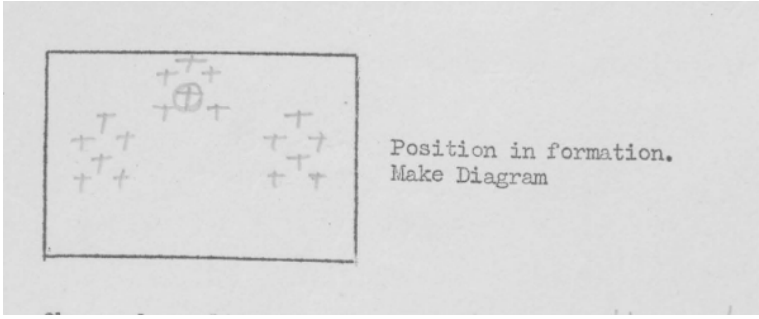
Every pilot knew where he was in the queue and the signal was given to take away wheel chocks and move to the taxiway. Because of the number of planes today; and all 4 engines firing on each B-17 plane, the noise was deafening. It could be heard for miles around at the 20-plus air bases participating in this dance. All this time, all planes, and particularly this plane, was using precious fuel.

A green light flared and that was the sign for take off. The lead plane in each squadron then became airborne and after about 90 seconds would bank sharply to indicate turning a slow left turn.

Planes took off every 30 seconds. Each successive plane in the element turned as soon as the plane in front of him turns. This was the choreography in action. This continued until they assembled, first as three planes, and then into larger units of six. To assemble with the correct group of planes, they looked for specific signals from the Aldis Lamp (flashing the letter C in white light) by the tail gunner in each plane until assembly was complete in their group.

Dance partners united. Don thought it looked much like a Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers movie which he could view out his navigator's window.

On this day Don's plane was with three units of six planes each for a total of 18 planes in his squadron. All this activity happened at about 1000 feet. Don made a note in his log book of the formation, circling their plane.




(actual drawing made by the co-pilot of this plane)

Circle, circle, circle. Find partners. Do your Do Si Do.

After squadrons united, then it was the combat wing assembly point to enlarge further. Squadrons met squadrons at a higher elevation. Then combat wings united. Each reiteration brought more planes to bear for the task of the day.

The dance continued. The noise continued. Fuel was used. Time was passing.

There were 338 B-17's going out on this day. Imagine that assembly.

The formation took a very long time. The positions are purposeful. The intent was to have the best defensive position any plane can have against enemy air craft coming from every angle. The precise position of each plane in formation was key. There could be no deviation. In tight formation there was some security from enemy fire.

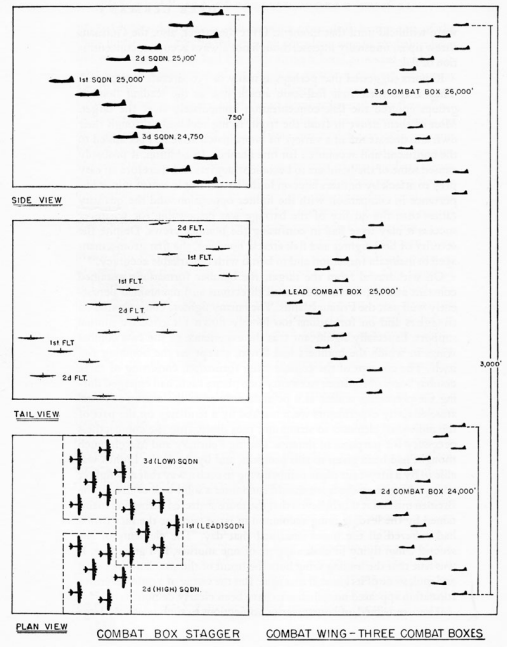
Because of the number of planes involved it took over 90 minutes to get into formation before they would even venture toward the English Channel. As with all previous missions some pilots were doing this for only the first or second time. Some pilots believed this was the most dangerous part of the mission. All planes were fully loaded with fuel and bombs in limited airspace, usually in the dark, and no radar and radio silence.

MORE ABOUT FORMATION

This from wikipedia,“Between November 1942 and the end of the war various configurations of the combat box were adopted to meet changing conditions, particularly changed German tactics that stressed head-on attacks against the weak forward firepower of the bombers. The 305th BG innovated the 18-aircraft "Javelin Down" formation, which stacked planes within an element and squadrons within a group downwards in the direction of the sun. This aided gunners on the higher aircraft in seeing lower aircraft without being blinded by glare. In the front elevation the formation resembled a set of stairs, but in profile and plan resembled a spear point. Unlike earlier group formations in which the lead bomber had flown in the lowest position, it now was placed in the center of the formation vertically. The 305th successfully tested the formation on a December 6, 1942, mission, and it was immediately adopted by the other three B-17 groups.

“The 305th soon developed a more compact staggered formation that stacked elements downward in one direction, but stacked squadrons upward in the opposite direction. A third element of three bombers was added to the 18-plane box, placed in the most exposed squadron for additional support. This resulted in a 21-plane wedge-shaped configuration that was adopted by all groups on January 13, 1943, and remained standard through September 1943.”

*Note this is not Don’s bomb group, but perhaps this was their preferred formation pattern as the above was standard through September 1943. Understanding how formations are done is complicated. Google formations and combat box you will see many examples.



They were finally all in formation as directed and where they should be. It was now go time. The bigger dance with all the entrants was ready to start in earnest. For better or worse, the September 6 mission was ready to move over the English Channel toward their primary target in Germany. As they got higher, oxygen masks were strapped in place and flak jackets put on.

Danger ahead—now subject to enemy attack soon.

Setting up for formation did take a long time. But for Don it was back to the details. What did he learn in the separate navigation briefing. First and foremost he wondered about the weather. If he had learned anything about the UK and Europe in his brief time here it was that the weather was changeable.

Very changeable.

## ENGLISH CHANNEL TO PRIMARY TARGET

To the extent possible this story is told by reports written by the men who experienced it and then amplified with other sources to understand the situation better. There are no reports from three of the men, two of those became P.O.W.s and the last died crossing the Pyrennes. Six of the men evaded and wrote reports usually two months after this event when they returned to England. Don wrote a narrative three decades after the event.

First, to focus on the time from the English Channel to the primary target for this mission.

Don, navigator, wrote this several decades later.

“Everything was going smoothly. We headed for the English Channel, gaining altitude steadily, so that we could cross the coast of Europe at 23,000 feet. At that point the anti-aircraft batteries would blast their first welcome, and the flak exploding around us would announce the German’s intentions of keeping some of us from reaching the target area.

“Across the coastline and still going smoothly. All bombers, many manned by veteran pilots, were flying in tight formation, the better to protect against fighter attack. Now the sun was coming up and casting patterns on the clouds around us. Another hour would take us to the target, a magneto factor in Stuttgart, Germany, then home to a lavish breakfast and the usual good-natured relaxed banter that takes place at the end of a mission.

“An hour later we were on the bombing run, and here our luck changed. Nothing too serious, but cloud cover obscured the target area, and we had to circle and take a second run at the target. Flak was heavy and taking its toll as one bomber, then another was hit and strayed from the formation. The second bomb run was no better than the first, clouds still completely blotted out the target,…”

Co-pilot Ed wrote this in his evasion report.

“….we took off from Thurleigh to bomb Stuttgart, I thought we flew the course as briefed, but the navigator said that we went in at 22,000 feet and started back at 17,000 feet, when we should have done just the reverse.

“At any rate, we met head winds going in instead of tail winds. We flew north of Paris and had not trouble going in. Over the target we met a heavy barrage and the flak followed us for a few minutes. We opened the bomb bay doors, but because of the heavy clouds we did not bomb. We went on, opening our bomb bay doors three times and closing them again three times….”

Bombardier August wrote this in his evasion report.

“We left THURLEIGH 0900 hours 6 September 1943 to bomb STUTTGART, Germany. We had fighter escort most of the way. We encountered no flak to amount to anything until just before the target. We circled the target once, then without dropping our bombs, took a heading of 300°….”

(Note—in the reports there is no agreement on when they left Thurleigh, but the evasion reports were written months after they were downed, and Don’s report was written years after it happened.)

Flight Engineer/Top Turret Gunner Bill did not write anything in his evasion report about this mission until they were on the return flight.

Radio Operator Bill died before returning to the U.K. No report.

Ball Turret Gunner Fred was captured as a P.O.W. No report.

Right Waist Gunner Bill wrote this in evasion report.

“We left THURLEIGH about 0530 6 September 1943 to bomb STUTTGART. I thought we had no fighter escort. I did not meet any flak until we were close to the target, and I did not see any fighters until we were in Germany. Our group, however, was not attacked by the fighters. Because of the heavy clouds we did not drop our bombs on the target, and we looked for the secondary target. While we were hunting around, we were all getting worried, for we knew that we did not have too much gas….”

Left Waist Gunner George from his evasion report.

“We left THURLEIGH: 0630 hours 6 September 1943 to bomb a factory in STUTTGART, Germany. Spitfires escorted us as far at ROUEN.

“Right after they turned back, FW's and ME 109's started their attacks but did not press our formation. We were the lead group. I noticed that most of the attacks were head-on attacks. They left us when we reached BARLEDUC. Before the enemy fighters left us, I saw four of our planes shot down and saw chutes come out of each ship. I also saw six other planes lagging, some of them smoking.

“We made our bomb run and heavy flak started. Some of the planes behind us made a second run and ran into extremely heavy and accurate flak. We in our formation did not drop our bombs due to heavy cloud over the target….”

Tail Gunner Douglas.

His evasion report starts only upon return flight. Douglas does note heavy flak in another portion of the report all the way, no fighter support. Also Douglas said few attacks from rear (where he was), but did not know what happened at the front.

## FLYING THROUGH FLAK

The above is what is known by reports of the crew prior to getting to the primary target. The reports of the crew will continue to the secondary target and return flight after we understand more about being in a plane under circumstances as described above.

Flak, what is flak and how do you deal with it?

First, flak is an abbreviation for the German word Flugabwehrkanone, which means anti-defense gun. In reading/hearing many accounts of men in the air, flak is what they feared most. The weapon was a German 88mm gun which projected jagged metal fragments into the air. They could tear through an aircraft and left a black cloud hanging in the sky.

Even if the flak missed the plane as a direct hit, the explosion would send a multitude of shards which could hit the plane. The black cloud hanging in the air could compromise planes flying through same. That was how the weapon was designed to work.

Remember how thin the skin of the airplane was? It could be ruptured with flak. Of course the crew could be injured as well, thus the flak jackets.

The term ‘flak happy’ was used in WWII. Now it would be called post-traumatic stress disorder (PSTD). An exhausted crew member could be sent to a rest home, and they derisively called them ‘flak houses.’ For some it was seen as a sign of weakness, rather than something to be treated.

The very best explanation of what flak is and how to avoid is found in a documentary meant to train pilots before they went to combat flying fields. Take 16 minutes and watch this video. There is no better way to understand. It is dated

1944, but probably made the year this mission took place. This is worth your time before going forward. Click on the visual in the middle.


BOMBING AND BOMBARDIERS

The mission is to the point they are approaching the target, what happens then?

Up to this point the pilots and navigator took the crew to what is called the IP, or initial point, which is usually within 45 miles of the target. From the IP to the target the airplane is under the control of the bombardier during this time frame of the war.

In the evasion reports above the co-pilot, Ed, says they opened and closed the bomb bays three times without dropping bombs. The bombardier, August, says, "We circled the target once, then without dropping our bombs…"

What we know as far as the primary target, which was Stuttgart industrial areas, August did not get to say Bombs Away. He had been in command of the airplane since the IP point. All these things come into play of whether the target can be hit: altitude, air speed, bomb ballistics, trail, ground speed, and drift. The bombardier drops his bombs given all these considerations and hopes it is on target.

All the evasion reports mention clouds which had the effect of aborting the bombing mission for the primary target. Formations also became separated because of the heavy clouds. Of the 181 B-17s in the first element in which this plane flew,

only 151 were considered effective for this bombing mission. There were 27 aircraft missing, and 54 aircraft damaged, some beyond repair. The statistics for the fliers was worse for KIA, wounded, evaded, POWs. The word fiasco is often found in these reports.

What was it like to be a bombardier in this era?

A poem in Flak News of one of the bomb groups had a poem that started this way.

"You can tell the gunners by their hands and glassy stare,
You can tell the bombardiers by their manner debonair, …"

You cannot talk about bombardiers without discussing the Norton Bombsight. What was it? Was it effective? Was it ethical to use? Opinions vary widely on these questions except what it was. Its purpose to was bomb the enemy, that part was clear. It was used by the U.S. Army/Air Force and U.S. Navy in WWII. It had over 2000 parts and was complicated to use.

You would know the bombardier by their posture and their eye. The bombardiers often had a black eye on one eye that was used for siting, as the black rubber ring on the bombsight equipment would rub off on their eye. They were stooped from carrying the 40-pound Norton bombsight equipment around.

The Norton Bombsight had to be kept secure and secret and that was the responsibility of the bombardier. They took an oath to protect this equipment from the enemy and were to destroy it if they had to leave the plane under fire. Many accounts say the enemy knew of the Norton, thus secrecy was not necessary.

The Norton bombsight supposedly allowed for greater accuracy at higher altitudes. It was a mechanical analog computer. All the features of this equipment, allowing for continuous monitoring of all conditions, made for unprecedented accuracy at the time. Many accounts say it was very effective in training in the States under ideal conditions, but weather conditions and combat conditions made it much less effective.

One is left with picking and choosing what is true about this equipment, but can agree it was iconic for its time and has certainly left a legend. As far as the question of whether it was ethical that takes one to the whole debate of what happens in war and what parts, if any, are ethical to secure 'winning.'

What is known is this equipment existed. It was used for the primary purpose of the mission which was to destroy things, and the bombardier was in charge of it. The bombardier also had 2 chin guns, 50-caliber machine guns, at his disposal to use for protection.

## SECONDARY TARGET

The primary target did not happen for this crew. What about the secondary target?

Navigator Don wrote this. "…so we headed for our secondary target, another hundred miles away. Here, too, we ran into trouble but finally were able to drop our bomb load and head for home. By now we were almost an hour behind our original flight plan, and now we had a real problem…sufficient gasoline to get home. To complicate matters further, a strong headwind developed, using our limited supply of fuel even faster…."

Co-pilot Ed wrote this in his evasion report.

"It was about fifteen minutes before we released our bombs on some tiny town in the hills. Clouds were still heavy, and I could not see what we hit.

"I was getting worried about the gas and the time which we were wasting. We had the heaviest gas-consuming plane on the field; we knew it, and apparently they realized it at the field, for they gave us quite a pep talk about it before we left. After we released our bombs, we figured that we had just enough gas to get to the channel and ditch, with a slim chance that we might make the English coast. We could see the Alps, and a lot of fellow turned off to Switzerland, but we decided that we would try to make it to the channel…"

Bombardier August wrote this in this evasion report.

“We circled the primary target once, then without dropping our bombs, took a heading of 300 degrees, flew about 20 minutes and dropped our bombs on a small town railroad stations with very good results.”

It was the job of the bombardier to go to the bomb bay and pull out the cotter pins that kept the firing pin locked in place and unable to detonate before dropping the bombs. Pin usually pulled when on way to target. When did this happen for the primary or secondary target for this mission? Unknown.

Left waist gunner George wrote this in his evasion report.

“We made our bomb run and heavy flak started. Some of the planes behind us made a second run and ran into extremely heavy and accurate flak. We in our formation did not drop our bombs due to have cloud over the target. We started for home went over STRASBURG, we dropped our bombs but I do not know what the target was. There was no flak here…”

Right Waist gunner Bill wrote this in his evasion report.

“Because of the heavy clouds we did not drop out bombs on the target, and we looked for the secondary target. While we were hunting around, we were all getting worried, for we knew that we did not have too much gas. When we dropped our bombs on a small town, we were flying right below and behind the lead ship. I did not see the bombing results. We turned and started back….”

No other reports on the secondary target and bombs disposed from crew reports.

## WHAT WAS HIT ON THIS MISSION

What happened on the ground?

This of course is the crux of the issue. Bombs drop, but what do they do below?

Here is the actual report written by the 368th Squadron regarding this day, which gives us the name of the secondary target before we get back to what happened to

the crew on this day. When the report was written they did not know the fate of the crew.

STUTTGART - The squadron's turn to lead came up again on another haul to the limit of our range, in Southern Germany. Our crews made the run to the target area without serious fighter opposition, but found the factories covered with clouds, and swung immediately for home, bombing the small town of Achern before crossing the Rhine, en route. The toughest break for the squadron since 21 May was the loss of Lt. Wesley D. Peterson's crew north of Paris where they bailed out because of lack of gas. Our first loss in 26 missions was hard, particularly for such a reason, but everyone is hopeful that some of them will get away. Col. George L. Robinson and Capt. L. G. Cook were in the cockpit of the lead ship, with Lts. Maynard D. Dix and Stanley Silverstein again in the nose. Lt . James H. Harrison kept an eye on the formation from the tail position. Capt. George Paris and his crew landed away due to fuel shortage. Lt. W. D. Jones was forced to return at Amiens when one engine went out. Lts. George Goris and William Dooley made up the rest of the formation.

The missing crew is: 2nd Lt. Wesley D. Peterson T/Sgt . William B. Utley 2nd Lt . Edward L. Maslanka Sgt . Frederick H. Huntzinger 2nd Lt . Donald E. Phillips S/ Sgt. George S. Monser 1st Lt. August Winters Sgt . William E. Scott , Jr . S/Sgt . William L. Plaskett S/Sgt . Douglas G. Wright

*two other notes from the Squadron log. Don came to the squadron on August 20. Also S/Sgt. Plaskett received his latest promotion on September 1. He is the man who died crossing the Pyrennes.

What is known about Achern? It is small, population in 1946 was 4492. It is 18 km southwest of Baden-Baden. Why was it a strategic target? Unknown.

Back to the story in the air. The bombs have been dropped, the load has been lightened. Can this plane make it home?

## FLYING BACK TO THE CHANNEL

Trying to get to the Channel, that was the goal. Here is how the crew explain what happened next.

First navigator Don.

"…By now we were almost an hour behind our original flight plan, and now we had a real problem…sufficient gasoline to get home. To complicate matters further, a strong headwind developed, using our limited supply of fuel even faster. The Chief Engineer busily transferred gasoline from one tank to another, so that each of the four engines would be supplied. Slowly the gauges crept toward the empty mark, and slowly we bucked the headwinds toward England. Now Paris was visible below and to our left, and we knew we were only minutes away from the Channel where we could ditch our plane and hope that Air-Sea Rescue would find us. No such luck...seconds later the first engine sputtered and coughed its last. The Channel was in plain sight ahead of us, perhaps three or four minutes away, but we were not to reach it. Our plane was in perfect condition, untouched by either flak or fighters, but it was as worthless to us as if it had been riddled like a Swiss cheese.

Co-pilot Ed wrote this in his evasion report.

"…we decided that we would try to make it to the channel.

"Our gas got lower and lower, and we saw that we were not going to make it even to the coast. We told the men to put on their parachutes and to prepare to bail out or ditch, and we started destroying any letter or papers which might help the enemy. We flew north of PARIS and were already beyond it. According to the navigator we were only ten minutes from the coast when number three engine started to go out. We changed gas from one tank to another, but number one then began to go out. For about five minutes we were flying with zero indicated for all tanks. We had seen some FW's attacking another group, but none had come after us. When we pulled out of formation a bit, however, fighters started to come in on our tail, so we went up again and put the plane on automatic pilot…"

Bombardier August wrote this in his evasion report

“I heard the pilot say that we had 325 gallons of gas left. Very shortly after this either our No 1 or No 2 engine cut out and gasoline was transferred. The engineer was kept busy draining gasoline from one tank to another. The pilot said he was going to call the group leader and say that we were going to leave. About this time all four engines cut out….”

Flight Engineer/Top Turret Gunner Bill wrote this in his evasion report.

“We were on the way back from target when the pilot called me on the inter-phone and told me to start transferring gas. We held formation as long we could, then we pealed off….”

Right Waist Gunner Bill wrote in this evasion report.

“I thought the pilot told the engineer to start transferring gas. Fighters attacked other groups, but not us. When we came North of Paris the pilot called the group leader to tell him we were almost out of gas. Soon one or two engines went out, and we had to drop out of formation….”

Left Waist gunner George from his evasion report.

“We continued on our way and when we reached the point where the enemy fighters had left us, they picked up again. This time we were getting low on gas and were forced to switch it from one tank to another. We were lagging a little behind the formation. The fighters attacked us and we did a great deal of shooting, but I don’t think we got any of them. I do not believe they hit us….”

There are no reports from Wes the pilot as he became a P.O.W. nor the Radio Operator Bill as he died. Fred the ball turret gunner also became a P.O.W. and no report. Tail gunner Douglas does not start his evasion report until bail out. .

## BAILING OUT

Bail out time.

First navigator Don.

“Now we had a choice...we could either bail out, setting the controls so that the plane would dive sharply and destroy itself afterward and be worthless to the Germans, or attempt to ride it down. Our Captain, a veteran of 23 missions, decided to have us bail out. Suddenly the parachute took on a whole new meaning, a totally different look. All through training school I had looked upon the parachute as a nuisance, a heavy cumbersome thing that Supply Depot insisted I check out at the beginning of each flight. Once inside the plane I had thrown it into a corner, out of the way, and lugged it back to Supply when the mission was completed. Again, when I went overseas I grumbled about lugging the heavy thing around with me. Now, suddenly, it was the only transportation between me and the earth, some 17,000 feet below. None of our crew had ever jumped before, and there was no time now for remembering the instructions from the training films we had seen time and again.

“I jettisoned the escape hatch in the nose of the ship where the Bombardier and I were stationed, and the wind swept it back and away as though it were a piece of confetti. Somewhere in the dim dark recesses of my mind I recalled that we were supposed to dive out through the escape hatch, and I looked down at the tiny patchwork of fields and farms far below. Not me…I couldn't go out headfirst. Instead I swung my legs out through the hatch, and the wind sucked me out into the quiet of the September morning.

“Now to see how this parachute is supposed to function! I have no recollection of pulling the ripcord, although I know I did, and quickly. No delayed jump for me...the urgency of seeing silk above me precluded that. I felt my body lurch as the great chute billowed almost instantly, checking my downward plunge. What a relief! That silk couldn't have looked better had it been gold instead. An enemy fighter circled me, but made no move other than to probably radio position to ground forces below.

“The descent seemed to take forever, though actually it was a matter of minutes...time enough to clean pockets of anything that might be of use to the enemy. The escape kit, a standard issue at the flight line, contained a few simple French phrases..."Je suis aviateur American" etc. in the happy event that the French underground might find and help a newly-grounded, clipped-wing flier, a compass,

and 2,000 francs, again for use of the French underground movement, which had done a fantastic job of smuggling many downed airmen through the Pyrenees mountains into Spain, to the American Consulate, and back to England."

Co-pilot Ed wrote this in his evasion report.

"The pilot and I yelled over the inter phone the order to bail out. He pulled the emergency release for the bomb bay doors, and I grabbed the parachutes for each of us. I saw the navigator go out the nose. I handed the pilot his parachute and went to the bomb bay. I looked in the back of the ship and saw that only one man was left. He did not seem to be quite sure what he was doing, and he was fumbling with his parachute. I yelled at him to try to bring him out of it. The bombardier did not want to go out the nose and came tearing back to the bomb bay. I went out at about 17,000 feet.

"I jumped out facing the rear of the plane. I had heard a lot of men express fears of hitting the ball turret if they bailed out the bomb bay. Consequently I was interested to notice that I cleared the ball turret by some six feet, even though the guns were pointing straight down. Furthermore, when the navigator jumped from the nose, he cleared the bomb bay doors by about five feet.

"I knew there was supposed to be a layer of clouds at 10,000 to 12,000 feet, so I delayed my jump until I came to the cloud level. I could see the plane going on under automatic pilot, and, while I was tumbling, I could see the plane gradually pull down out of the formation. I could see only one chute far above me; I believed it was the bombardier's. When I pulled the rip cord, I was on my side. The chute opened with a tremendous jerk, and my heels came up and jolted the back of my head. I blacked out, and when I recovered consciousness, I thought I had broken my back. From 10,000 to 3,000 feet a strong wind rocked my chute, and I became seasick. After 3,000 feet the wind died down, and I began feeling a little better. I saw that I was heading for an apple orchard and tried to avoid it. Unfortunately, however, I had had no instruction whatsoever in the technique of using a parachute, so all my efforts were unavailing. I think that every airman should, at the very least, be instructed in how to turn around in a parachute by crossing his arms and pulling. He might have the bad luck to come down backwards, as I did, and now know how to turn around. Since I saw I was willy nilly heading right for the apple

orchard, I put my hands over my face to go through the trees. I hit right on a dead tree, bringing half of the tree down with me and breaking a rib on my right side in the fall. I landed about 10 miles southwest of Amiens."

Bombardier August wrote this in his evasion report.

"I told the navigator to bail out and picked up my walk-around bottle. I went back to where the co-pilot was getting ready to bail out. I saw the pilot was setting the plane on AFC. I urged the co-pilot to jump and before I went out, I looked back and saw the ball turret gunner leave. I then went back and dropped out through the bomb bay.

"I jumped at about 17,000 feet, turned over twice and then pulled my rip cord. I blacked out and came to again at about 3,000 feet. I saw five chutes above me but did not see the plane. I noticed two fences below me and in trying to avoid them, hit an apple tree. My chute fell over the top of it. Since I could not get it down, I cut the shroud lines…."

Flight Engineer/Top Turret Gunner Bill from his evasion report.

"…and the pilot gave the bail-out order. I opened the bomb-bay with the emergency release, and stood there a second. I stepped off at 17,000 feet.

"Before leaving the plane, I had decided to make a delayed jump. I wanted to get to the ground as quickly as possible, and not let a crowd watch me float down. I tumbled for a while and then went into a spin; I could not get out of it. I had been told that one could control a spin by pulling ones knees onto ones chest and grasping them in ones arms. I did not want to let go of the ripcord and only used one arm, this may have been why I kept spinning. I started to have difficulty breathing, and pulled the ripcord at 10,000 feet.

"The chute opened immediately, but the spinning had twisted the shrouds. I had to unwind myself before the chute would open fully. Now, when I looked up, I could see eight chutes far above me. I decided that the missing one must belong to Lt. Peterson (pilot), as he was still at the controls when I jumped, and I could not see the plane. I had my aids box in my pants pocket and this caused the harness straps

to bruise me badly in the crotch. Over two months later this hampered me when I was crossing the Pyrenees, for I could not lift my legs to stride along properly.

“I reached a cloud, but just missed the corner. I seemed to be drifting into a small town, so I worked the shrouds in an effort to avoid this.”

Right Waist Gunner Bill wrote this in his evasion report.

“….When we were about 17,000 feet, the pilot gave the order to bail out. I was still firing at the enemy planes in the distance, but we had had no attack on us. The ball turret man came up. The radio man kicked the waist door off, went back to the bomb bay, and followed the engineer out there. I saw other waist gunner go out the bomb bay after the radio gunner. I tied my GI shoes to my parachute and went out the waist door head first, pulling the rip cord almost immediately.

“I did not see what happened to the plane. On my way down I saw two parachutes. An FW circled me but left me alone.”

Left Waist Gunner George from evasion report.

“When we were just north of Paris the pilot gave the order to prepare to bail out. We all did this except the ball turret gunner who seemed to be in a daze, so I put his chute on him. When just south of Beauvais the pilot gave the order to bail out. I kicked the waist door off. The radio gunner motioned for me to come to the bomb bay, so I went up and bailed out there, following the engineer and radio gunner. This was at about 17,000 feet. Just before I went out, I looked back and saw the other waist gunner trying to get the ball turret gunner out. I found out afterwards he could not get him to jump, so he was left in the plane. I opened my chute immediately. It took me approximately 20 minutes to reach the ground. While going down I saw our ship burning in the air. I also saw four other chutes. One FW kept circling me, did not shoot at me, but did try to shoot a hole in my chute. I don’t believe he hit it.”

Tail Gunner Douglas from his evasion report.

“I didn’t hear the order to bail out and was still firing when I saw a chute open behind the plane. Then, after counting four chutes I went to the tail and jumped. My heated-suit cord caught on something and held me in the door for a second but I jerked until it tore loose. I was out around 18000 feet, but pulled the rip cord as soon as I had cleared the plane. There was another ‘Fort’ near us under attack; I watched the battle and never did see any chutes. I was over a large village and pulled at the shroud lines to get more drift, but, at 10000 feet I went into a rain cloud and had no visibility again until 5000 feet. There were open fields below me and I landed in a field.”

Three are no reports from pilot Wes and Ball Turret Gunner Fred as they became P.O.W.s nor Bill, the radio operator, as he died crossing the Pyrennes. From this it is clear all 10 men did bail out and get to the ground.

Next to get them on the ground in their own words or known circumstances.

## FROM BAIL OUT TO GROUND

Getting to the ground and contact with someone.

First navigator Don.

“Gradually I drifted down, until I could see that I would land in a thick grove of trees at the edge of a small town. Then the ground rushed to meet me and my body was hurdling through branches and stopping abruptly as the parachute tangled in the tree top. Hurriedly, I cut my way down, and stuffed the chute into a nearby culvert. But too late...I straightened up at the guttural sounds of a foreign tongue, and found myself eyeball to a gun barrel with two young German soldiers, and in the vernacular, "for me, the war was over." Then, and only then, did the horrible realization sink in that this was indeed the enemy, that I was on his playground, that I had only minutes before dropped a few tons of bombs in his nest, and that the rules by which the game would be played henceforth were his rules, not mine.

“They didn't speak English, nor I German, but gestures with machine guns in any language are readily understandable. We marched to the depot, where a crowd of French villagers quickly gathered, peering in the windows at the unwilling visitor,

in his strange uniform. The descent through the tree had scratched and bloodied my face, and the Stationmaster's wife busied herself with basin and washcloth, sponging away the blood and clucking away in French all the while. While she worked I managed to smuggle the envelope with the 2,000 francs into her hand without being noticed by the guards. She hurried to another room, discovered her good fortune, and returned with a big smile, the typical French kiss on each cheek, and an explanation in French for all the villagers gathered around the station. As the word spread, they, too, smiled, waved, and then boldly formed a line, marched into the station and one by one, greeted me with the French hug and cheek-kissing ceremony. However, the guards took a dim view of this and ran everyone out.

Minutes later, the train arrived and we were on our way to Beauvais, France, a local camp, a large room with barred windows, and my first night in captivity. Already another airman was there, and before morning there were six of us in the room...and an unhappy bunch we were…"

Co-pilot Ed where his evasion report left off (recall he is injured).

"I landed about 10 miles outwits of Amiens.

"While I was lying on the ground, my parachute draped over the remainder of the tree, an FW flew overhead at 200 feet, evidently hunting for those who had bailed out. When I was about 300 feet up, I had seen a number of people in barnyards watching my fall. Soon some came over and picked me up; I could not stand up by myself. I pulled out my cigarette lighter and began to set fire to my parachute, but they French prevented me. They thought I was mad and indicated that they had all sorts of uses for a good parachute. I took off my jacket and coveralls and left them. I had lost my cap and gloves on the way down. Before I jumped, I had taken off my flying boots and put on some brown cadet oxfords. If I were doing any more evading which took as much walking, I would make certain that I was wearing good GI shoes.

"The French seemed unwilling to do much for me, no doubt because they feared the Germans would be along any minute, so I started off across the fields, going as best as my right side permitted. It was pretty bad; I had to go underneath fences

because I could not climb them. When I bailed out it was 1147 hours, and I walked away from the French people about 1201 hours.

“When I had walked about half a mile, I came to a farmyard just off a road. About ten people were crowded in it. I walked up to them and said that I was an American aviator. I pulled out my phrase sheet and with it asked them if they could help me. They stood around as if they did not know what to do. I was suddenly struck by the fact that they all seemed to be smoking, and the cigarettes were not home-made affairs. In fact, they looked like American cigarettes. I suspected that one of my crew must be around and asked them where he was. They went to some bushes rather reluctantly, and pulled out my bombardier, August. They took us both to a haystack and covered us up….”

Bombardier August from his evasion report.

“I noticed two fences below me and in trying to avoid them, hit an apple tree. My chute fell over the top of it. Since I could not get it down, I cut the shroud lines. Several French peasants came close to where I was and tried to talk to them. But they did not seem to want to come very close, so I worked and finally managed to get my chute up, gathered it up and climbed over a fence. I put my chute, flying clothes and Mae West into a haystack. One of the Frenchmen motioned me to set fire to it. I did not wish to do this as I was afraid it would attract the Germans. But he came up and did it himself. The Frenchmen then took me with them to a farm occupied by either two or three families. On the way I gave them two packages of cigarettes, some chocolate and my knife.

“As we approached the house several dogs started barking, so I was guided to a pigpen. There were a great many blackberry bushes with briars, so I crawled in there and hid. In about 20 or 30 minutes they called and I wouldn’t come out. They came after me and when I did get out they had my co-pilot with them….”

Now we have Don as a POW and the Co-pilot and Bombardier together.

Flight Engineer/Top Turret Gunner Bill from his evasion report.

“I reached a cloud, but just missed the corner. I seemed to be drifting into a small town, so I worked the shrouds in an effort to avoid this.

“I landed on a high piece of ground a half mile from the village. Six or eight people arrived immediately, and I knew that they had been watching me. I asked, in English, if there were Germans in the neighborhood. I thought that “German” was the same in every language, but soon realized my mistake, when no one knew what I was talking about. They did, however, understand that I wanted to hide and they left me free to do so. The sides of the hill, on which I had landed, were heavily covered with brush; I started down one side. As I started to walk through the brush, I realized for the first time that, while jumping, I had lost my left flying boot, heated boot, shoe and stocking. I had not been wearing the shoe, my shoes were tied around my left hand, and the laces of one shoe, the left, broke.

“When I reached the bottom of the hill, I started to look for a place to bury my chute, I still had my chute, harness, and Mae West with me. I was half way through hiding them, after searching for a good place for what seemed to be 15 minutes, when I heard someone coming. I hurried off to a spot I had seen while trying to hide my equipment. I thought this a particularly good location, because trees growing low over the brush here, blended well with my green flying suit. I walked into this cover backwards, trying to pull the tall grass back again over my trail.

“When I was safely settled, I started to watch the searching party. There were no Germans in it, and I recognized one of the Frenchmen. I called him over to me. About five people trooped over. I told them I wanted civilian clothes and they went off to get some. While they were gone, I finished hiding my chute, then I settled down again and opened my aids box. The first thing I did was to get out the language card, so that it would be handy. Then I separated my money from the other objects as I did not how far I could trust these people.

“In an hour my friends returned. The shoes they brought were a little too small, but they had to do. I put on a baggy pair of trousers, and a grey coat that had gone white with age. I looked like a tramp. Then I moved to a tree covered swamp that was thick with brush. Food was brought to me here, and I learned that one of my helpers was himself anxious to leave the country. He said he would take me to Paris, and maybe the whole way to Spain. Then I was left alone.”

Right Waist Gunner Bill wrote this in his evasion report.

“I landed in a woods about eight miles south of Beauvais. My chute caught on a tree, leaving me hanging about 40 feet from the ground. I shook the chute, and it slipped off and eased me gently to the ground. I pulled the chute down and hid it and my flying boots and helmet under a bush. While I was putting on my GI shoes, I heard some voices and some dogs barding. Soon the other waist gunner (next report) came with a French girl, and from there on my journey was arranged for me.”

Left Waist Gunner George wrote in his evasion report.

“I landed in tall grass at the side of a railroad, Just before landing I saw farmers coming to the spot where I would land. I immediately took off my chute, hid it along with my mae west and heavy flying boots in some weeds. I climbed a fence and started toward the farmers. By this time there were 15 or 20 of them, all ages. When about 30 yards away they started to make a circle around me. I went to an old man, stuck out my hand and said "Comrade," then went on around the circle doing this. When I came to a big fellow, he held my arm and said "Deutsch!" I said "No, American!" He said there are no Germans around.

“Three boys and a girl then took me to a woods about 100 yards away. They had seen one of our crew members down there. They asked me to yell, which I did. We soon found the chute which I knew belonged to our right waist gunner, so I started calling him. In a few minutes he appeared and we hid what was left of his chute. The French had already taken part of it.

“We were then taken to a farmyard. By using the maps from our purse, they explained to us where we were. I asked if they knew how we could get back to England. They said to wait—someone who could speak English would come. We were hidden in some raspberry bushes and there given civilian clothing. One of the men took off his shoes and gave them to us. We in turn gave them our uniforms and asked them to bury them which they did. After about an hour we were taken to a farmhouse and fed. Then we walked about a mile to a deserted farmhouse where

we were hidden until 2000 hours. At that time our radio gunner was brought in. The man with him arranged the rest of our journey for us."

Note—Radio Operator Bill. This is the only indication by the report above we have of the radio operator who later died crossing the Pyrennes. It appears he initially hooked up with the two waist gunners.

Tail Gunner Douglas from his evasion report.

"As soon as I touched the ground a fighter swooped over my head but went away without circling me. I gathered in my chute, hid it in some hay, and started for a small village about half a mile away. I followed a hedge-row, there was a woman standing there waiting for me. She had followed my jump with binoculars and had come out of the village to meet me. She hid me in a ditch immediately, telling me to wait while she got clothes and food. when she was out of sight I changed my hiding place so that I could see her when she returned. About thirty minutes later she returned with another woman. This convinced me that she meant to help, so I whistled at her. After I had changed into the clothes she gave me I was taken to a garden where a hiding place was fixed for me. I was to stay here until the woman's husband returned that night, and then talk with him.

"When he came we talked for a few minutes and then I was taken into the house. Because I had a bad cold they insisted I go to bed; I stayed in bed a week, being treated for the cold. At the end of that time I told the woman I was going to leave but she said I couldn't until she had found some help for me…."

END OF REPORTS GETTING THEM TO THE GROUND

This is all that was in the evasion reports of getting to the ground and in contact with someone. We have two men not accounted for in the evasion reports. First, Fred the ball turret gunner. He did become a P.O.W. but it is unknown how he was captured. He would have gone to an enlisted man's P.O.W. camp, not Stalag Luft III.

The other man not accounted for is Wes the pilot. He ended up as a P.O.W. and was in Stalag Luft III in the same small combine with Don, the navigator. Thus, it

might be assumed when Don said, “Minutes later, the train arrived and we were on our way to Beauvais, France, a local camp, a large room with barred windows, and my first night in captivity. Already another airman was there, and before morning there were six of us in the room...and an unhappy bunch we were.”

It is highly likely that Wes was one of the six men Don mentioned, although since Don knew the pilot well it could also be assumed he would have stated the fact in his narrative that he was with his pilot. We are left with unknown, except to know they ended up in the same combine of initially 3 men in Stalag Luft III and eventually 14 before leaving Stalag Luft III on January 29, 1945, for the Forced March to Moosburg, Stalag VIIA.

As far as what happened to the plane with no name, this from the American Air Museum in England. “Ran out of gas, abandoned to crash Sancourt, 25 miles E of Rouen, Fr. Missing Air Crew Report 518” Unknown if any remains of the plane have been found.

In 1943 men in bombing missions of the 8th Army/Air Force could go home after completing 25 bombing missions. In reality for this year of 1943 only 25% of the men did so. The other 75% were either KIA, MIA, or POWs.

“A total of 350,000 airmen served with the Eighth Air Force in England, and to this number, 26,000 were killed, or **7.42 percent**. Compared to the percentages of other military branches – U.S. Marines 3.29%, U.S. Army 2.25%, and U.S. Navy 0.41%.” From a google search.

From the 8th Air Force website.

“From May 1942 to July 1945, the Eighth planned and precisely executed America's daylight strategic bombing campaign against Nazi-occupied Europe, and in doing so the organization compiled an impressive war record. That record, however, carried a high price. For instance, the Eighth suffered about half of the U.S. Army Air Force's casualties (47,483 out of 115,332), including more than 26,000 dead. The Eighth's brave men earned 17 Medals of Honor, 220 Distinguished Service Crosses, and 442,000 Air Medals. The Eighth's combat record also shows 566 aces (261 fighter pilots with 31 having 15 or more victories

and 305 enlisted gunners), over 440,000 bomber sorties to drop 697,000 tons of bombs, and over 5,100 aircraft losses and 11,200 aerial victories."

Being on a bomber crew was perilous.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

For those who want to know more, here are links that might be helpful. First, the six evasion reports.

Co-pilot Ed.

https://nara-media-001.s3.amazonaws.com/arcmedia/nw/305270/EE-222.pdf

Arrived in Spain, October 29, 1943; arrived in Gibraltar November 10, 1943; departed Gibraltar November 19 by air; arrived Bristol November 20, 1943.

Bombardier August.

https://nara-media-001.s3.amazonaws.com/arcmedia/nw/305270/EE-179.pdf

Bombardier, arrived in Spain October 10, 1943, arrived in Gibraltar October 29, 1943, departed for UK (did not say by air or sea) on November 3, 1943; arrived in New Qyuay - Port Mawgan (can't read writing well here) did not get date of arrival at this place but by line it is on must be in the U.K.

Flight Engineer/Top Turret Gunner Bill.

https://nara-media-001.s3.amazonaws.com/arcmedia/nw/305270/EE-326.pdf

Arrived in Spain November 22, 1943, arrived in Gibraltar January 13, 1944, depart Gibraltar January 16, 1944, by air; arrived in Bristol January 16, 1944.

Right Waist Gunner Bill.

https://nara-media-001.s3.amazonaws.com/arcmedia/nw/305270/EE-173.pdf

Arrived in Spain October 9, 1943; arrived in Gibraltar October 27, 1943; departed by air October 29, 1943, arrived in Bristol October 30, 1943.

Left Waist Gunner George.

https://nara-media-001.s3.amazonaws.com/arcmedia/nw/305270/EE-169.pdf

Arrived in Spain October 14, 1943; arrived in Gibraltar, October 27, 1943; left Gibraltar October 29, 1943 by air; arrived in Devonshire October 29, 1943.

Tail Gunner Douglas.

https://nara-media-001.s3.amazonaws.com/arcmedia/nw/305270/EE-262.pdf

Arrived in Spain November 22, 1943; arrived Gibraltar December 2, 1943; departed Gibraltar by air December 9, 1943; arrived in Newquay in U.K. December 10, 1943.

Here is the report of the plane from the American Air Museum in Britain

https://www.americanairmuseum.com/aircraft/4132

Here is the report of the 3685th Bombardment Squadron (H)

https://www.306bg.us/library/368combatdiaryv2%20v-text.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0prq6DtafCWAXNim4ljfGMtOThWYQcpLgHF3kyWzELQWyxuL6SVLJitFI

Here is the story of the radio operator Bill who died crossing the Pyrennes.

https://www.ww2history.org/war-in-europe/escape-over-the-pyrenees-mountains-and-the-story-of-wwii-b-17-gunner-bud-owens/

Here is what the American Air Museum has about the pilot Wes on this day who became a P.O.W.

https://www.americanairmuseum.com/person/223274

Here is what the American Air Museum has about the ball turret gunner Fred on this day who became a P.O.W.

https://www.americanairmuseum.com/person/71604

Here is a picture of a quonset hut at Thurleigh Air Base, living quarters for crew members.

https://www.ww2online.org/image/three-us-air-crewmen-stand-front-quonset-hut-thurleigh-airfield

This is a very good description of what life was like regarding B-17 missions.

https://www.march.afrc.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/168566/b-17-duty-was-tiring-memorable/

Donald E. Phillips' story is an ebook available on several platforms. Don’s Great Escape: Life in a German POW Camp. It has over 70,000 downloads.