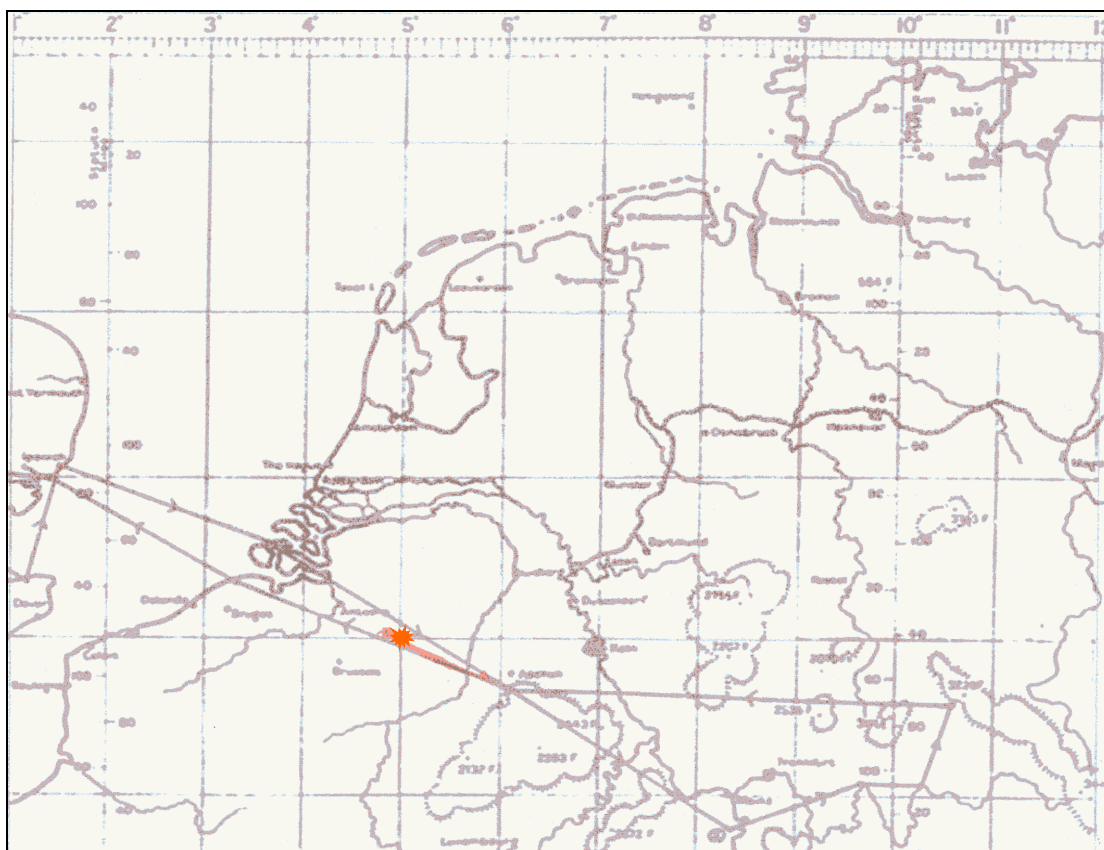


17 AUG 1943:
The Air Raid on Regensburg and Schweinfurt



by Paul Laureys



FLIGHT ROUTE AND CRASH LOCATION OF
B-17 #42-29559 4°55'53" E - 51°01'36" N



Crew of B-17F *STUP-N-TAKIT* OR-Q # 42-29559; 17 AUG 1943.

Bottom row left to right: 1Lt. Ch. Bennett, 1Lt. A. Van Bommel, 2Lt. S. Dahlman, 1Lt. M. Sullivan.

Top row left to right: (3) R. Gayner , F. Cowherd , W. Barrett (5) (Photo; AFHRA)

TWO ARMEN TOUCHED DOWN AT TESTELT (BELGIUM) AND WALKED BACK HOME

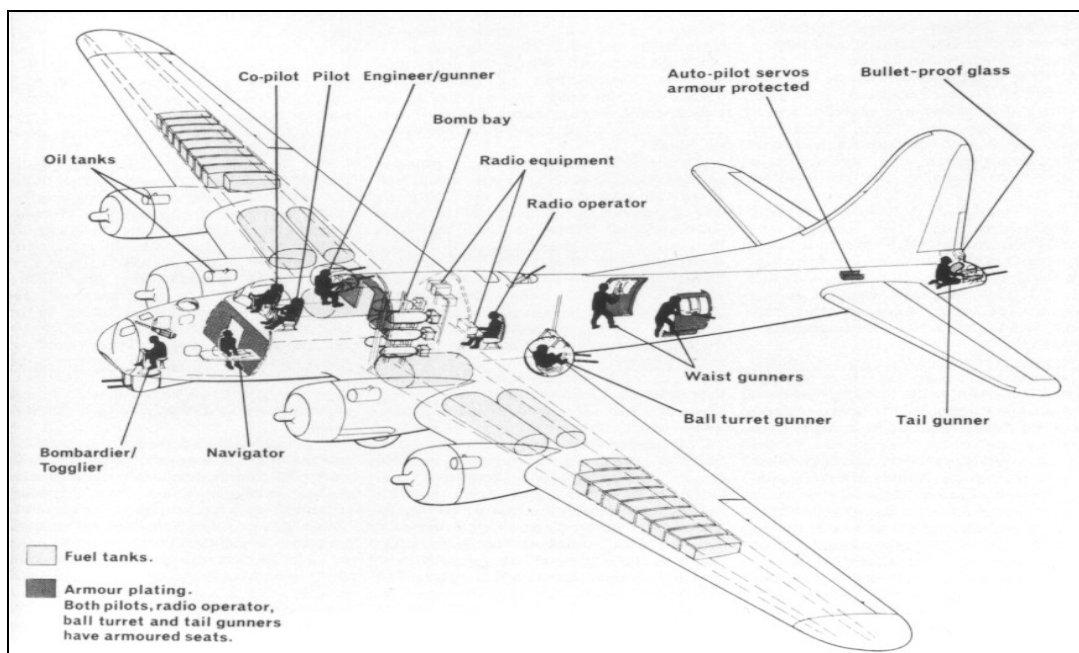
The Raid

As we already know from many publications, the 8th American Air Force on that infamous Aug., 17th of 1943 launched a combined attack on the Messerschmidt aircraft factories at Regensburg and the VKF ball-bearing factories at Schweinfurt.

One of those hundreds of four-engined bombers which took part in the raid, was the bomber B-17 *Stup-N-Takit*, with 1st Lt Bennett in command. That particular day his crew consisted of 2nd Lt Stanley A. Dahlman, co-pilot, 1st Lt Adriaan T. Van Bommel, navigator, 1st Lt Maurice T. Sullivan, bombardier, T. Sgt Ford C. Cowherd, both engineer and top turret gunner, T. Sgt William J. Barrett, radio-operator, Sgt Robert F. Gaynor, right waist gunner, S. Sgt. Thomas J. Hunt, left waist gunner, Sgt John F. Greager, ball turret gunner and tail gunner S. Sgt Edward P. Troy. The whole crew had already taken part in various raids, some of them more than ten times, a few like T. Sgt. Barrett even more than twenty times. The raid on Regensburg-Schweinfurt was the latter's 25th combat flight, which was to have finalized his 'Tour'. Alas fate would decide otherwise.

1st Lt Charles Bennett's aircraft belonged to the 323rd Squadron, 91st Bomb Group and formed with the 351st Bomb Group and the 381st Bomb Group the 101st Combat Wing, which had the lead. The latter was under the command of Col. W. M. Gross. Then followed the 3 other Combat Wings of the 1st Division. Together they constituted the second attack wave. All in all a caravan long 62 kilometers consisting of 230 four-engined bombers. Target of this air force was Schweinfurt.

1st Lt. Charles Bennett's position was at the back in the lower squadron of the 1st Combatbox (1), a position pilots sarcastically refer to as the Purple Heart Corner (2).



Due to opaque ground mist on the 1st Division air fields this second offensive didn't manage to take off until noon. The effect of surprise of a combined attack on two different objectives, so desperately hoped for by the General Headquarters, thus never materialized. Likewise the time schedule coordination went completely wrong. For one thing the fighter escort to support the second wave didn't show up. The complete German air defense, alarmed by the 1st wave (3rd Division) with destination Regensburg was given free scope and in this way could join forces by the moment the second wave appeared. The effects soon became apparent: in the vicinity of Mol the B-17 *Stormy Weather* under the command of 2nd Lt. Don von der Heyden (3) crashed, the craft all aflame. 2nd Lt. Don von der Heyden was the 'Tail-end Charly' of the last aircraft in the Combat Box right behind 1st Lt. Bennett. The latter and his crew only noticed two parachutes. In the neighborhood of Liege the notorious 88mm anti-aircraft artillery was extremely precise, a few B-17 got hit without severe effects, though. Only when the German frontier had been crossed the going really got tough when the 101st Combat Wing was intercepted by some thirty Fw 190. During this massive offensive 1st Lt Bennett's aircraft was severely damaged. It had to abandon the unit and return to its base. From Lummen onwards contact was again established with Me 110 aircraft from II./NJG1 based at St. Trond. Lt. Walter Barte is given credit for a few direct hits which forced Lt. Bennett and his crew to abandon their aircraft over Testelt.

The Escape of 1st Lt. Charles A. Bennett, the B-17 *Stup-N-Takit* Pilot

After his return from occupied Europe, Bennett described his experiences in an extensive report. His story started off with the attack along the German-Belgian border. *'Just beyond the German border two sections Focke-Wulf kept us under fire both in the front and the back. The starboard engines were hit and the aircraft started to tremble to such an extent I had to switch them off. At the back the tail gunner reported that one of his .50 machine guns was out of order. The next contact the rudder was hit by some 20mm grenades and the tailgunner was severely injured by flying shell splinter. In spite of severe injuries S. Sgt. Troy kept his position to defend it.'*

For this act of bravery S. Sgt. Troy was mentioned in general orders of the 91st BG (4). After his return from prison camp he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

Flying on two engines proved to be an impossible task. 1st Lt. Bennett couldn't maintain his position and decided to return. In doing so, he became an easy target for the 3 Me 110 which intercepted him on his way back. During the first attack *'in train'* from below, a proven strategy of night hunts the outer port engine caught fire. In vain, the co-pilot tried to extinguish the fire by directing the fire fighting system on the engines. The fire didn't die down and the German hunters proved to be relentless. During the next assault a 20mm grenade exploded in the cockpit, injuring co-pilot 2nd Lt Dahlman severely. 1st Lt. Bennett also got a leg shell-splintered. Amidships the left waist gunner and the radio operator were reported to be lying on the floor, deadly injured. Neither rudder nor aileron responded any more. Upon this the pilot ordered to abandon the aircraft. Together with the badly injured co-pilot 1st Lt. Bennett attempted to reach the front compartment. There he would try to drop the latter through the escape hatch, with the help of the navigator and the bombardier. But both had already jumped. We don't know what precisely happened in those last minutes. In his report Bennett claimed that he had been ejected through the plexiglass nose turret as a result of the blast.



On his parachute landing Bennett reached of a farm belonging to Van De Weijs, Vanderstokken Str., Ter Hoeve. From all sides people flocked and helped him to get rid of his parachute. Bennett reported on the incident: *From all sides I was surrounded by people. I was being addressed in a language unknown to me, tapped on the shoulder, kissed, shaken hands with and I noticed a very young chap getting away with my parachute. I sat down quite dazed, but I was being pulled by the sleeve and made all sorts of signs which I didn't understand at that moment. The farmer offered me a glass of milk. At the same time our ball turret Sgt. Graeger came stumbling round the corner, his head covered in blood, his shoulder blade and left arm broken; he had hit the aircraft while jumping. His face contorted in pain he told me our right waist gunner (S. Sgt Gaynor) was lying a few yards away with a broken leg. Someone tried to reassure us and to explain in a mixture of English and French that a doctor was being called. When the Germans arrived I fled into the woods. While running I rid myself of my aircraft equipment, but after half an hour I felt quite exhausted. The leg had started to bleed again and I took shelter in a ditch. I found bandage in my survival kit to nurse my leg. I stayed there in order to recover from the emotions of the last hours. At a certain moment I heard something, warily I looked across the ditch's edge and noticed the man who'd tried to get me to the farm where I had touched down. Again he signaled that I should follow him. Together we headed west, through woods and fields till we got to the edge of a village (Wolfstdonk?). Here I had to take up a position without being noticed and wait for someone to help me. After some ten minutes the man got back in the company of a ten year old lad, dressed in a black sweater. They had brought with them old clothes I was to put on a bit further in a wood. The three of us went down to a pub in the center of the village. Two men were already waiting for us. I got some food and beer was being served. The landlord treated me to cigars. Tension suddenly rose when a lorry crowded with German soldiers at the back of it passed by. My helpers then decided to wait until dark.*

That evening Bennett, accompanied by the two men, left the pub by bike and headed for Aarschot using various small by-roads. Darkness had already settled when they arrived at deputy police chief Jozef Claes's place in Aarschot. At once they were taken upstairs where the chief's wife expertly took care of Bennett's injured leg. This was the end of the first day of what once was to become the longest flight in the life of this American airman.

Navigator 1st Lt. Van Bommel was shown in the same night. This young American was of Flemish origin and was quite fluent in his 'mother tongue' (5). He too had been picked up immediately after his flight from the place where he had crashed.

The reunion was for obvious reasons warm-hearted. They all had their own story to tell and found out who had survived the crash. Van Bommel had met the flight engineer T. Sgt. Cowherd safe and sound in the company of the heavily wounded tail gunner Troy. Each of them had gone their own separate ways when the Germans got nearer. 2nd Lt. Sullivan, the bombardier, had jumped through the escape hatch in the nose of the aircraft just before Van Bommel, never to see him again.



Pilot 1 LT. BENNETT and navigator 1 LT. VAN BEMMEL



Engineer and Top Turret Gunner COWHERD

In the middle of the night another member of the resistance group reported that three corpses had been detected in what was left of the crashed aircraft. One of the pilots had landed on the Molenberg to the south of Ter Hoeve, but had broken his foot in the process. Some time later he was run in by the Germans. The pilot in question was 2nd Lt. Sullivan, the bombardier. One of the onlookers was forced by the Germans to take the injured pilot on his bike to the residence of the local solicitor at the Dorp Str. in Testelt. Here, the platoon in charge of guarding the railway line was billeted. Still the same day 2nd Lt. Sullivan was transported to the *Kommandatur* in Diest. There he met Luce Wandall, bombardier of the B-17 which had crashed at Averbode later that day. Both were from the same training center and had never met ever since. The next day Sullivan together with the other members of the crew of the B-17 that had crashed in Averbode were conveyed to the Sint-Gillis prison.

The two heavily injured gunners whom Bennett had still seen after he had landed were picked up by the Germans. Meanwhile only T. Sgt. Cowherd had not been tracked and was probably still wandering about. The next morning he was spotted at Wolfsdonk along the road to Langdorp. He was found at the Van Rompays at the back of their garden, shivering with cold amidst the high grass. It appeared later that these people were in contact with the local resistance, for the following night T. Sgt. Cowherd joined his friends at the home of deputy police chief Claes at Aarschot.

T. Sgt. Ford C. Cowherd's Escape

As soon as the pilot had given the bail out signal, the twenty year old engineer left the gun position in the ball turret. Later on Cowherd wrote: *'In great hurry I hooked the parachute on to the parachute frame and opened the hatches of the bomb bay. Without hesitating I dived from the catwalk across the bomb bay into the depth. As soon as my parachute had opened up and the swinging movement had stopped I started looking around to find out whether the other members of the crew had also left the aircraft. I counted yet another six parachutes. The double-engined Messerschmitts were still there and made victorious rounds before disappearing in eastern direction.'*

Slowly Cowherd glided down towards the edge of a row of houses. Eventually he ended up in a lime tree behind the school, Hoeve Str. in Testelt. Swiftly gathering villagers set him free from his high position in the tree and conducted him to the Mechelse Road where he found Van Bommel and the severely injured Troy.

The tail gunner, heavily injured during the battle, was lying unconscious, his parachute still on, at the foot of a pine tree where he had landed. Van Bommel and some civilians tried to remove Troy's parachute and to staunch the hemorrhages at his head with an emergency dressing. However, when they heard the sound of an engine in the distance they were told the Germans were closing in and they left at once. Frightened, Cowherd fled into the wood. After some running, he found himself in the open. Utterly breathless he sought cover in a ditch. All by himself and undecided he kept lying there. Not a living soul was to be found for miles around and his mate had disappeared too. Apparently they had gone their separate ways. Cowherd had fled to the north-east and had hidden for some time somewhere between the Nieuw Str. and the Lange Str. Van Bommel however had left in westerly direction in the company of a resistance fighter.

Cowherd had been lying for some 4 hours when he witnessed the crash of the B-17 *'Patches'* from the 305th BG (6), which on its way back from Schweinfurt had exploded over the Weefberg at Averbode. Part of the fuselage crashed at a distance of less than 750 meters from him.

Spellbound by what was going on in the air he counted seven parachutes, but they touched down at some 5 & 6 kilometers away from his position. He saw some Germans running up to the fallen debris. Since his position wasn't safe any more he left. Following the ditch, squatting, half creeping, half running he reached a bridge. Somewhat later a German motorcyclist crossed the bridge. He decided to wait until night had fallen, it was too risky to further move on.

This new sheltered vantage point enabled him to observe an isolated farm. Occasionally an old woman appeared in the yard. He decided to walk up to her still before dark. He tried to make clear to her in his imperfect French and by dint of reiterated gestures that he was hungry. He got some milk and bread. He tried to figure out his whereabouts but the old lady didn't connect. The fugitive then decided to move on and seek shelter for the night. All night through the Germans were ceaselessly looking for the lost pilots.

After a few hours' rest he tried to organize his flight on a more rational basis. With the aid of a small compass from his escape kit he left before dawn in a south-westerly direction. At daybreak he got to a road close to a small village (Wolfsdonk?). From a shallow ditch

surrounded by high grass he enjoyed a fair view of the backs of several houses along the road. One moment an older man left a house close by and walked down the garden path up to his hide-out. Cowherd scrambled to his feet, waved a hand and sat down again. Terrified the man stood still, looked in all directions and approached the pilot. In poor French, a few English words and lots of gestures Cowherd tried to bring it home to the stranger that he was an American pilot and needed help. The old man signaled to hide and wait until he'd come back with his daughter. Fortunately the girl's French was excellent. She told him his whereabouts (the vicinity of Aarschot), supplied him with food and went for assistance. Not quite reassured Cowherd saw her enter a neighboring house a few houses down the row. After a while the girl in the company of a neighbor appeared on the upper floor behind a window and he saw her point in his direction. Anxiously he wondered what was going to happen. Time crept by until two young men walked up to him with an overcoat and a pair of slippers. At last he could take off his heavy boots and he looked more or less like a civilian in his new overcoat. Both signaled him to follow him to a small grove beyond the village. Here some kind of accommodation was available, probably used at night by people in hiding. He was told to wait there till nightfall which allowed them to prepare his further flight. Exhausted but reassured by the men's determination he fell asleep. Night had fallen when he was woken up and taken to one of these men's property. There two townspeople were waiting for him. First he was being interrogated about his unit, aircraft and crew and then he was told his pilot and navigator had been found back the day before. That same night they left by bike to Aarschot to see his mates back.



Ground crew of STUP- N- TAKIT. (Photo; Ray Wood)



Ford COWHERD (L.), Jules VERBOORT (M), and Frans STORMS (R);
August 1943 at Winksele (Photo; Frans STORMS)

On the Way Back Home

As soon as possible the three airmen had to find a safer shelter, for the assistant police chief Claes lived in the residence of the municipal girls' school, Amers Str.. In the same building some thirty collaborating gendarmes had recently been accommodated.

Later on it would appear from the membership roll of the *Onafhankelijkheids Front* (O.F. = Independent Front) that Claes had ties with the O.F. force 034 – Louvain, for the next day a man named Frans – his real name was George Mertens – in the company of two armed O.F. partisans (Frans Storms and Désiré Mertens) arrived by bike to pick up the Americans. In broad daylight the trip took them to Westmeerbeek. This Frans wasn't just anybody, he was commander of the "O.F. Boortmeerbeek" battallion. One of his more dashing exploits consisted of an attack on an explosives transport from *Les Poudreries Réunies de Balen-Wezel*. Under the very eyes of the Germans Frans and his companions sneaked off in a truck loaded with 3,2 ton of TNT (7).

Bennett was first put up with a wealthy family. Van Bemmelen and Cowherd were accommodated with the Vanderhoves. A week later Frans took Cowherd to Winksele, where the latter stayed with Jules Vervoort, his wife and his two daughters. After a few days Bennett joined the Vervoorts where Cowherd had been in hiding for some time. A week later the two airmen left by bike, accompanied by three partisans, to Mechlin (Mechelen) and were housed with the chaplain of the Hanswijck parish.. Some days later Lily, a young Comète agent (8) arrived to pick up the airmen in hiding. They continued the trip by train to Brussels, the hub of the escape route. In Brussels they stayed in a flat off the Konings Str. with two English-speaking ladies, one of whom appeared to be English. On the 23rd of September, a guide picked them up and together they continued the journey to Doornik (Tournai) by train. From there they reached a place close to the border by tram. At the tram stop a young French girl was waiting for them. In the evening she took them to a douanier's house across the border. Quite early the next morning they left for Lille station. A new guide, a tall dark-

skinned man accompanied them to Paris by train. Somewhere in Paris another stranger, a man called George took over. He appeared to be the head of the organization (sic). On arriving the identities were checked again. George put all sorts of questions before introducing them to a 50-year old lady. In the company of the latter they took the subway to reach the other side of Paris. There she met a man about 30 years old, called Albert, who took them to his flat on the 4th floor, rue Odinet, one of the *safehouses* of the Paris organization. He lived there with his wife Georgette and his 8-year old daughter. Albert's mother and sister paid the Americans a few visits. A new guest, 1st Lt. Claytor, pilot of the B-17, '*Alice of Dallas*' joined them after a few days. The '*Alice of Dallas*' had been brought down over Munsterbilzen during the same raid on Schweinfurt. From then on Cowherd and Claytor would travel together.



WITTE BRIGADE-FIDELIO AARSCHOT

2de v.l. Jozef CLAES, in het midden RAF piloot Douglas ELDRIDGE, 4de v.l. Frans VAN WINKEL, zittend rechts Mevr. CLAES. (Photo: J.Breugelmans)



Rechts FRANCO met baret, TANTE GO en twee *evadées*. (Photo:E. De Greef)

STUP-N-TAKIT CRASH LANDING



The day after Claytor's arrival Bennett was picked up by a little fellow wearing a *pince-nez*, who was working for Universal Pictures. They traveled to Dax in a third class carriage. On the same train, Bennett met other fugitives of the Schweinfurt raid, among them Sgt. Aguino (95th BG) who had landed in Vlimmeren and Sgt. Walters (381st BG) who had come down in Bassenge. In Dax station they were joined by the American gunner Sgt. Fahnke and an RNZAF airman F. Sgt. Hodge, who had descended in the night of $\frac{3}{4}$ July in Geetbets (10 kilometers south-south-east of Diest all in Belgium). Here the two fugitives were being waited for at the station from where they left by bike for Bayonne. At Bayonne, they were introduced to Elvire Degreef, Aunt Go for the fugitives, a Belgian woman in her forties who had been living in Anglet, close to the Franco-Spanish border for some years. Already from the start of the escape route she had been involved and she organized the crossing of the Pyrenees.

This extremely dangerous crossing took at least nine hours, but usually longer since the crossing was divided into various stages. Sometimes it took place by day, but more often at night and depending on circumstances, different routes were used along farmsteads and mountain refuges. The country was harsh, continuously rising and falling, along rocky slopes. Pelting rain or blizzard was common. Fear was omnipresent since the border area was teeming with German patrols. From their last hide-out it was only a few kilometers to reach the high mountains from where to risk the crossing at the most appropriate time. The point was how to avoid getting caught in that last stage. In Irun the fugitives crossed the border with a Spanish guide. Bennett and his co-fugitives were lucky, they succeeded in reaching the British Embassy in San Sebastian safely. Bennett's fellow fugitives already left for Gibraltar the next day. Bennett himself left only a week later and arrived in Gibraltar, 10th of November. Cowherd and Claytor had already managed to reach Gibraltar on the 15th of October and had already been flown over to England. In Gibraltar, Bennett learned that Van Bommel had been less fortunate. He had been caught by the Germans in Saint-Jean-de-Luz in the French Pyrenees. With him was a Scotsman, Brice Domingan (9), another fellow fugitive from Aarschot. Elvire Degreef a.k.a. Aunt Go explained in her diary why the escape had gone wrong: *'The 10th of September 1943 Franco (10) and myself were in for a big disappointment. We were biking to Saint-Jean-de-Luz with the airman Bryce Domingan and Adriaan Van Bommel when suddenly a German patrol, coming from a side-track separated us. We had accounted for unforeseen circumstances like these and the two airmen had been told to go and make a U-turn should they see Franco take off his beret, which deed he did rather desperately. Instead of acting as agreed upon they threw themselves as it were in the arms of the German Feldgendarmesl. The Germans took advantage of this favorable opportunity to ask for their papers. I myself continued my way unsuspecting scanning the road. When eventually I didn't notice anybody anymore behind me I started to worry. I went back to find out what had happened and found Franco utterly upset. He proposed to revert to the point where the airmen had bumped into the German patrol. A few minutes later, much to our regret we noticed both airmen, handcuffed between the Germans leave, the latter obviously quite happy with their human catch. Admittedly it is quite agonizing to fail so close to destination.*

Eventually Bennett flew back to England on the 20th of November. Debriefing took long and he set down his flight across occupied Europe for the benefit of the Intelligence Service. A few days later he was picked up by someone of his own squadron. Then he left on leave to the USA. He wouldn't return to Europe anymore, for him the war was over.

The Aftermath

2nd Lt. Stanley A. Dahlman, T. Sgt. William J. Barrett and S. Sgt. Thomas J. Hunt were laid to rest in the *Feindfriedhof* at St.- Truiden military base. After the war they were reburied in the U.S. Military Cemetery at Ardennes, Neupre, Neuville-en- Condroz. Later on families of American soldiers killed in action were given the opportunity to have their dearest repatriated. Thus 2nd Lt. Stanley A. Dahlman and S. Sgt. Thomas J. Hunt were flown over to the USA. The body of T. Sgt. William J. Barrett remained at the Neuville cemetery, the Ardennes Cemetery Memorial in Belgium (burial place A – 35 – 6).

The badly wounded S.Sgt. Edward P. Troy, S. Sgt. G. Gaynor and S. Sgt. John F. Gregor were taken by the Germans to the Bordet hospital in Brussels. After their recovery they were sent to a P.O.W. camp in Germany.

As already mentioned above 1st Lt. Adriaan Van Bommel and the Scot RAF Sgt. Brice Domingan were arrested on the 10th of September in the French border village of Saint-Jean-de-Luz.. In this way all military men in civilian dress who were caught south of the demarcation line were turned over to the Gestapo as spies and conveyed to the infamous Gestapo prison of Fresné near Paris. The Gestapo considered this a favorable moment to grill a pilot who had been caught hundreds of kilometers away from the place of the crash in civilian dress and with forged identity papers at that. If then it appeared that the latter had landed weeks ago somewhere in Holland or Belgium, they left no stone unturned to get information. The whole time span was carefully sifted out and compared to the already known facts. For the Gestapo not the pilots mattered, the escape routes on the other hand were a thorn in their flesh. The prisoners were not sent to a P.O.W. camp in Germany until the inquiry had been closed.



Still the same month assistant commissioner Jozef Claes and his brother Leon were caught in a raid in Aarschot. Two days later Pierre Verpoorten, Frans Adang and Frans Van Winckel were arrested. This wasn't the end yet, for still one day later Jozef Van Hoorick from Baal and Van Roosbroeck from Betekom were arrested.

Only Jules Roelants managed to get away, but since the Germans couldn't find him, they arrested his wife Magda Verduyck instead. Roelants went into hiding in Liège where he started working for another resistance group viz. Service D.

Jozef Claes and Jozef Van Hoorick were executed on the 3rd of November at Brasschaat. The other members of the Aarschot White Brigades vanished as *Nacht und Nebel* prisoners in German concentration camps. Out of all the resistance fighters arrested by the Germans only Van Roosbroeck survived the German concentration camps. Also the unit from Boortmeerbeek took their share: George Mertens a.k.a. Frans and another 12 members of the group, among them his wife and son, were arrested. Only George Mertens and Frans Storms a.k.a. Louis managed to escape and survived the war.

The loss of all these people put an end to the organized aid to airmen downed in our area. The remainder of the members kept collecting information and committing acts of sabotage till the liberation, though.

That day the 8th American Air Force lost as many as 64 four-engined bombers in the course of the combined air raid on Regensburg and Schweinfurt, the largest amount to date to have been lost in one single day. The 91st Bomb Group to which Bennett belonged lost 10 out of the 24 Flying Fortresses deployed in the raid.

630 members of the crew were missing, many of them killed, others taken prisoners, only a few managed to escape and succeeded in reaching England after many vicissitudes.

91st Bomb Group (H)



322th Sqdn



323th Sqdn



324th Sqdn



401st Sqdn



Original Crew of STUP N TAKIT Serial # 42-29559 .
T.Sgt Cowherd on top left . (Photo; Steve PERRI)



The crew of STUP N TAKIT on august 17th 1943

Bottom row left to right;; 1Lt. Ch. Bennett, 1Lt. A. Van Bommel, 2Lt. S. Dalhlman, 1Lt. M. Sullivan.

Top row; (3) R. Gayner , F. Cowherd , W. Barrett (5) (Photo; AFHRA)

Explanatory Notes

- (1) The Combatbox was a formation with the purpose of providing bombers with maximum security. It consisted of 3 squadrons. It was a phased order one squadron occupying the higher level, a second the middle level in forward position and one squadron occupying the lower level in back position. Three combatboxes constituted a Combat Wing. These battle orders shouldn't be confused with the organic composition of a Squadron or a Bomb Group.
- (2) Meant the most vulnerable position in the formation. The Purple Heart is an American decoration awarded for severe injuries during combat. The jewel is in the shape of a purple heart, in whose centre is the effigy of president George Washington.
- (3) The aircraft under the command of 2nd Lt. Von der Heyden 91 BG, 324 Sqdrn. OR** S crashed at Balen Belgium. Only two airmen survived. The navigator Lt. Yelle, one of the two survivors, had only arrived at the base that very morning. Due to a shortage of navigators he was at once put into action. He had not been in a position to unpack.
- (4) T. Sgt. Edward P. Troy was mentioned in general orders. It ran as follows: ' T. Sgt. Edward P. Troy, the tailgunner on 1Lt. A. Charles Bennett's aircraft Stup-N-Takit, was wounded in the head and face during the fighter attacks on the Fortress. Although he was painfully wounded he continued to man his guns and call out evasive tactics to the pilot. Troy, bleeding profusely, stayed at his guns until he was out of ammunition and continued to call out enemy attacks until Bennett gave order to bail out'.
- (5) According to the Aarschot resistance archives 1Lt. Adrian T. Van Bommel's parents originated from the Tielt area in West Flanders. Although born in the USA, Van Bommel like many immigrant families stuck to his native tongue at home.
- (6) Returning from its mission to Schweinfurt the B-17F 41 – 24564 XK*W 'Patches' (305th BG 365th Sqdrn) crashed around 4p.m. on the Weefberg (Averbode Belgium). Three airmen were killed, seven survived. All survivors were taken prisoner. One civilian, a villager, was killed by nervous Germans in their hunt after the fleeing airmen.

- (7) Georges Mertens a.k.a. Frans from Boortmeerbeek was arrested in Brussels in March 1944, but managed to escape during his transport to Antwerp. Some days later he was again arrested together with his 20-year old son Désiré who accompanied his father on all his actions. Both his wife and daughter were equally arrested. Frans again escaped. His son however was executed the 21st of July 1944 at Antwerp. His wife vanished as *Nacht und Nebel* prisoner in Ravensbrück.
- (8) Lily or Michou, two code names used by Micheline Dumont. She was one of the major Comète agents. After the great wave of arrests in 1943 she became a sort of odd-job woman: looking for hide-outs, escorting pilots, recruiting new agents, collecting food coupons, restore the escape route after each wave of arrests. She had a thorough knowledge of the whole line. If due to arrests or other circumstances there was a shortage of agents she joined in. Five times she crossed the Pyrenees with fugitives. Time and again she succeeded to escape the Gestapo, thanks to her cold-bloodedness, insight, and to a certain extent a certain dose of good luck. All in all the COMETE agents will smuggle more than 700 people out of occupied Europe, chiefly allied military men. Out of the 700 two hundred and eighty-eight belonged to the flying personnel. After the war the Allies showed their gratitude towards all those involved in helping crashed airmen out. Many were awarded high military medals. Lily and Aunt Go were each awarded the US Medal of Freedom with Gold Palm (USA) and the George Medal (England), the highest decorations for civilians during WW2. Also assistant chief of police Jozef Claes was awarded the VS Medal of Freedom posthumously.
- (9) Sgt. Brice Domingan (408 Sqdn RAF) crashed in the night of the 13/14th of July 1943 at Fellenoord, a few kilometres south of Drunen (Holland). Two airmen survived. After days of rambling Domingan found himself in Heppen with Jozef Claes's sister-in-law. Jozef Claes and Jules Roelants picked him up and took him to Aarschot to spend a few weeks there.
- (10) Franco, alias Jean-François Nothomb. From January 1943 on he was in charge of the southern network. As a result of an infiltration he was arrested, after having crossed the Pyrenees seventeen times. He was sentenced to death on the 27th of July 1944 and deported to Germany. He narrowly missed being executed when the American troops freed the Amberg prison in Bavaria on the 13th of May.

The Bail Out

A reconstruction on the basis of statements by members of the crew, eye-witnesses, landing sites of the airmen and the crash site of the aircraft.

1Lt. Sullivan, the bombardier left the aircraft first through the escape hatch in the floor of the nose section. He landed on the Molenberg, commune of Testelt, slightly more than one kilometre away from the crash site. Next T. Sgt. Cowherd, flight engineer, escaped through the opened bomb doors. He touched down in the Nieuwe Mechelsebaan behind the school. Then the navigator 1Lt. Van Bommel left via the hatch in the nose of the aircraft and landed 300 metres further to the west, in the Spiesweg, off the Mechelsebaan. Simultaneously the severely wounded tail gunner S. Sgt. Troy was helped out of the aircraft via a side door in the tail section by S. Sgt. Gaynor and Sgt. Greager, he landed less than 100 metres away from 1Lt. Van Bommel in the Mechelsebaan.. At a 600 metres' distance from the pieces of the wreckage of the aircraft 1Lt. Bennett landed in the Vanderstokken Str.. The right waist gunner Sgt. Greager and the ball turret gunner S. Sgt. Gaynor left the aircraft last via a side door in the tail section. They landed further down the Vanderstokken Str.. After the pilot's command to leave the aircraft everything must have happened very quickly, probably within

one minute allowing for the speed of the aircraft (at least 200km p/h) and the distance of hardly one kilometre between the landing site of the first and the last airman.

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