

THE BAD EGG DIES TWICE

Written by Jack Gaffney

How is it that the “Bad Egg” was declared “Salvage” on 1 January 1944 and then again declared “Salvage” on 14 November 1944? There must be a story behind this—and there is.

After a mission to the submarine pens at Lorient, France in 30 December 1942, A/C 41-24484 of the 91st Bomb Group was christened as the “Bad Egg.” Crew Chief M/Sgt. Pierce asked Jack Gaffney to paint the Donald Duck nose art and the name “Bad Egg” onto the port side of the nose. The “Bad Egg” had a distinguished career with the 91st, flying as the lead ship for the Group four times. On 14 October 1943 (the infamous Schweinfurt Mission), the “Bad Egg” flew as the lead aircraft for the entire 1st Air division. Over the target, the 91st, under intense flak and fighter assault, placed 77% of the Group’s bombs within 2,000 feet of the MPI.

In its 43 mission with the 91st, the “Bad Egg” had 15 engine changes, all fuel tanks replaced and numerous other changes so all that remained of the original plane was its left wing, fin, and some parts of the fuselage, at one point, 20mm fire had destroyed the control cables. Either during its 43 missions, or more likely thereafter, the nose was equipped with a chin turret.

On December 1943, a year and a day after its first mission and on its last mission, to Cognac and Chateaubriand airfields, the “Bad Egg” and the 24 aircraft of the 91st suffered considerable damage from enemy fighters and flak. As it touched down onto the runway, the “Bad Egg” ploughed into a jeep and killed the driver, Cpl. Gillies, who had been assigned to put out runway flares to help to guide the incoming planes. As a result of the severe damage, the aircraft was on the next day, 1 January 1944, declared Salvage and sent to the 2nd Strategic Air Depot—Death #1.

Now let’s turn to the 390th Bomb Group and A/C 42-31229. It flew its first mission with 390th on 5 December 1943. It was scheduled for its 21st mission on 13 February 1944 when an almost disaster occurred. On the runway, the left main tire had a blowout and caused the aircraft to veer off, causing severe damage. The chin turret was literally torn off the plane. This put the airplane out of action for two and one-half months for repairs.

Here someone of our wonderful and resourceful Eighth Air Force ground support personnel was aware of the just recently salvaged aircraft from the 91st Group with a wreck of an airplane but with an undamaged nose. For some 10 or so weeks, the aircraft mechanics and body workers labored, Where did this new nose come from? You’ve guessed it, from A/C 41-24484 with the nose art and name the “Bad Egg.” For the first time, A/C 42-31229 had a name, with the original nose art of Donald Duck painted by Jack Gaffney of the 91st Bomb Group. It resumed flying missions on 27 April 1944.

Beginning with the 290th mission #99, the “Bad Egg” was flown by the Harwood J. Rhodes crew for its next 13 mission; Rhodes contributed the following for our newsletter, Vol. 8, No. 2, summer 1992.

“Then at the Tucson reunion our top turret gunner, Gene Johns, and I got two mote bits of information. We were sorry to learn, first, the Bad Egg now lies at the bottom of the North Sea.... The second item was that the Bad Egg had been brought to us from another base.”

The two bits of information he received were not entirely accurate. The “Bad Egg” did not go down in the North Sea and the airplane did not come from another base. Only the nose with the original name and nose art came from the 91st Bomb Group thus A/C 42-31229 its name. The detailed records maintained at the 390th Memorial Museum would have been of help to Harwood Rhodes in ascertaining the facts relating to the fate of the “Bad Egg”.

Now we come to the final mission of A/C 42-31229—target, Dusseldorf—date 9 September 1944, mission #186 of the 390th. The flak was severe and accurate. Of the 11 570th aircraft comprising the “A” Group, seven were knocked out of the sky in an instant. Three airplanes exploded fractions of seconds before and after “Bombs Away.” Another exploded within minutes. Another, with severe damage, dropped out of the formation and flew for a while before an engine caught fire and forced the crew to bail out; all becoming POW’s. The sixth aircraft was able to limp to a forced landing in Belgium. (However, at the Charleston reunion, Bill Can, the navigator, stated they landed in France.) In our records, the “Narrative Report” states “believed to have landed in France,” but also in our records the “Flak Report” states “landed in Belgium.” Thus, the differing records have been resolved. Later, that aircraft returned to the base.

The seventh aircraft, the “Bad Egg”, was severely damaged and caught fire from the explosion of A/C 42-97871 with its full bomb load. These two airplanes were #2 and #3 in a three A/C element. They were close enough that the debris of the exploding aircraft literally shredded the “Bad Egg”, setting it on fire and damaging three engines. Limping on one engine for some two hours, the fatally wounded “Bad Egg” was able finally to land at airfield A-22, Collenville-sur-mer, France.

The leaders of the formation could only report that they had lost seven of the 11 aircraft, and 56 airmen were unaccounted for. Fortunately, one airplane made a landing in France, and another, the “Bad Egg” also landed in France with full crews alive. Of the three aircraft that exploded, one had 9 KIA, the second had 7 KIA and 2 POW, and the third had 5 KIA and 4 POW. The other two aircraft within a short time determined to bail, and the two crews of nine men all became POW’s.

The writer of this article, flying the “Bad Egg”, returned to base in about three days. It so happened that he was alone as he approached the quarters. In this Quonset, there were 24 beds, which represented the four officers of six crews. These, of course, were the men whom he had gotten to know. As he walked in the door, every single bed was rolled and all clothing and personal items were removed, including ours! His feelings at that moment, he shall never forget.

It wasn’t until 14 November 1944 that the “Bad Egg” was officially declared Salvage, with every movable object, including the ball turret, having been jettisoned. Thus the “Bad Egg” died—Death #2.

This narrative is about planes and left out is the human beings who lived and died on that fateful day. Possibly in another article we may tell of the crewmen, those who died and the actions of some of those who lived.

The authors of the Blue Book list four aircraft’s apparently based on the criteria of having flown 100 or more missions. Since the nose of the “Bad Egg” flew 43 missions with the 91st Bomb Group and 57 missions with the 390th Bomb group, shouldn’t the “Bad Egg” be included in the above listing.... Have qualified by a “nose”?

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