

1944 - THE FRENCH UndFINAL FLIGHT

Written by Rev. Gene Wilson

As dawn broke on the United States Air Force base in Bassingbourn, England on October 9, 1943, the crew of the B-17 Flying Fortress bomber names "Chief Sly III" prepared for the coming mission into German occupied territory, not knowing theirs was a doomed flight.

The mission was a diversionary flight to Neubrandenburg, Germany. The crew was to draw enemy fighters away from the main attack force. The plan worked too well as every type of aircraft the Axis could possibly send against them was in the air.

Despite the heavy armament of the B-17 Flying Fortress, the "Chief Sly III" was one of the first planes to fall out of formation to Luftwaffe fighters. The crew of 10, including the pilot, Lt. Charles B. "Bernie" Pinning, plunged into the North Sea where all aboard perished from exposure in the cold waters while attempting to swim to the Danish coast. Ironically, less than a week later on October 14, 1943 a mission named "Black Thursday" lost so many B-17s a new edict was given declaring no bombers would fly over Germany without fighter escorts.

Now, almost 57 years later, the Rev. Gene Wilson, pastor of St. Peter's Evangelical Community Church, rural Genesee, keeps the memory of the crew alive.

"Lt. Pinning was my mother Mildred's first husband," explained the Rev. Wilson. "My middle name is Bernie, which is in honor of him."

Nine years after Lt. Pinning's death, the Rev. Wilson's mother marries Woodrow S. Wilson, his father. Lt. Pinning was buried in either Denmark or Belgium. After the war in 1949 his body was returned to the United States, where it is now entombed in Baltimore National Cemetery, Baltimore, Maryland.

The Rev. Wilson is planning a trip to the Eighth Air Force Museum in Savanna, Georgia on Thursday, June 29 with his wife, Sandy, and their children Eric and Scott for the dedication of a plaque to the crew of the "Chief Sly III." It will be displayed in the memorial garden outside the museum. There are almost 300 memorial plaques lining the garden. The museum first opened in 1996.

The "Chief Sly III" was in the same bomber group as the now famous, Memphis Belle, which earned fame by being the first bomber to successfully complete 25 missions. Later a motion picture was made on the history of the Memphis Belle.

The Rev. Wilson will perform the dedication service for the plaque. He said there will be an unveiling of the plaque, with a list of the names of the crew. Family members will have the chance to speak.

"I have never done anything like this before," he commented. "I am not sure how it will go."

He said the cost of the plaque, \$1,308 was split among the family members of the crew.

Other surviving relatives of the crew include the nephew of second Lt. Walter Cavanaugh, the navigator of the "Chief Sly III," and the son of co-pilot Lt. Edward Tomer, who was born two weeks

following his father's death.

"The crewmember never knew if he had a boy or a girl," commented the Rev. Wilson.

A glimmer of pride shows in the Rev. Wilson's eye as he discusses the flights, which were taken by his mother's first husband.

"There was always a picture of him in my room as I was growing up," the rev. Wilson said. "Even in photos, he gives off a certain class and demeanor."

The Rev. Wilson said Lt. Pinning's first flight was September 23, 1943, a non-combat flight to Nantes, France. Despite the non-combat role, Lt. Pinning landed the plane with many holes from Luftwaffe guns.

"I am nit sure how many missions the 'Chief Sly III' flew," said Rev. Wilson. "I do know after the plane was shot down, another crew named their plane 'Chief Sly's Son.' That was lost in January, 1944."

He also mentioned Lt. Pinning had four brothers and one sister. All four brothers were in the service during World War II which classified Lt. Pinning's mother as a "Gold Star Mother."

The Rev. Wilson's son, Eric, was also told of the flights of Lt. Pinning. He gave a presentation on the Luftwaffe to his social studies class at J. D. Darnell High School, which is taught by David Aper. The class later watched "Memphis Belle."

The Rev. Wilson said he never had any ambition to follow in Lt. Pinning's footsteps.

"I had glasses at an early age so I knew I couldn't be a pilot," He commented. "I have never flown a plane."

He mentioned the Eighth Air Force Museum is currently setting up a database, which will list all members of the Eighth Air Force Squadron on-line. The Internet address for the museum is www.mighty8thmuseum.com.

"It is an aviator's museum, not an aviation museum," the Rev. Wilson said. "The emphasis is on the people, not the equipment."

October 8, 1943

Dear Mil (sister of Charles B. Pinning),

Received your V mail, dated the 24th. Am glad that Lou Azreal wrote of me and the crew, because I am not allowed to. Am sorry that he mentioned the darker moments.

The name "Chief Sly" may be a little difficult to explain; but I will try. It seems that they're two other planes in this squadron by the name of Chief Sly. They set up quite a reputation for themselves before they went down. The same ground crew was in charge of both of them. So when the next new ship was

given this crew to service them. So when the next new ship was given this crew to service without consulting anyone they named it “Chief Sly” I of course could put any name I wanted on it; but before I got around to it, I met with Lou Azreal and he wanted the people of Balto. Name the plane. My bombardier (A. Rolinck) was all for this idea. Not thinking much of all the publicity it would mean. I sided with the ground crew, so the name will be “Chief Sly.”

Guess I am funny; but you know how I feel about that newspaper crap. Don’t give me wrong, I do appreciate a little mention that I am alive and well; but that’s enough. You might show Millie (wife of Charles B. Pinning) this letter, save my explaining the name to her.

Millie writes me that you people have no idea how much your kindness helps,

Best Wishes to you all,

Love Bernard

- - - - -

THE ABOVE STORY IS THE PROPERTY OF THE AUTHOR AND MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED WITHOUT THE AUTHOR'S CONSENT

www.91stbombgroup.com