

# THE FATE OF DESTINY'S CHILD

Written by John Butler

## Chapter 17

### The Fate of “Destiny’s Child”

\*This is from John Butler’s Diary. You may use anyone all of this as I have received permission to do so \*

As I stated in the previous chapter, I witnessed “Destiny’s Child’s” demise, shot down on the first attack by the Luftwaffe fighters. She was flying in the “tail end Charlie, Purple Heart corner,” the position of the last plane and to the left side of the full formation. This position was definitely the most vulnerable to enemy fire and certainly was not preferred by any crew. As only the most inexperienced crews were assigned this position, they themselves probably didn’t realize their precarious position.

This plane was permanently assigned to our crew on my eighth mission, and I had flown in her 20 times in the tail gun position. I was saddened as I watched her right wing fall off and her swooping dive to my left as she passed beneath me. I lost sight of her after that and the following account, by the bombardier, Lt. John R. Butler, is what happened to her during that fateful mission. Here is his story.

July 20, 1944

Our mission was to Leipzig, Germany. The crew consisted of the following individuals and indicated their fate, KIA- Killed in Action, POW-Prisoner of War:

Pilot-----1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Charles Van Ansdall (KIA)

Co-Pilot-----Flt Officer Joseph Sammon (POW)

Navigator-----2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Richard Loomis (KIA)

Bombardier-----2<sup>nd</sup> Lt John Butler (POW)

Engineer/Gunner-----TSGT Charles Sullivan, Jr. (KIA)

Ball Turret Gunner---SSGT Anson Riley (POW)

Waist Gunner-----SSGT Winton Blevins (POW)

Tail Gunner-----SSgt Vernon Winters (KIA)

Two original crewmembers, TSgt Walter Slominski, the Engineer, and Corporal Warren Price, a Waist Gunner, did not fly this day. The former had lost his nerve and had been grounded, and the latter had served on guard duty the night before and was given the day off.

Everything seemed to go wrong that day. We had an old ship, “Destiny’s Child”, the little baby in those hillbilly cartons, wearing diapers and carrying a shotgun. She was on her 53<sup>rd</sup> mission and seemed to lack pep. Lt. Colonel Ensign was leading the group.

“Bandits” were reported as being in the area as we neared the target, but some of the gunners mistakenly reported seeing P-51’s and P-47’s. Our element wasn’t in too tight of a formation and I was pretty uneasy. Sgt. Winters, the tail gunner, kept calling out planes in the area. All of a sudden he called out:

“Here they come, in on the tail.”

The ship started vibrating as his guns began firing. I checked my own guns and watched the other planes as their tail guns all started firing. I remember saying to myself, “give it to them.”

The pilot said over the intercom:

“Be sure you know what you are shooting at.”

All of a sudden the area in front of us and to the right was filled with white crackling flashes. At first glance it looked like flak, but not like any flak I had seen before. Then the co-pilot yelled over the intercom:

“Someone get a fire extinguisher and put out this fire.”

About the same time, an FW-190 slipped under us, and rolling over on to his back, dived toward the ground. Then the co-pilot yelled again:

“For God’s sake, someone get an extinguisher and put out this fire.”

I climbed out of my seat on the chin turret. I had fired about 50 rounds at the Folk Wolfe but didn’t hit him. I then grabbed an extinguisher from over the navigator’s table. By this time the nose was full of holes and a 20mm shell had exploded in the nose compartment and the whole plane vibrated with thuds as these shells hit us. The navigator was sitting down holding his arm where he had been hit. My hands were bloody but didn’t hurt.

I ducked into the passageway and helped the engineer put out a fire that had started there. Empty, I threw it down and went back to my position. I flicked the salvo switch to release the bombs and plugged my intercom in. O tried to call the pilot to see what he had to say about our situation, but the intercom was dead. Almost immediately another 20mm burst in the passageway started another fire. I got another extinguisher and put out that fire.

While I was standing there we started turning right in a steep and swooping bank (this must have been when the right wing fell off). I looked at the navigator. He seemed to be all right and was putting on his parachute. I already had put mine on a couple of minutes before we had been attacked. While I was getting back to my seat to close the bomb bay doors, I felt the plane lifting up like it was going to spin. I threw myself in the direction of the escape hatch just as we flipped over and started spinning. My face was mashed against the escape hatch and I reached for the emergency release handle and after a couple of pulls the door was gone.

I must have been dazed because I couldn’t remember when it opened. All I knew was that I was hanging half out of the plane. I couldn’t get out or back in. We were roaring down in a tight spin. All of a sudden I was fully conscious of what was happening, but I wasn’t a bit terrified. I knew that we would crash and that in my position I wouldn’t have a chance. The next thing I knew was that it was still as death. I was falling through the air and managed to pull my ripcord. The plane must have blown up and thrown me free. The sky around me was filled with pieces of the B-17. Ahead lies still another new experience.

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The foregoing was L. Butler’s story as told to me years later in a letter. What happened to the pilot, navigator, engineer, and the tail gunner, either was not known or told to me. I would assume that the first three died when the plane had exploded. The tail gunner I am sure must have been killed during the initial fighter attack as they were coming directly at him.

Often I looked back, thinking of the 20 times I had ridden in that exact same position. God must have had his hands on my shoulder. “Destiny’s Child”, to our crew was a great B-17, and it was as great to its Ground Crew Chief, then Sgt. Gaffney. All of us were very proud of her. Sgt. Gaffney later was awarded the Bronze Star for the excellent maintenance he and his crew had performed on her, keeping her combat ready and in the air without and abort.

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