

OPERATION REVIVAL

Written by Jack Gaffney

The 8th Air Force swore they would fly the Prisoners of War out of Stalag 1 near Barth, Germany as soon as the Nazi Troops left the area. Fortunately there was an airfield next to the POW area, so they took full advantage of the opportunity to actuate this most important mission.

The 91st Bomb Group (H) consisting of the 322nd, the 323rd, the 324th and the 401st Bomb Squadrons were all involved in this operation, flying three consecutive missions on May 12th-13th-14th of 1945 to bring the men back to freedom in non-hostile territory. The British prisoners were to be flown to Old Ford, located south of London and the Americans to Camp Lucky Strike near La Havre France.

Each B-17 used on the operation was sent with a Pilot, Copilot, Navigator, Radio Operator, and Crew/Chief Engineer. Each plane was assigned a take-off time and a designated airplane to fly in from the Base at Bassingbourn over the English Channel and the North Sea to Barth, Germany. Warning was given to stay in the assigned preset flight corridor, or be subject to possible ground fire.

Flight plans and take-off were similar to Combat operations, but with a little more time between take-off and arrivals at the field at Barth. We were scheduled to arrive and land in pre-arranged order and to proceed single file along the taxi strips to a pre-designated point on the perimeter track. There with engines at a slow idle we loaded 25 POWs into each B-17. After loading we resumed our taxiing in our assigned order to the take off area and once again in selected order we took off on the return flight to our designated drop-off areas. After unloading our elated passengers, we as well as the passengers, and also the aircraft were completely deloused. Then it was back in the air again and the flight home to Bassingbourn, home of the 91st Bomb Group and another job well done.

During this operation the 8th Air Force flew 5 operation revival missions, 4 to Barth, Germany and 1 to Linz, Germany (formerly Austria). Barth was located almost due north of Narlin, east of Rostock. Linz was located southeast of Regensberg south-southeast of Berlin. During this series of missions 110 aircraft were used and 2,454 POW were returned.

I flew as Crew/Chief Engineer on two of these missions, May 12th and May 13th. 1945 to Barth, Germany. We brought back British Prisoners on the flight of the 12th to the airfield at Old Ford, south of London. We flew in the plane I was Crew/Chief on at the time an all silver B-17 #43-39014 LL-C a G model from the 401st Squadron piloted by a Lt. Spurgin. We were one of 10 401st planes that took part in that days mission. Our planes was called "Hot Shot Charlie" no nose yet, it had completed 26 missions from Feb 14th, 1945 through April 21st, 1945, which was the last mission for the 401st Squadron in combat, as we stood down the next day the 22nd. The 91st flew its last combat missions on May 25th, 1945 to Pilsen. I believe our pilot for the 13th of May to Barth was a Lt. Small.

While we were in the taxi-strip waiting to line up for our return take-off we were entertained by a Russian Pilot in a small Bi-plane, almost vintage WWI, I swear he had too much vodka. He flew upside down close enough to the ground to touch the tops of the hedges surrounding the field. Upon landing he to a faltering blow for his show.

While we were on the taxi-strip waiting to line up for our return take off, the plane ahead of us dropped his right wheel off the taxi strip into the dirt and got stuck. A very decorated important looking Russian Officer came over and loudly stated “startnen uppa you engines to full power and flynit out” Thanks to the help of a small tractor and the shoulders of a lot of men they did get back on the strip, and we all breathed a sigh of relief. We sure didn’t want to be stuck there fir the rest if the day.

Here is the kicker in 1998 at the 91st BG reunion in Tucson, Arizona while waiting in line to get drinks I was relating this story to some former buddies and a gentleman in front of us turned around, proffered his hand and said “Hello” that was us. Small world isn’t it on the return flight in the 12th of May to Bassingbourn after we had left Old Ford we were flying over London. We could see some of the city lights as they were turning back on after many years of blackout, returning slowly to pre-war status. Suddenly out of the almost pitch dark sky a P-61 Black Widow night fighter loomed up dead ahead, we dipped our left wing as he lifted his right wing and somehow we missed each other. My thoughts after catching my breath were OOOH-BOY 33 months of war and I’m going to wind up as a blotch on the streets of London a victim of non-combat accident.

It was quite a sight to see all those planes loading all those men. They went with their precious cargo of men some that had been prisoners of war for 3 years. Needless to say I felt very proud to have been a small part of their safe return. It is one of the treasured memories of my 33 months in England as an Asst. Crew/Chief and Crew/Chief.

- - - - -

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

www.91stbombgroup.com