

MERSEBURG

Written by Ed Gates

The Greatest Battle of WWII and the 91st Bomb Group

Some observers regarded the air battle over southeastern Germany near Merseburg on 2 Nov 44 as the “air battle in forces committed and losses – at least in the European Theatre of Operations (ETO). It was one of the maximum efforts by Luftwaffe to defend German synthetic fuel refineries. Official USAF history estimates 500 German fighter attacked 1100 bombers deployed against five major target areas. Seventeen American fighter groups lost 28 P-51’s and 40 B-17’s and B-24’s failed to return. U.S. fighters and bombers were credited with 160 FW-190, ME-109 and others including some jets destroyed. On 27 Nov 44, 750 German fighters were estimated to have tried to defend the Magdeberg-Munster-Hannover area -“largest sighting to date” according to Combat Chronology 1941-1945, Center for Air Force History, Washington, DC 1991, P. 507- but only 98 kills were claimed and only 11 US losses. I visited Offenburg on 27 Nov 44, too). The 91st Bomb Group lost 13 B-17’s on 2 Nov 44- the most on any of our missions- and at least 121 men plus others killed and wounded on Flying Forts that made it back to Bassingbourn Airbase. From my view in the 323rd Squadron- we lost 5 of 12 B-17’s, so from my biased view Merseburg holds "top honors". (I recalled the 323rd lost 6, as did my bunk mate "Tex Frye, navigator on "Wicked Witch", in his diary, but we were misled because the high element leader, Mullins, returned on 2 engines to another base in England.

Excitement, hate and fear are all powerful emotions. Ignoring the advice of Sgt. Friday and his partner, Gannon, about “The facts, please, just the facts,” I’ll leave that to the others who have written about the events of 2 Nov 44; this is a reflection from 57 years later on one 20-year old pilot’s feelings leading up to and surrounding that mission. To take a church-going teenager from a small town in Kansas and make him want to “blow up real good” all those people and things on the ground is powerful stuff. I had wanted to fight the Nazis in Germany from the beginning of the war inspired partly from my Civil War veteran and Methodist minister grandfather. (The Pacific seemed so ugly and hot and sticky.) The B-25 medium bomber seemed like the glory road as I completed pilot training in March 1944. The Army Air Forces needed replacement crews for the men who faced tough days without any long range fighter cover in 1942-43 against well trained German fighter pilots: that helped explain why I graduated even though my Advanced twin-engine instructor sent me off on my first solo with the admonition, “You may never learn to land this (AT-17) but you’ve been in every conceivable position and gotten us out of every one alive!” (I never told my crewmembers that one.)

The letdown after graduation came when we arrived at Fresno, CA and learned that it was a “replacement” base and we were slated to be co-pilots- Ugh! – On heavy bombers. So much for dreams of piloting a B-25 Mitchell with a 75mm cannon hung underneath (which by-the-way did not work well). It was better than the news from Ralph Digenesis of Iowa, my 1943 hut-mate at Jefferson Barracks, MO, who wrote that he had been assigned to C-47 “Gooney Bird” transports “with a 45 cal. Pistol and a relief tube firing rearward for defense,” all those guns and gunners on a B-17 in Rapid City, SD with old-hand Chuck Kirkham (mid-20’s, former crew chief in Hawaii and an excellent natural pilot); I recall the feeling of awe as I looked out over that huge wing sticking out almost 50 feet from my seat. Wow! Power!

Three and a half months later we were a trained crew and on our way to England to fight Nazis, so at least that part of my teenage assumptions had worked out almost as miraculously as getting through

pilot training. While most of our crew was barely 20, there was “Pop” Griswold well into his 30’s, our crew chief in the top turret. Bombardier Joe Frankie, from Texas, didn’t seem that much older in his mid 20’s. Our navigator, Lauri Kivimaki, another Michigander was a bit older and radioman, “Deke” De Quardo of Wisconsin, was even younger than I was. On the way over in “our” B-17 – we thought – we heard on 30 Jul 44 that Gen. Patton’s tanks had broken out toward Paris and I remember distinctly feeling, ‘Oh, no, it will all be over before we get into action!’ We landed in Ireland, helped some farm folks harvest their crops on the way to the pub- and lost “our” B-17 as we were shipped off to Bovington, England to undergo combat crew orientation; that included meeting pleasant V-1 rockets to crash before they could hit a populated area. Finally-all of a few weeks- and off to our new bases: we were the lucky ones who went to Bassingbourn- the Country Club facility of the 8th Air Force with its stone barracks instead of tents and mud that many of the other bases lived in.

Wolcome to Bassingbourn in late August. I remember distinctly walking into our living quarters where Chuck Kirkham and I would live for the next six months, which included perhaps 25 double-deck beds in two rows separated by hanging uniforms down the center- and a lot of empty beds. At the far end on the top bunk sat a navigator named Wyatt who was unfolding his hands in an explosion gesture and saying “poof, poof” to simulate exploding flak; I never knew whether he was doing it to tease us or as a reminder to himself how it looked out of the Plexiglas nose of a B-17 that “protected” a navigator and bombardier. I don’t think I ever asked whether the empty bunks were from people who completed their tours or didn’t come back from Germany. For whatever reason, Wyatt’s was the only name I remember of all those men except for Kirkham and my bunkmates, A. J. Sinibaldo and later “Tex” Frye: perhaps that was my way of avoiding remembering those friends that did not come back from missions.

So let’s set the stage for the 2 Nov 44 mission to Merseburg. Our first mission was on 30 Aug in Nine-O-Nine whose ground crew established the 8th Air Force record of 124 missions without a mechanical abort; to Kiel shipyard and submarine base on a clear day with fighter cover comfortably visible and the flak bursts 3000-4000’ below us; we “new guys” thought this combat stuff was a piece of cake except for the eight hours in the air. The next two weeks and two more 8+ hour missions to Ludwigshafen and Lutzendorf (near Merseburg) corrected that impression of an easy tour; the latter on 11 Sep 44 was a day on which the P-51’s of the 352nd Group shot down an 8th Air Force group record (at the time) 31 German fighters. In the rest of September and October our crew flew 13 more missions including two 8 hour and a 9:15 stretch to Frieburg, 70 miles ESE of Merseburg on 7 October when the 8th lost 40 B-17’s and B-24’s plus 28 fighters. On 9 Oct we returned to Schweinfurt, the scene of some vicious bomber losses in 1943. Though the Royal Air Force night bomb attacks had originally received credit, our 14 and 17 Oct bombings destroyed the major bridge across the Rhine River at Cologne as shown in a photo on the back page of the 3 Nov 44 Stars and Stripes titled “Suspense Over for Cologne Bridge,” on the day after Merseburg, I doubt I appreciated the credit or the pun (it had been a suspension bridge). I will always remember how our target briefers warned us then and for the other three missions we flew to Cologne to avoid the medieval cathedral near the end of the bridge.

Our October missions were not as intense as those flown in 1943 with little or no fighter cover against a better Luftwaffe, but if they were “milk runs” (as someone must have written to Yank magazine) no one will convince me that “Got Milk” is a good idea. The 4 Nov Stars and Stripes reported 18,000 US 8th Air Force and R.A.F. bomber sorties had dropped 100,000 tons of bombs on Germany even though “adverse weather” limited operations to 18 days (our crew flew nine of them). On one of those not-so-bad missions an infantry Captain and Lieutenant flew with us for “kicks;” the Captain was particularly critical of “fly boys” especially those who lived in such cushy quarters as we did. After a mission with

moderate flak seen Through the B-17 nose, he hit the ground on all fours and said, “You guys are crazy! At least I can hide behind a tree. I’m not going to say anything critical of the Air Corps again!” So much for how it was in the months leading up to 2 Nov 44.

The four hours inbound to Merseburg and the 3 ½ return can be the subject of some more historically accurate research; this is about the 10 minutes in between as seen from the co-pilot’s seat of Nine-O-Nine (about mission #90 for her). We were the right wingman of the low 3-plane element of the 323rd Squadron. Flak had been severe in the bomb run but one of our gunners- probably T/Sgt. “Pop” Griswold in the top turret or tail gunner S/Sgt. Ed Floyd from New Jersey, had reported by inter-com that our P-51’s little friends departed upstream (as we learned later because they had heard the Luftwaffe was attacking a bomber group ahead of us and they wanted to get in on the action). The flak had increased in intensity and was taking its toll; a couple of B-17's in our "tail end Charlie" element has been hit and the left wingman in our element - piloted by Liekhus - was damaged and had drifted out of formation. Suddenly the flak stopped!

The good news quickly changed. The big black bursts of 88mm anti-aircraft flak were replaced with white puffs (20mm cannon shells) and 50 caliber fire from FW-190’s as someone yelled, “Bandits!” Another sequence of perfectly coordinated (I remember thinking, “German efficiency”) flak and fighter hits followed. Somewhere in the 5-10 minutes that seemed forever our gunners reported that Cal Perkins, our Colorado cowboy, who had come over as one of our waist gunners, had bailed out of his aircraft, which had been hit. (He survived as a POW and we were reunited at the Colorado Springs reunion). While fixed on holding tight formation I noted out of the corner of my eye that someone leaped out of our burning Forts- but then noticed that his chest pack was on fire. As we closed to formation on the Squadron leader (both our wingman were gone as was his left wingman).

A FW-190 came in beside us, dropped his gear for an instant and tried to shoot down our squadron lead B-17 (without success). He was directly off my wingtip so our guns could not be brought to bear on him without endangering another B-17 or damaging our wing; we exchanged glances for an instant and I thought, he doesn’t look any more evil than I do- and probably no older (I turned 21 six weeks later). This may have been the same FW-190 described in his account of 2 Nov in "35 Missions" by "Tex" Frye who was navigator in LL-B "General Ike" (a spare from the 401st flying left wingman of our high element.

The flight home was a good bit quieter than usual. None of our crew had any visible injuries, but I’m not sure whether I played my harmonica on the way home (as our crew members reminded me years later that I usually did); my playing was so bad that they could not stay focused on their worries. My 17th mission was history (though most of our crew passed the half-way point at 18). The Jerries hadn’t laid a glove on us; in fact, our aircraft never suffered any significant damage in a combat mission and no one was injured while I was on board. The only mission that I didn’t fly with my crew they lost an engine and ended with 2 feathered. Our waist gunner Bill Rabedeaux from Iowa and ball turret gunner A. J. Jolly from Kentucky came to me to ask me not to leave the crew (to fly as a first pilot) – because I seemed like the nearest thing they had to a rabbit’s foot. Later we learned that we were promoted to 1st Lt. effective 3 Nov 44.

The report in the Stars and Stripes for 3 Nov 44 headlined “Luftwaffe Up, Loses 130 Planes” and referred to the “not-so-down-and-out Luftwaffe (that) showed itself in strength yesterday” without saying how many bombers had been destroyed. They reported 130 German aircraft shot down by fighters plus 25 on the ground. Bombers were credited with 53 additional kills and one B-17 bombardier was quoted as saying he shot down one of three jet-propelled fighters that attacked his

Squadron, but bomber crews generally were credited with less kills because they did not they did not have gun cameras to prove their success.

A letter to the editor in "Mail Call" in the 4 Dec 44 British Edition issue of Yank, The Army Weekly, may have been responding to a previous critical comparison between D-Day and later 1944 missions when the Germans were apparently said to be "just coasting along." The "Boys of the Squadron" somewhere in Britain wrote:

"Yet it seems the greatest air battle of this war took place on Nov 2. I for one wouldn't call a mission where eleven out of a (squadron) of twelve 17's were knocked out in one pass, a 'milk run.' I saw just that happen."

"Many a flier went thru his tour (during the D-Day period) without ever seeing a ME-109 or FW-190 (let alone jets). Also their mission then averaged from 5 to 6 hours as compared to our present 6 ½ to 7 ½ hours average. Surely if they deserve the DFC the boys nowadays do also. I don't believe we regard the DFC as a means of building up points for discharge, but as an award for having accomplished something, and would gladly give up a few points to be able to wear it."

Not many of us were concerned about ribbons and I rarely wore mine until it was required. It was likely just chance timing but the 4 Nov 44 Stars and Stripes reported that Gen. Eisenhower decorated Lt. Gen. Spaatz, commander of U.S. Strategic Air Forces in Europe, with the Distinguished Service Medal.

Nobody said life is fair, but most of us probably were more focused on surviving than on medals though. Our gunners on bombers probably did deserve more credit than they received. The discrepancy between the total German air combat losses between the "over 160" in the official record and the 183 total of fighter plus bomber claims reported in The Stars and Stripes for 3 Nov 44 was probably resolved by whittling down the credits to our gunners. What is abundantly clear is that, at least for the 91st BG, the 2 Nov 44 mission to Merseburg was a perfect example of that old description of combat as "hours of boredom intersected with a few minutes of sheer terror."

Back row: Cpl. Calvin J. Perkins, 39921242, Colorado, left Waist Gunner; Cpl. Wesley R. "Bill" Rabbedeaux, 170433348, Iowa, right Waist Gunner; Cpl. Harold H. "Pop" Griswold, 36362889, Michigan, Flight Engineer and Top Turret Gunner; Cpl. A. Jordan "AJ" Jolly, 15119369, Kentucky, Ball Turret Gunner; Sgt. Edmund B. Floyd, 12137129, New Jersey, Tail Gunner; Cpl. Emil F. "Deke" Dequardo, 36818203, Wisconsin, Radio Operator.

Front row: 2nd Lt. Edward C. Gated, 0771378, Kansas, Co-Pilot; 2nd Lt. Lauri Kivimaki, 0722326, Michigan, Navigator; 2nd Lt. Charles M. Kirkham, 0759376, Ohio, Pilot; 2nd Lt. Joseph Frankie, Jr., 0771999, Texas, Bombardier

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