

BRILL'S DITCH

Retyped by Steve and Nancy Perri, War Library, Maxwell Field, Alabama

1st Bomb Broup-Mission 22

On the mission to Hamm, Germany on the 4th of March, 1943, 1/Lt. Alan Brill was the pilot of aircraft, Excalibur 41-24464 a B-17 Flying Fortress, for the 324th. Bomb Squadron of the 91st Bomb Group, flying #3 position of the first element in "C" flight. During the flight to the target the 91st's formation became separated from the rest of the bomber stream after climbing through dense cloud and in spite of being such a small force pressed on to attack the target Hamm, Germany. Twenty minutes from the target the meager force of 16 B-17 Flying Fortresses were met by FW190 enemy fighters, which pressed their attacks from the front of the formation. This aircraft was subjected to the most vicious attacks; there was a virtual, continuous running battle with fighters. Notwithstanding these attacks the bomb run over the target was steady, Straight and level for 45 seconds, and the Bombardier, 1/Lt. Robert Brubaker, dropped the bombs, and the hits were observed by several members of the crew to have plastered the bridge area of the railroad yards and buildings nearby. Slight heavy flak, which was inaccurate, was observed over the target area and also over Goor, without any hits on "Excalibur". About 60 enemy fighters concentrated most of their attacks on the front of this element, attacking the lead ships four abreast, principally in a shallow dive from just above the aircraft, and coming in at eleven and one o'clock, and going out over the aircraft. Excalibur's nose guns ran out of ammunition and the pilot was forced to throw the airplane into violent evasive action to avoid the incoming fighters. About ten minutes after going in over Texel, Germany, the radio gunner, S/Sgt. Wells was wounded in the knee and from then on the troubles of the Pilot multiplied. On one attack, just over the target, #1 and #4 engines were hit. The #1 engine continued to run and finally it set up a terrific vibration, which seemed as though it would shake off the whole wing, before the engine finally cut out.

The #4 engine governor was probably shot up and that engine would run away and then, by cutting it off, it would run down and in a short time, it would be running away again, until it finally quit. Getting back to Texel, Germany, the right waist gunner, Sgt. L.W. Wolfington, received eight or more wounds from fragments from a 20MM shell that came through the ship. The yellow nosed single engine fighters encountered out near the coast, about 25 of them - perhaps some of Goering's famous air units were unusually ferocious and skilled in their attacks.

Somewhere over Germany, presumably Texel, further hits were received and #3 engine was hit and began pouring oil. Ten minutes out to sea with #2 engine alright, but only limited pull from #4 and #3 it was no longer possible to stay up with the formation, Lt. Brill let down, unprotected from which time he was under constant attack. Finally at about 11:50 the #4 engine and #3 engine quit entirely, leaving only #2 pulling power, and not quite enough to keep the plane airborne.

Lt. Brill then issued instructions for a forced landing, he and the Co-Pilot opened the windows in the cockpit area, and the rest of the crew assembled in the radio compartment with the navigator, 1/Lt. Roland Ball, who was also injured, just aft of the radio partition. At 11:55 the plane touched the top of the wave and stopped solid on the next impact - judged by the crew to be an up wind landing directly into the sea. The shock was terrific and the forward partition of the radio room went out, the ship breaking in two across the bombay section. The crew were all out in a matter of seconds, the Pilot and Co-Pilot, were out of the windows and into the water and the rest of the crew stepped out onto the left wing through a ten foot gap in fuselage. The top turret gunner Sgt. William Dickson tried

desperately, while in a shocked and weakened condition, to pull the life rafts out of their storage compartments, without success.

In three to five seconds the nose sank followed by the tail, which just missed three crew members that happened to be too close to the tail as it went down, the suction drag also being felt by the navigator, Lt. Roland Ball. Nobody had thought to grab the radio and miraculously, as the ship sank, both life rafts and a box came floating to the surface. Sgt. William Dickson, who had no life vest, grabbed the box and it kept him afloat for 45 minutes, and this later proved to be the missing, and all-important radio.

There were shortly seven of the crew members, together clinging to and trying to inflate the two life rafts and the other three members of the crew were bobbing up and down in and out of sight in a boisterous short steep white capped sea with a 40 foot trough and about 80 feet between crests.

They had all keep on their boots and all of their flying clothes and with life vests were glad they had, for within ten minutes in the icy water they were desperately cold and exhausted. The life vests, supplied excessive buoyancy on the chest, tended to throw them over on their backs but a little kicking keep their heads up and on an even keel. It was a struggle to inflate the unwieldy rafts. because the rip cords had pulled off and it was hard to get something to break the glass connection for inflating, but when finally connected, the tank inflated and filled in a flash. The first raft took about 20 minutes and the second 25 minutes later. They lashed together with 3 of the crew in one raft and 4 in the other. The struggle with the rafts in the icy water and in that terrible North Sea made it impossible to attempt to swim to give assistance to the other three members of the crew, Lt. Alan Brill, Lt. Allen Lowry and Sgt. J. E. Morgan. they all appeared uninjured after the landing, and apparently were buoyed up by life vests, but the weakening strain of the flight and crash landing, and the buffeting of the icy waves, and the terrors of their predicament, doubtless all contributed in overcoming them. There was nothing to throw to them for added support and no way to answer their yells for help. S/Sgt. J. E. Morgan, the ball turret gunner was the first to disappear after about five minutes after the landing, Lt. Brill, about five minutes later and Lt. A. W. Lowry, about five minutes after that.

When the first raft was inflated only a concerted final effort of struggling and boosting by all hands could get the first man, Navigator, Lt. Roland Ball into the raft. Then the others were pulled aboard together with 4 boxes of food, which had become water soaked. There was no fresh water on the plane and none on the raft. Salt water is a poor appetizer and no one was hungry for quite a while. The radio, when recognized in its case, was soon set up and for 45 minutes after that it was sending out SOS's and was continuously cranked until help arrived, about 1800 hours. The kite, which was flown to hold up the aerial, worked well in the 8 to 12 mile wind.

About 2 1/2 hours after the sea landing, a plane was overhead and a flare was shot up but apparently not observed. A while later another plane went over, but no signal was attempted. About 1730 hours we started paddling toward England figuring a northerly drift, although when picked up we were told a strong tide was sending us to the south. At 1800 hours four planes flying low approached from the south, so low we were afraid we were going to be straffed. They were British Ansons. A flare was sent up and the planes circled and stood by overhead for about two hours, dropping a large rubber boat with a sea anchor which was reached by paddling for ten minutes, and tinned food and water and many flares for emergency use. They marked us with a smoke smudge and smoke bombs. After dark, at 1945 hours, we spotted a searchlight coming across the water. We then fired off one of our flares and by holding up a light, which had been dropped to by the RAF, on the end of an oar. Soon we were aboard a minesweeper and got the best soup we ever tasted and on our way back to England, about 0545 hours the next morning, a landing was made at Grimsby, a 90 mile voyage. Then back to Bassingbourn Airbase.

- - - - -

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

www.91stbombgroup.com