

“MARY RUTH” MEMROIES OF MOBILE...WE STILL REMEMBER

Written by Lowell Getz

There was an unusual sense of anticipation at one of the hardstands at USAAF Station 121, otherwise known as Bassingbourn, that early Monday morning of 17 May 1943 in East Anglia, England. This hardstand was the home of B-17F Flying Fortress, Serial Number 41-24485, "Memphis Belle", of the 324 Bombardment Squadron, 91st Bombardment Group (Heavy), 1st Bombardment Wing, VIII Bomber Command. The olive-painted "Memphis Belle" bore a number of metal patches, replacement surfaces and splotches of newer paint, stark testimony to the mutilations she had endured during earlier missions. These grim reminders of near fatal encounters with enemy flak and fighter aircraft were lightened by a colorful perky bathing-suited girl painted on both sides of the nose. The paintings had been rendered there by Cpl. Tony Starcer, one of the more famous "nose artists" of World War II.

Crew Chief M/Sgt. Joseph M. Giambrone was busily overseeing the details of the last minute maintenance work of the ground crew. It was doubly important that, today of all days, "Memphis Belle" would not have to abort. For, today's mission to the German U-boat pens at Lorient, France is an extra special one for the crew of the Memphis Belle. If they return, the pilot, Cpt Robert K. Morgan, and five others of the 10-man crew will have completed their 25th combat mission. VIII Bomber Command has decreed anyone completing 25 combat missions can go home on leave and will not fly any more any more combat; only one out of three crewmen survive that long. Those manning the other four positions on the plane today are filling in for crew who have already completed their 25 mission quota.

"Memphis Bell" would fly her own 25th mission two days later when Lt. L. C. Anderson and his crew would fly her to the U-boat yards at Kiel, Germany. Hell's Angels of the 303 Bombardment Group stationed at nearby USAAF Station 107, Molesworth, who will also go to Lorient today, completed her 25th mission last Thursday when she flew to the Avions Poltez aircraft factory at Meaulte, France. VIII Bomber Command would decree Hell's Angels to be the first B-17 to achieve this unique accomplishment. The pilot of Hell's Angels, Cpt Irl E. Baldwin, and three his crew flew their own 25th missions to Keil last Friday. The rest of her crew would complete their missions within a few days. However, for the past three weeks VIII Bomber Command publicity has highlighted the "Memphis Belle." Accordingly, following the mission to Kiel Wednesday, "Memphis Belle" and her crew would be designated by VIII Bomber Command as the first plane and crew to complete 25 combat missions and ordered to return to the States.

Maj. William Wyler (the renown Hollywood movie director, who had directed the 1942 Oscar winning-movie, "Mrs. Miniver") and Hollywood cameraman, now Cpt, William Clothier were in part responsible for the publicity surrounding the "Memphis Belle." Assigned to Bassingbourn, they had flown several missions on the "Memphis Belle", including one to Heligoland Island last Saturday, to film actual air combat action. Yesterday, Maj. Wyler had arranged for the "Memphis Belle" and her crew to be visited by and filmed with the King and Queen of England in recognition of their pending accomplishments. On 13 June Cpt Morgan and his crew would leave Bassingbourn to fly the "Memphis Belle" back to the United States. There they would receive three months of well-earned public acclaim at War Bond rallies and other patriotic gatherings throughout the country.

Cpt Morgan and the bombardier, Cpt Vincent Evans, would go on to lead the first B-29 bombing mission to Tokyo. From film taken Saturday and on the other missions, Maj. Wyler would produce the highly acclaimed morale-boosting documentary movie, "The Memphis Belle", extolling the exploits of the Eighth Air Force (as it would be so designated by the time the movie was released). The movie

would appear now and then over the following decades on documentary and history TV channels. Maj. Wyler would later direct such movies as "The Detective Story", "Friendly Persuasion", "Roman Holiday", and the Oscar-winning, "The Best Years of Our Lives" and "Ben Hur." "Memphis Belle" eventually would be given a permanent "hardstand" in Memphis, Tennessee, home town of her namesake, Margaret Polk, the fiancée of Cpt Morgan. Forty-seven years later Maj. Wyler's daughter, Catherine, would resurrect the Memphis Belle and her crew in a commercial movie, "The Memphis Belle." As a result of all this publicity, "Memphis Belle" deservedly would go down in history as one of the two most famous planes of World War II. The other would be Enola Gay, the B-29 from which the first atom bomb would be dropped in August 1945.

At another nearby Bassingbourn hardstand that same Monday morning, another ground crew, headed by M/Sgt. Bert "Black Jack" Pierce, 28, from Harrison, Arkansas (who had been working for Modoc Orchards in Medford, Oregon when he enlisted), was also busily engaged. They were preparing another B-17F Flying Fortress, Serial Number 42-29536, "Mary Ruth" Memories of Mobile, of the 401st Squadron of the 91st Group, for today's mission to Lorient.

There was no unusual sense of anticipation as the flight crew arrived, just the understandable mouth-drying anxious nervousness prior to flying a combat mission. The crew quietly went about its preflight routines. The flight deck crew: pilot, 1Lt Kenneth L. Brown, 24, Hodgenville, Kentucky, previously an Aircraft Armorer Staff Sergeant; copilot, 2Lt James H. Quenin, 26, Fort Smith, Arkansas, until recently a Signal Corps Sergeant. The nose crew: navigator, 2Lt Vincent J. Bliley, 26, Ottumwa, Iowa, a former staff artist for the Ottumwa Courier; bombardier, 2Lt James P. Feerick, 24, New York City, who earlier had completed a year's enlistment in the 102nd Engineers of the 47th Division, New York National Guard. The rest of the crew: flight engineer and top turret gunner, T/Sgt. James O. Akers, 23, Starbuck, Minnesota, doing construction work in Idaho when he enlisted; radioman, T/Sgt. Richard O. Maculley, 19, Chester, Pennsylvania, recognized for his artistic abilities, who left High School at the age of 17 to enlist; ball turret gunner, S/Sgt. Henry "Maurice" Crain, 41, "Pops" of the group, originally from Canyon, Texas, with a Bachelors Degree in Journalism from the University of Texas, who had been working in New York as a city editor for the Daily News and as a literary agent; left waist gunner, S/Sgt. William G. Allen ("Glenn" to his family, "Bill" to the crew), 21, Athens, Georgia, who had just purchased and was operating two small neighborhood grocery stores when he entered the Service; right waist gunner, S/Sgt. Raymond Litzo, 22, Denver, Colorado, who was attending the University of Denver where he was majoring in Business Administration and a member of the golf team when he left school to join the Army Air Corps; tail gunner, S/Sgt. William R. Brown, 22, Eldorado, Illinois, one of five brothers in the Service and who had been working for a PepsiCola distributorship.

There was nothing unique about "Mary Ruth" Memories of Mobile to attract the attention of a Hollywood director, nor for her crew to be roused from their beds yesterday morning to meet the King and Queen. Today's mission would be only her third over enemy territory. The nose painting was not sufficiently artistic to warrant inclusion in any of the books that would appear in later years depicting "nose artwork" of military aircraft. There was no Tony Starcer painting of a perky bathing beauty such as "Memphis Belle." There was no unclad voluptuous woman, such as adorned Cash and Carrie of the 569th Squadron of the 390th Group. The name did not represent a famous city, as did Windy City Challenger of the 422nd Squadron of the 305th Group; a popular cartoon character of the day, as did Fearless Fosdick of the 358th Squadron of the 303rd Group; or a famous personage, "General Ike" of the 401st Squadron of the 91st Group. Nor was the name rendered in flowing script as was Mary Alice of the 615th Squadron of the 401st Group. Rather, there was simply "'Mary Ruth' Memories of Mobile" in plain block dark yellow letters. We are reminded of the lyrics "plain as any name can be" of the

George M. Cohan song, "Mary's a Grand Old Name." Even the name itself did not represent what might at first blush suggest a brief romantic war-time encounter by a member of the crew. Number 42-29536 had been named by an unknown crew back in the States, the reason for which became lost in history. When Lt. Brown and his crew were assigned the already-named plane superstition prevented them from making a change.

"Mary Ruth" Memories of Mobile would fly four more combat missions. On the 29th of May she would fly to "flak city", St Nazaire, France. On 11 June the "Mary Ruth" would attempt to go to the docks of Bremen, Germany. When Bremen was found to be clouded over, the Group would go on to Wilhelmshaven. The day "Memphis Belle" and her crew would leave Bassingbourn to return home to the United States, "Mary Ruth" Memories of Mobile once again would fly to Bremen. This time she would be successful. On 22 June "Memphis Belle" and her crew would wind up their three-day "tour kick-off" celebration in Memphis, Tennessee. Earlier that day the now sleek "Mary Ruth" would become a scattered pile of smoking rubble in a forest 4 kilometers west of the small village of Wulfen in the Ruhr Valley of Germany. "Mary Ruth" Memories of Mobile would not quite make it to her final target that day, the synthetic chemical plant at Huls. She would be shot down by yellow-nosed Focke-Wulf 190 fighters flown by pilots of I Group, led by Captain Emil-Rudolf Schnoor, of the Luftwaffe fighter wing, JG 1, flying from the Schiphol Air Field near Amsterdam, Holland.

Three flights of two FW-190's in a frontal attack from slightly high off the right wing of the "Mary Ruth", about ten degrees to the right, would set the number four engine afire, damage the cockpit flight controls and knock out much of the electrical system. "Mary Ruth" would drop out of formation. From all sides, other FW-190's would then attack the now alone "Mary Ruth", their 20 mm cannon shells exploding in the cockpit destroying more controls. The bail-out bell would be rung. Sgt. Akers would leave the top turret just before it blew up, throwing exploding ammunition into the cockpit. Lt. Brown would struggle to hold the plane level as the right wing burned away, all the while exploding shells sending fragments of the instrument panels into his head and face. Lt. Feerick would make two frenzied trips from the bombardier compartment to the bomb bay to work on the shackle mechanisms of two bombs with a screwdriver, eventually causing them to fall free. This would allow the forward crew to escape by squeezing around the unsalvaged bombs. Lt. Brown's efforts would buy time for the rear crew to get to their escape hatches. For his efforts on behalf of the crew, Lt. Brown would be awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. Before all the crew could bail out, the outer wing would blow off throwing "Mary Ruth" into a spinning downward dive, the centrifugal force of which would prevent the remaining crew from leaving the plane. Almost immediately thereafter the "Mary Ruth" would explode, throwing free all but Sgts Allen and Maculley, who would remain trapped within the falling fuselage.

In a few minutes it would all be over. "Mary Ruth" Memories of Mobile would be no more. Sgts Maculley and Allen would lie dead in the wreckage. The remainder of the crew would float to the earth and soon be prisoners of war. Lt. Brown and Sgt. Crain would manage to evade capture for five days before being taken prisoners. Lt. Quenin would sustain compound fractures of both legs when his parachute opened. His legs would escape further injury when landing as he would fall through the tile roof of a farm shed on his shoulder and be held suspended above the floor by the parachute. But, then he would then be shot through one of his legs while being captured by German infantry.

The officers would be sent to the South Compound of Stalag Luft III near the town of Sagan in Silesia, where they would spend most of their time in captivity. Because of the severity of his injuries, Lt. Quenin would be removed from Stalag III on 16 February 1944 and repatriated by the Germans through Lisbon, Portugal, arriving back in the United States on the Swedish liner, Gripsholm, 15 March

1944. On 27 January 1945, Lt. Bliley, Brown and Feerick would be forced by the Germans to take part in the freezing cold "Death March" to Stalag VII-A at Moosburg near Munich. They would be held there until liberated by Patton's Third Army on 29 April. The enlisted crew would first be sent to Stalag VII-A at Moosburg. After six months they would be moved in packed railroad box cars to Stalag XVII-B near at Krems, Austria, and be held there until early April 1945. They then would be marched up the Danube River to Braunau, Austria, where they would be liberated by the advancing Americans.

There would be no War Bond rallies or heroes' welcome for the crew of "Mary Ruth" Memories of Mobile when they returned. Only families and friends would be there to celebrate their homecoming. Lt. Brown would remain in the Air Force to fly B-29s in Korea and B-52s in Vietnam, eventually retiring as a Colonel. He would then obtain a Masters Degree from the University of Arizona. Afterwards he would serve as an administrator in the University Medical School until retiring again, this time to his golf game in La Jolla, California. Lt. Quenin would recover from his injuries to return to flight status to fly in the Berlin Airlift. Later he would serve as Director of Materiel for the 505 Tactical Air Control Group, and fly a few "unofficial" missions, in Vietnam, finally retiring as a Lieutenant Colonel to sell real-estate in Costa Mesa, California. Lt. Bliley would return to civilian life to own and operate an oil distributorship in Milwaukie, Oregon. Lt. Feerick would become a Captain in the New York Fire Department and late serve as an administrator at Mt. Sinai Hospital, and then as an Ordained Deacon in the Catholic Church. Sgt. Akers would remain in the Army when the Air Force split away, serving in Korea. He would retire as a Warrant Officer to Colorado Springs, Colorado where he would engage in a number of business ventures and work for the U.S. Postal Service. Sgt. Brown would remain in the Air Force as a supply sergeant, eventually retiring to become manager of the P. N. Hirsch Department Store in Humbolt, Tennessee. Sgt. Crain would return to New York to take up again his prewar activities as a literary agent and to operate his own agency. Sgt. Litzo would return to Denver to work for Boyd Distributing, a major appliance distributorship, and to continue his avocation with golf. Sgt. Pierce would leave the Service to return to Medford, Oregon to become a manager for Modoc Orchards. Sgt. Allen would return to the Oconee Hills Cemetery in Athens, Georgia. Sgt. Maculley would remain in the Netherlands American Cemetery in Margarten, The Netherlands.

"Mary Ruth" Memories of Mobile would not survive to take part in the more memorable events of the air war over Europe. She would not participate in the July 1943 "Blitz Week." She would not fly the Schweinfurt missions of 17 August and 14 October 1943. She would not be there to join in the February 1944 "Big Week". She would not answer the call to "The Big B", Berlin. She would not partake in the D-day invasion. And, she would not share in "Operation Chowhound" dropping food rather than bombs to the starving populations of the occupied countries during the final weeks of the war. "Mary Ruth" Memories of Mobile was not allowed as long a life as was Nine-0-Nine of the 323rd Squadron, 91st Group, who successfully completed 140 missions over Europe. "Mary Ruth" was denied the thrill of buzzing the air field at Bassingbourn, as was allowed upon completion of the 25th mission.

Still, "Mary Ruth" Memories of Mobile would be a part of history, even if mainly as an unnoticed participant. Her first mission to Keil, along with Cpt Baldwin and Hell's Angels and "Memphis Belle", flown that day by Lt. J. H. Miller, on 14 May had been the longest and farthest of the VIII Bomber Command to that date. She, too, would complete the mission to Lorient today, as would Hell's Angels on her 28th and Cpt Morgan on his 25th mission, returning unscathed. She also had flown the 91st Group mission last Saturday, along with "Memphis Belle", officially to Wilhelmshaven. When they found the primary target clouded over, the planes of the 91st dropped their bombs on the submarine pens and other naval installations on Heligoland Island. This latter mission would be used as the setting

for Maj. Wyler's documentary. "Mary Ruth" Memories of Mobile, represented by Lt. Brown's name, appears on the flight formation board shown during the mission briefing in the movie. "Mary Ruth's" seventh, and last, mission would also be historic. This would be the first "Maximum Effort" mission against the German fighter plane industry following realization that strategic bombing would not be successful until the threat from fighters was eliminated. The Huls mission would also be the first "Maximum Effort" daytime mission flown by the VIII Bomber Command into the Ruhr Valley, which, because of the intense flak, soon would come to be known as "Happy Valley."

True, "Mary Ruth" Memories of Mobile and her crew flirted briefly with fame from time to time over the years. John Steinbeck, a prewar friend of Sgt. Crain, visited Bassingbourn long enough to write nine newspaper articles about day-to-day life in the VIII Bomber Command. These were based on the crew of "Mary Ruth" Memories of Mobile. His projected 25-article series would be cut short when the "Mary Ruth" failed to return from Huls. Six of these articles would find their way into Steinbeck's 1958 book, *Once There Was a War*. In 1992, a color picture of the "Mary Ruth" taken on the Huls mission, just before she was shot down, would appear on the cover of *B-17, The Flying Fortress*, by William N. Hess. A short while later, there was a chance encounter by the free-lance writer, Chuck Dunning, and Ken Brown. This would result in an article in the July 1995 issue of "Aviation History" describing the events of the final flight and death of the "Mary Ruth."

In general, however, "Mary Ruth" Memories of Mobile and her crew, as was true of the thousands of other B-17 Flying Fortresses, B-24 Liberators, B-26 Marauders, B-25 Mitchells, and their "little friends", the fighter escorts, and their crews, would be destined to do their flying and dying, oftentimes all too soon during those early years of the airwar over Europe, achieving lasting notice only to their families and friends. The airmen associated with the "Mary Ruth" would typify the thousands of "Black Jack" Pierces who worked frantically, often under almost impossible time and physical constraints, to repair and maintain "their" planes so as to "loan" them to the air crews for the next mission; the thousands of Ken Browns and Jim Quenins who wrestled their bomb-laden planes off the runways and struggled to keep them in the air when hit by flak and fighter cannon fire; the thousands of Vince Blileys who made certain the planes slipped into the proper places within their Elements as the formations came together, were on time and on course to the targets, and navigated them back to their hardstands when crippled by flak or fighters and had to leave their formations; the thousands of Jim Feericks who stared into the face of the head-on attacking Luftwaffe fighters and listened to the thumping of flak tearing through the Alclad aluminum skin of the fuselage, all the while keeping a steady hand on the Norden bombsight to make certain the bombs were placed on the target; the thousands of Jim Akers, who kept the planes' flak-shattered equipment working, as well as manning the upper turret guns; the thousands of Bill Browns, Maurice Crains, and Ray Litzos who did their best to keep at bay the Messerschmidt 109 and the Focke-Wulf 190 fighter aircraft; and the thousands of Dick Maculleys and Glenn Allens who all too frequently died with their planes. As such, the crew of "Mary Ruth" Memories of Mobile epitomizes the unselfish dedication and ultimate sacrifices made by those who struggled to keep the planes flying and who flew and died in relative obscurity in the air over "Fortress Europe" during the period of 1942-1945.

Revisionist historians would argue over the actual contribution of strategic bombing in bringing to an end that conflict. However, the crews of "Memphis Belle", of "Mary Ruth" Memories of Mobile and of the hundreds of other planes in VIII Bomber Command were not concerned about history that early Monday morning in East Anglia. Rather, they were there to do a job that had to be done. They had responded to a request by their country to perform a dangerous duty that was deemed necessary and essential, given the knowledge of conditions at the time. They had volunteered for this duty not to seek

glory, not to become heroes, not to achieve a place in history, but simply because their country was in trouble and needed them. Circumstances placed some of the planes and some of the crews more in the limelight of fame than others. All, the "Memphis Bells", the Nine-0-Nines, the Hell's Angels, and the "Mary Ruth's", flew their missions as they were trained to do. The fate of many would be to be blown to bits at the end of the runways while taking off, to be reduced to rubble in a farmers field in Germany, to be entombed forever in the cold bottom waters of the North Sea, or to be incinerated into nothingness in a fiery ball over Berlin.

Others would survive, to end up a field near Kingman, Arizona, Altus, Oklahoma, or Walnut Ridge, Arkansas. From there they would be converted into aluminum siding to build the Levittowns, into electric skillets, into toasters, into waffle irons, into patio chairs, and into the innumerable other consumer products needed to fulfill the postwar dreams of America. Sentimentalists may feel that to be an ignominious ending for those planes who had endured so much and still had carried the day. However, it was for the very fulfillment of those postwar dreams that they had risked the midair collisions while corkscrewing upward around the Buncher and Splasher homing beacons to assemble their formations in the clouded skies over East Anglia, had braved the box barrages of flak over St. Nazaire and Merseburg, had flown into "Happy Valley", and had fought off the swarms of Me 109s and FW-190s on the way to Schweinfurt and Berlin. They had done their job and they had done it well. They would no longer be needed as instruments of war. They would then be ready for realization of the peace for which they had fought so valiantly.

The years would flow by swiftly. Soon the planes would all be gone. The only record of their passing this way would consist of photographs of planes and their crews illustrating histories of World War II. For a time, Memorial Associations of veterans of the various Bombardment Groups would keep alive the memories of the planes and events. However, like the planes themselves, one by one their former crews would quietly fold their wings. Soon only the impersonal written accounts and fading photographs would remain. Society has a way of assuring that its heroes are not consigned to oblivion. The devotion and dedication, the skills and sacrifices, the convictions and courage of the "Memphis Belles", the Nine-O-Nines and the Hell's Angels, and their crews, will not be forgotten so long as there is written history. But, we also have an obligation to ensure that, as generations pass, there will be those who will say of all the "Mary Ruth" Memories of Mobiles, and their crews..."We remember."

Now, let us return once again to Bassingbourn and to "Mary Ruth" Memories of Mobile. Thirty six days have passed. The Lorient mission has been completed. All planes returned safely. Other missions have been flown and "Memphis Belle" and her crew have returned to the States. It is another early morning in East Anglia. Today is Tuesday 22 June 1943, 0630 Double British Summer Time. Another mission is on, the Huls raid. "Mary Ruth" Memories of Mobile will be flying in the number two position (rear outer right) of the last three-plane element of the echeloned right, low Squadron of the low Group, "Tail-end Charlie." The predawn flurry of ground crew activities has ceased and the crews are standing quietly beside their planes. The air crews are aboard, the preflight check lists completed. An apprehensive somber silence lies over Bassingbourn. In Memphis, Tennessee it is late evening 21 June. The crew of the "Memphis Belle" is still being feted by a grateful citizenry.

Two green flares form an arch over the field. From dispersal points scattered about the base there comes an erratic chorus of sputtering coughs as planes come to life. Soon the ragged rumblings coalesce into a penetrating ear-rendering roar as the multitude of engines are run-up and additional instruments checked. Slowly the olive-drab graceful, but deadly, low-winged fortresses begin moving down the taxiways in two weaving, snaking, nose to tail columns, brakes squealing, toward the end of the runway. The columns pause. Two flares arc upwards from Flying Control on the second story

balcony outside the control room—green-green. The first B-17, Mizpah--The Bearded Beauty, belches a cloud of blue smoke and rumbles down the 6,000 foot Runway 25, slowly struggling to clear the trees at the end of the runway. At 30-second intervals another follows, another, another, and yet another. Old Ironsides leaves on her journey to the bottom of the North Sea. Royal Flush! lifts off on her final flight. No. 42-29998 (she has not yet been named) tucks in her wheels one last time. Golden Bear heads for her long hibernation.

There is a hectic scramble around "Mary Ruth" Memories of Mobile. The number three engine supercharger is not working. Sgt. Pierce clammers aboard and works rapidly. The pressure comes up seconds before an abort is declared. He has done his job. Brakes released, the "Mary Ruth" jerks away from her hardstand, rolls along the taxiway, pivots, and lumbers quickly down the runway. She is the last plane of the Group to depart Bassingbourn today. For the last time her wheels lift away from what later generations will refer to as the "hallowed grounds" of East Anglia. "Mary Ruth" rises hurriedly and disappears into the distance as she heads for her nirvana and the obscurity of history. We watch her vanish with the confidence that those same later generations will say of "Mary Ruth" Memories of Mobile and of the others who will not return today, and all the days to come, "We remember...we still remember."

- - - - -

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

www.91stbombgroup.com