

THE GHOST SHIP

Written by Unknown

The date was November 21, 1944; Lt. Harold R. DeBolt with the 401st Squadron was assigned a B-17G number 43-38545 from the 324th Squadron, Hal's 33rd mission. The plane was so new; it didn't have a "Name" yet. It was only the 3rd mission for this plane. The mission was to go back to Merseburg, Germany and was lead by Major Klette.

The weather was terrible, with solid clouds everywhere as the mission proceeded. Most things had been routine until he turned on the bomb run. The formation tended to slow up in the turn and with bomb bay doors open, DeBolt's aircraft stalled and dropped out of formation. At this instant he was attacked by enemy fighters and also began the run through a very heavy and accurate flak barrage. Due to malfunction with the bomb release mechanism, the bombs would not drop. This caused the aircraft to fall further out of formation. About this time the whole ship took the blast from a flak burst just below the bomb bays, the plane was badly damaged.

The explosion caused the bombs to drop but No. 2 and No. 3 engines also went out. No. 2 was out completely and No. 3 was wind milling and causing undue vibration throughout the aircraft. The crew began jettisoning all surplus equipment in an effort to lighten the Fortress as DeBolt set course for home. The plane was losing altitude and was turned to a heading of 270 degrees west, for friendly lines. The crew stayed with the plane as long as they could and when it was down to 2,000 feet, Hal gave the signal for everyone to "bail-out" and they did, while the Fort continued on its way with the autopilot doing its job. All chutes opened and the men were picked up by British infantrymen soon after landing.

The damaged Fortress continued onward, losing altitude and remaining in a perfect landing attitude. The Fortress mysteriously made a perfect three point landing in a plowed field. It ground looped at the end of the field and sat there with engines still running, undamaged in an open field, near Liege, Belgium. The landing was in a flat strip area, near a British Army encampment. A British Officer ran out to help the crew, but only found neatly stacked flying gear inside and was astonished to find no one on board. He inspected the Fort (as a possible German trap) but found no one. He then turned off the operating engines. The British Officers name was Major John Crisp.

The Stars and Stripes published the story the next day and called DeBolt's B-17 - a Ghost Ship, or Phantom Fort.

Factoid:

Information on B-17 #338545 401 LL J

18 08 44 Added to Air Force inventory. 18 09 44 Arrived Over Seas

21 11 44 Failed to return. Landed on Continent in friendly territory.

Salvaged - Lt Harold R. DeBolt - 9 crewmen Returned To Duty

FROM 401ST DAILIES

21 November 1944 - Mission to Merseburg

On the 21st of November we dispatched 11 A/C and 12 crews to attack the Synthetic Oil Plant at Merseburg.

A/C 145 piloted by 1st Lt. R. R. Goldsmith,

A/C 545 piloted by 1st Lt. H. R. DeBolt,

A/C 851 piloted by 2nd Lt. W. W. Seller, Jr.,

A/C 504 piloted by 1st Lt. H. E. Garner,

A/C 035 piloted by 1st Lt. Dick F. Gibson,

A/C 429 piloted by 1st Lt. S. E. Rice,

A/C 610 piloted by 1st Lt. R. N. Broughton,

A/C 911 piloted by 2nd Lt. W. T. Carter,

A/C 069 piloted by 1st Lt. J. J. Ondrovic,

A/C 552 piloted by 1st Lt. C. M. Buchanan,

A/C 843 piloted by 1st Lt. F. B. Foster, Jr.,

A/C 144 piloted by 1st Lt. N. K. Gehret, flew on this mission.

A/C 145 was furnished by the 323rd Squadron. The Squadron flew the High Squadron in the Group formation. The Group furnished 1st "A" Group of 1st CBW. Bombing was done by means of instruments. Results were unobserved. AA fire was accurate and intense at the target. A/C 545, piloted by 1st Lt. DeBolt, had two engines damaged by flak over the target. At 1500 feet the other two engines failed. The entire crew bailed out, Lt. DeBolt jumping at 800 feet. The A/C made a freak perfect landing in Belgium, about 10 miles east of Brussels. All crew members returned safely to base. Fighter support was excellent. All other A/C and crews returned safely.

MESSAGE FROM DIRK VANDER HULST

Thank you very much. My e-mail address is: vanderhulstdirk@yahoo.com

I'm currently investigating the landing of an unmanned B-17G, which occurred in the Belgian village of Huldenberg (situated about 10 miles southeast of Brussels, and about 3 miles from where I live). I have reason to believe this plane was B-17G s/n 43-38545 LL - J of the 401st Bomb Squadron/91st Bomb Squadron - the so-called "ghost ship" or "phantom fort" piloted by 1st Lt. Harold R. DeBolt. The press named it that way because it had landed unmanned on automatic pilot in a field near Brussels, Belgium. It returned from a mission to Merseburg, Germany, November 21st 1944.

I bear an interest in regional history (folk-lore) and aviation and I intend to write an article about the unmanned landing that occurred at Huldenberg for "Huldenbergs Heemblad" i.e. the periodical of the local society for history and folklore of Huldenberg.

I interviewed several villagers on the subject. According to them the unmanned fortress touched down in a plowed field, not far from a British Anti-Aircraft Artillery site as described in the Ghost Ship Story.

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