

THE MAN WHO WOULDN'T QUIT

Written by Roger A. Freeman (The Manny Klette Biography)

When, on the pleasant spring afternoon of 25 April, Pathfinder B-17 '588' touched down safely at Bassingbourn following an attack on Pilsen, the young man in the Aircraft Commander's seat was unaware that this had been the last combat mission he, or the 8th Air Force heavy bombers, would fly. For Lt. Col. Immanuel J. Klette it was his 91st sortie over Festung Europa in the cockpit of a B-17, a total unsurpassed by any other US heavy bomber pilot. Manny Klette had long been something of a living legend, a man pointed out as a symbol of confidence to recently arrived replacement crews who after a few rough missions considered their future bleak. On the other hand there were many veterans at Bassingbourn who thought Klette was chancing his luck too far in the dangerous sky over Europe; the law of averages, it was thought, would eventually work against him. But Klette kept on flying combat missions. He knew the odds well enough, having started back in 1943 when only one man in three had a chance of coming through a 25-mission tour. His faith in his own ability to master dangerous situations was a major factor in his persistence. He would quote a Latin motto: *Nam et ipsa scientia potestas est* - Knowledge itself is power. In furtherance of this belief, Klette had learned to know the B-17 inside out, what was likely to happen to control when particular systems failed or were damaged, and how to overcome the difficulties. He developed a practice of studying all operational material, not only pilot's, but navigator's and bombardier's as well. His logic in being well informed was that it both improved the success of the mission and the survival of combatants. 'Manny' Klette's story is justification of that belief.

Son of a Lutheran minister who emigrated from Germany to the Middle West, this first generation American's Christian name was taken from the bible, its meaning being 'God with us'. Academically brilliant, having completed one university degree and working towards another, patriotism came to the fore when the US entered the war., his father having instilled in him an understanding of the totalitarian nature of Nazism.

In February 1943 he was dispatched to the UK as co-pilot on 2nd Lt. Keith Conley's crew and subsequently assigned to the oldest B-17 combat group in the theatre, the 306th at Thurleigh. At that time morale was generally low at this station as a tour of operations had yet to be officially established. Completion of combat was by failure to return from a mission, death, serious wounds, transfer to a ground job or other physical barriers to continue flying. However, the 369th Bomb Squadron, in which Conley and his men were placed, had incurred no losses in recent weeks. The crew was immediately split up to fill vacancies in inexperienced crews, Klette joining 1/Lt. Ed Maliszewski, whose original co-pilot had been given his own bomber.

Klette got off to a rough start when at Vegesack on 18 March the 306th was engaged by fighters and FW-190s blasted through the formation so close to Klette's Fortress that he could clearly see the pilots in their oxygen masks. The 369th's run of luck continued and during the first four months of Klette's service with the squadron - when he flew on nearly every operation - it lost no bombers over enemy territory. A tour of 25 missions was introduced during this period and Capt. Maliszewski became one of the first pilots in the group to reach this figure and return home. Klette, with 10 missions under his belt, then rejoined his old pilot, Keith Conley, and went on to fly another 11 missions from the right seat. While he had plenty of action and harrowing sights, for him the most disturbing incident occurred on the 28 June mission to St.Nazaire. Persistent fighter attacks were directed at the rear of the formation but without any known hits on their bomber. Once out over the Bay of Biscay, Klette made the usual

co-pilot's check of each crew member by calling over the interphone. No response was received from tail gunner Sgt. Daley who was on his 25th and last sortie. Klette went back to investigate where he could see Daley sitting over his guns. He put his hand on the gunners shoulder and was about to say something to him when the upper part of Daley's body fell back into Klette's arms. With the help of a Waist gunner he got Daley out of the turret and back into the radio room but the gunner was dead, a bullet through his heart.

Late in July Klette was made a first pilot and given his own crew and a B-17F which he named Connecticut Yankee. He was sorry to leave the old crew and on his first mission with his own command, he was grieved that Conley's B-17 was one of two lost by the 369th Bomb Squadron that day - the first loss for 42 consecutive missions.

Having previously flown the Schweinfurt raid, Villacoublay airfield in France seemed by comparison a 'milk run' for Klette's 25th and final mission for the required tour. The reverse was to be the case. As the group entered the bombing run, accurate flak burst around damaging all but one of the 18 aircraft in formation. A shell exploded close to Connecticut Yankee's No. 4 engine which had to be feathered as they continued across the target. The same burst also put fragments into No. 3 engine and this faltered and had to be shut down. Another shell had sent splinters into the nose and ball turrets causing more damage and wounding the ball turret gunner in the hand. With both engines stilled on one side control was difficult, as Klette struggled to keep close to the formation knowing the fate of stragglers. The increase in power necessary to keep pace brought the right wing up and Connecticut Yankee continued on her way with a 45 degree list. The waist gunners were ordered into the radio room to keep weight forward and over the Channel ammunition and all other movable items were thrown out. If Klette could get the aircraft back to England he reasoned he would have a better chance by landing at Thurleigh rather than make an approach to a strange field. Connecticut Yankee was down to about 2,500 ft when Thurleigh finally came into view. Other B-17s were in the pattern so Klette did a gentle right hand orbit and line-up for the runway. At this crucial moment No. 1 engine burst into flames - probably from overstrain. As the co-pilot shut down No.1 a voice was heard over the radio from the control tower" "Bail out, Klette Bail out." The warning came from Col George Robinson, the Group CO. Undaunted, 'Manny' Klette still believed his best course of action was to try and land and with a superb display of skill succeeded, despite a flat tire and the remaining engine losing power just after touchdown.

Prior to this mission Klette had applied to his Squadron and thence Group Commander for permission to fly another tour. This rare request was engendered by Klette's love of flying, his absorbing interest in the work of the 8th Air Force bombers, and his burning desire to help successfully to terminate the war in Europe. After a week's leave in Scotland, he returned to Thurleigh to learn that Col. Robinson had granted him permission to fly another five missions with the 306th. Klette was fated to fly only three of the five.

On 23 September 1943 the Group went to Nantes. The raid was dispatched late in the day and bombing was carried out near sunset. As Connecticut Yankee was still under repair the Klette crew were in a borrowed Fortress. They were leading the high squadron when flak burst below the aircraft and a fragment hit Klette in the left shin bone. Damage was also done to the bomb bay doors which would not close, causing considerable drag. After leaving the target Klette noticed that one of the fuel tanks was quite low, having been holed and failing to self-seal. As the English coast was neared it became evident that there was insufficient fuel to reach home base and that both Nos. 3 and 4 engines would have to be shut down. Leaving formation at dusk, a homing was called for and given - to the RAF airfield at Wing.

The fuel situation became critical and the crew took up crash-landing positions in the radio room. Shortly afterward, Klette was forced to feather No. 1 engine. No longer able to maintain altitude, a rapid descent began from 2000 ft and with landing lights turned on. Low cloud was encountered and Klette had to fly on instruments until they emerged. He could then see they were down to about 100 feet and flying into a series of valleys. Checking his descent momentarily, he observed directly ahead a large wooded area. There was now little in the way of options but to stall out in the tree tops. Unfortunately, the initial impact involved a large oak which severed the left wing and brought the fuselage smashing down through other oaks onto the ground. The cockpit area was severely smashed and Klette knew he was badly injured but managed to drag himself out of the aircraft. Unknown to Klette, the navigator, Lt. Madden, anxious to help locate an airfield, had remained in the nose and was trapped there in the crash. RAF personnel from Wing, half a mile away, were soon on the scene and extricated him.; he had eight fractures; Klette had five. The rest of the crew escaped with only bruises and scratches.

The injured men were removed to the RAF Halton Hospital at Aylesbury where it was found Klette had fractures to pelvis and upper leg bones in addition to several cuts and bruises and his flak wound. His ability to walk properly again was in question. As far as the medical authorities were concerned, Klette's war was over. But 'Manny' had other ideas. In November 1943 after transfer to the US 2nd General Hospital in Oxford, he indicated to doctors that whatever the outcome of his treatment he preferred to remain in England rather than be returned to the US. Recuperation took time, but he was soon hobbling around the ward.

One of his wardmates at Oxford was 2/Lt Ted Shultz, whose stepfather was Ambassador Anthony Drexel Biddle. In the later stages of convalescence Shultz invited Klette to go with him to meet his mother and stepfather in London. Here Klette was introduced to Col Allen, Deputy Intelligence Officer at the recently formed USSTAF Headquarters. Klette mentioned his intention of remaining in England and that while he hoped he might eventually return to flying duties he expressed a desire to be involved in operational planning. Arising from their conversation, Col Allen arranged for Klette to join the Operations Section of the USSTAF on release from the hospital. The day arrived in February 1944 and moving to Bushey Park Klette became actively engaged in the preparation of briefings for General Spaatz and senior staff. Later he became a briefing officer. During his time with USSTAF he absorbed a great deal of information on enemy capabilities, tactics and equipment, which helped give him a much better appreciation of the problems confronting the heavy bomber offensive. He also worked on air matters for the 'Overlord Plan' - the cross-channel invasion. As his strength increased and he regained full use of his legs, Klette was reinstated on flying status and thereafter his thoughts turned towards a return to combat missions. An opportunity arose when he learned that his old Squadron CO and former Group Executive at Thurleigh, Col Henry Terry, who had taken command of the 91st Group at Bassingbourn, was looking for a combat experienced officer to command one of his units. A transfer could not be permitted until approximately two months after D-Day because of Klette's association with the plan and the risk to security should he be shot down and captured.

It was late July 1944 before his release came through and he was assigned on the 30th to command the 324th 'Wild Hare' Bomb Squadron at Bassingbourn. The 324th was a pathfinder unit operating H2X equipped B-17s and it now had a commander who was probably the most knowledgeable combat pilot in the whole 8th Air Force.

Capt. Klette's first mission with his new command was to Brandenburg on 6 August, when he discovered that the B-17G was a heavier aircraft than the F models he had flown the previous year and so requiring higher power setting. He also found that the electronic supercharger controls were an

advance on the oil regulated type of the old model Fortresses, giving faster response to power changes. The 324th CO had his own theories about several aspects of mission procedure, developed as a result of his observations a USSTAF. He held that a key tactic to good bombing was to plan the approach to the Initial Point in such a manner that when the formation passed over this landmark it was already on the briefed heading to bomb. The advantage lay in placing the bombardier, navigator and radar operator in a position to more easily monitor check points along the bomb run and thus pinpoint the target, than if turning in towards the target from a different heading. The disadvantage, of course, was that a lengthened straight and level bomb run would result, giving the German anti-aircraft gunners more time and better opportunity to put an accurate barrage into the formation. At Ludwigshaven on 8 September Klette put this into practice for a 54 mile run to the target with need for only 2 degrees correction culminating in an excellent strike on target from 25,000 ft. Unfortunately, a strong headwind arrested speed, an opportunity, coupled with the straight bomb run, which flak gunners did not miss, resulting in extensive flak damage to 29 of the 37 B-17s with one man killed and nine wounded.

The German oil industry was protected by formidable flak installations of which the most notorious was Merseburg/Leuna. On 21 November Klette led the entire 8th Air Force to this target through deteriorating weather in almost constant radio contact with his friend, Lt. Col Allison Brooks, Commander and leader that day of the 1st Scouting Force. Klette made a coded request that Brooks check the weather over the target area below the assigned bombing altitude. The ensuing coded conversation between two combat veterans resulted in Klette's election to take his formation down from the assigned 27,000 ft to 17,000 ft to attack. The results were considered the most destructive ever achieved by the 8th Air Force at this much repaired target.

In Klette's opinion, the prime factor in the creation of a good lead crew was combat experience. The best formation control, route discipline and accurate bombing was achieved by men with a score or more missions behind them. Few of his current command had run theirs into double figures. When the squadron bombed the wrong target and on another occasion led a formation into a fighter ambush by wandering off course, he felt a deep responsibility even though not directly involved. While he obviously had to delegate, he nevertheless flew every mission he could, particularly those to difficult targets, believing in his ability to do the job accurately while incurring the minimum losses. Although he was already well versed on enemy defenses from his studies at USSTAF, other members of the squadron noticed that he always studied the current intelligence reports and briefing data longer and far more thoroughly than any other pilot on the base. In fact, 'Manny' Klette always had a mental picture of the current flak and fighter situation on the map of Germany. He varied the routes when he tried to avoid obvious and suspected flak traps. He also developed a procedure for evading the radar-controlled barrages by timing 7 seconds after bomb release and then turning slowly left or right into a very steep bank. This and other tactics certainly paid off for in the 30 missions where he flew the lead group pathfinder, only two B-17s were lost from that formation.

This personal concern to see the job performed with expertise was given added impetus by what occurred on a Berlin mission early in February 1945. Lt. Col Marvin Lord, 91st Group Operations Officer, had never been to Berlin and asked if he might take Klette's place in the lead plane. Despite Lord's higher rank Maj Klette was loath to let any pilot, however skilled, lead his mostly experienced crew so the matter was dropped. Because of deteriorating conditions the mission was cancelled before takeoff and with the weather man predicting no improvement over the next 24 hours, Klette decided to leave for London to keep a dinner engagement that evening. In the unlikely event of the clouds dispersing and the mission being reinstated on the morrow he arranged that Marvin Lord could serve as Aircraft Commander with the lead crew. The forecasters were wrong and next day, 3 February, the

Berlin mission was flown. The lead 91st aircraft took a direct flak hit in the waist shortly after bombs away and spun down in two parts. Of the 11 man crew the radio operator was on his 79th mission, the engineer on his 81st and the ball turret gunner - who had previously flown in the Pacific war - on his 108th. Klette took this to heart, not only due to the loss of friends and men he had built into one of the best lead teams in the Eighth, but because he felt that had had he been in the Aircraft Commander's seat and made the usual sharp turn off target, the flak barrage might have been avoided. From then on Klette was more determined than ever to fly on missions to difficult or important targets. This personal conviction of his ability to do the job better than those around might have been seen as conceit in some other situation but in these dangerous circumstances it instilled confidence in those other crews who followed his lead: if 'Manny Klette was up front' the right action would be taken whatever contingencies arose. This was cogently proven at Vlotho where a rail bridge spanning the Weser sped supplies to the Wehrmacht. On 14 March 1st Combat Wing was sent to smash it with the 91st Group in the lead. Brig. Gen William Gross rode as Aircraft Commander in the Pathfinder, with Klette as pilot. Visibility was poor with a profusion of Fortresses in the Vlotho area as groups, heading for another target, messed their timing. These formations obstructed the 91st bomb run causing Maj Hudson, the Group Bombardier, and Klette to decide on a 360 degree turn and another run. Photo reconnaissance the following day confirmed that the bridge was put out of use by the strikes obtained and Klette received his third DFC for the tricky task of maneuvering the combat wing formations for this second and successful pass at the target.

His friend and boss, Col Terry, became concerned about Klette's appetite for combat: "We had a rotation policy wherein the squadron commander would fly when that particular squadron was leading the group as combat wing or division lead. "Manny" would take his prescribed turns at leading the group but would also go on missions whenever his squadron flew. He did this so consistently I felt he wasn't paying enough attention to the administration of his squadron or attending enough staff meetings. I asked him to stay on the ground more but he still continued to go. I got my dander up and ordered him only to go when his turn to lead came up. He still went. What the hell are you going to do with a man like that? He'd give me that ready smile and all I could do was chew him out and let him go."

Col Terry was, of course, an ardent admirer of Klette and long aware of his abilities, knowledge and courage. He also knew him as a man who played hard too, a great practical joker and one - as Terry put it - "who participated in all the extra-curricular activities that combat personnel seem so adept at practicing."

People would ask 'Manny' Klette when he was going to quit chancing his luck with Hitler's flak and fighters. "When the war's over, I guess," he would reply. And when hostilities did cease it was hard to believe that this serious, cheerful 27-year-old was someone extraordinary. He bore no visible signs of having faced possible death 91 times or of shouldering the responsibility of leadership on 73 of these occasions. 'Manny' Klette had long ago learned to live with fear, to sublimate it with his conviction that he was needed to help win the war. There was no bravado, no seeking after records, just this intangible desire to get the job done. There were other distinguished veterans who felt the same way.

In addition to completing 91 combat missions, 'Manny' Klette also flew seven missions that were recalled before the enemy coast. His total combat flying time was 689 hours, 25 minutes. A formidable record by any standard.

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