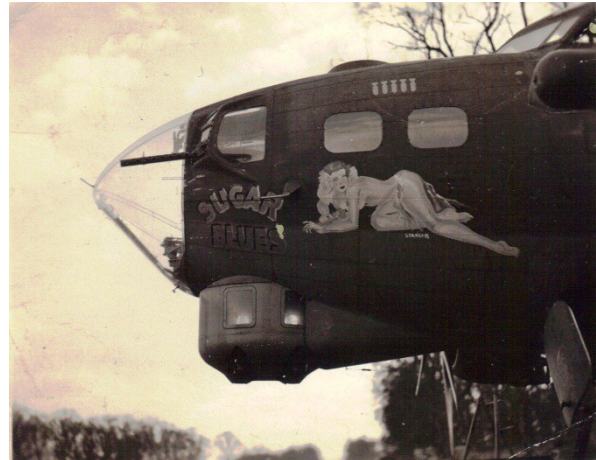


The Last Flight of Sugar Blues - February 22, 1944

I was a B-17 bombardier in the Eighth Air Force, 1st Bomb Division, 91st Bomb Group, 323rd Squadron, Lt. Roman Maziarz's crew. On a mission to bomb aircraft factories at Aschersleben, Germany, on 22 February 1944, our B-17 "Sugar Blues" was severely shot up by German fighters. Lt. Maziarz was forced to ditch in the North Sea.

At the mission briefing, when Aschersleben was announced as the target, there was a groan from the air crews. We had been to this area on 11 January, and we ran into a real hornets nest. The situation was much the same on 22 February. After the bombers had taken off, the weather over England again delayed our fighter escort operations, so when we got over the continent the only fighter aircraft we saw were Germans. They knew the bombers would be alone, so they were ready and waiting.



If my memory is correct, our plane was flying in the low squadron of the low group, which was made up of planes from the 91st and the 381st Bomb Groups. Before we reached the target, we were attacked by Focke-Wulf 190s. A B-17 from the 381st that was to our left and above was hit, and in seconds it was a ball of fire and we were past it.

Subsequent attacks took out our #1 engine and damaged two others. Our airspeed was dropping and we were forced to drop out of the formation. Without the support of the other guns of the formation we were a sitting duck and the Germans came in for the kill.

After more attacks, the pilot put the plane in a steep dive, from 20,000 feet to 1,000 feet. After the bombs were dropped, we went right down on the deck with a heading for England.

The first thing I saw when we leveled off, at almost treetop level, was a German farmer standing in the field with a horse and wagon. When he turned and saw the American bomber, he put his arms in the air. I guess he thought we were going to shoot him.

At first it was such a relief to get away from the fighters and flak, but we were still in central Germany with big problems and a long way to go. The right inboard engine was useless, and the propeller was "windmilling", which increased the fuel consumption of the other engines. To conserve fuel, all gun barrels, ammunition and loose equipment were jettisoned.

We passed over flak towers, anti-aircraft guns and an army camp. We were actually too low for them to shoot at us. When the people on the ground started waving at us, we knew we had crossed the border into enemy-occupied Holland.

Lt. Maziarz did a great job of flying. At times it was necessary to pull up to get over power lines. He got everything possible out of the damaged engines.

After about two hours of this thrill-a-minute ride, we reached the Dutch coast, where the crew was told to huddle in the radio compartment and prepare for possible ditching. A short time later one of the remaining engines quit, and another racked the plane with violent vibrations. As we hit the water, the engines tore loose. Under the circumstances it was a superb landing. The co-pilot, Pete Delo, was the only one injured. He suffered stomach, chest and head injuries when his seat broke loose upon impact. Those in the radio compartment got pitched around pretty good. There was a little trouble releasing the rubber dinghies and the water was rising rapidly, but everyone got out the top hatch.

We got into the dinghies. The pilots stepped directly into the dinghies and remained dry. The rest of us were soaked.

It was difficult to get clear of the sinking plane. The waves kept pushing the dinghies up onto the wing and dangerously close to the jagged holes from the air battle. To avoid a fatal puncture, some of us got in the water between the wing and the dinghies and pushed them free. It was only a few minutes and our bomber went under.

We were in a good mood and thankful to have survived. A P-47 flew by very low. Other planes that were returning to England could be heard above the overcast.

We were confident we would be rescued. We had been transmitting radio signals which were being picked up at locations in England. From these our location could be determined. It was not too long before a RAF Lockheed Hudson Air Sea Rescue plane spotted us. They dropped a large 10 man dinghy, but it landed too far away. On another run they dropped one that we were able to get into.



Sgt. Jake Jacoboski asked me how far we were from land. I replied, "Two miles – straight down". Nobody thought it was funny.

Then there was the wait for the English Air Sea Rescue boat. After a few hours it got dark and much colder. The waves got bigger and a wet snow began to fall. There was little conversation. Everyone knew that many airmen had not survived a winter night on the North Sea.

After about 6 or 7 hours we saw a light. Flares were immediately shot and a boat came into sight. Our location was much closer to Holland than England, so there was a good chance it could be a German boat. When it got near, we were glad to see the English.

When we got along side, another light appeared in the distance. Someone asked the boat commander about the light. He replied, "Shut up and get your ass aboard, it could be Jerry". We went below and got out of our wet clothes. We were furnished blankets to keep warm.

But the excitement for this long day was not over yet. There was a lot of cheering up on deck so we hurried up to check it out. The navy base we were nearing was under attack by German planes and one of them was going down in flames.

At the base we were given used RAF airman uniforms with instructions to send them back when we returned to our squadron. We never saw our uniforms and flying gear again. An officer explained that it all belonged to the boat crew under the salvage rules of the sea. I thought this was a stretch. I was grateful for the rescue but I sure hated to lose my A-2 jacket. I was never able to get another one.

Lt. Maziarz was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for the courage and flying skill he displayed under extreme adverse conditions. He had long before won the admiration of everyone on his crew.

Lt. Col. Arthur Clay, AFRES Ret.
November 1995



The crew of "Sugar Blues". Front row: 1/Lt. Roman V. Maziarz, Pilot; 2/Lt. Peter M. Delo, Co-pilot; 2/Lt. Mortimer Pudnos, Navigator; 2/Lt. Arthur D. Clay, Bombardier. Back row: S/Sgt. Robert W. Heller, Tail Gunner; S/Sgt. Anthony J. Barbotti, Waist Gunner; S/Sgt. Walter P. Meader, Jr., Ball Turret Operator; S/Sgt. Urban A. Jacoboski, Waist Gunner; T/Sgt. Joseph LaCascia, Radio Operator; T/Sgt. Joseph T. Depoti, Engineer.