

THE RAGGED IRREGULAR



322nd BS



323rd BS



Supporting Units



324th BS



401st BS

Vol. 50 No. 4

91st Bombardment Group (H)

October 2017

Memphis Belle's Top Turret Installed!



On August 16th, Restoration crews and 88th ABW civil engineers installed the top turret on the *Memphis Belle*. The *Belle's* rollout is planned for May 17, 2018 and will be the center piece of the 91st Bomb Group Memorial Association 2018 Reunion in Dayton, OH. [See President's Corner on page 2 for more information regarding the reunion]

A video of the *Memphis Belle's* turret installation is available online: tinyurl.com/belleturret.



Remaining 2017 Wings of Freedom Dates

See Collings Foundation's *Nine-O-Nine* on one of the remaining 2017 tour stops. For up to date information, please visit www.collingsfoundation.org/events/ or call (800)568-8924. Aircraft walk through tours and flights are available at each stop.

- 10/19 - 10/22 Raleigh, NC
- 10/23 - 10/25 Burlington, NC
- 10/25 - 10/27 Statesville, NC
- 10/27 - 10/29 Greenville, SC
- 11/2 - 11/4 Leesburg, FL
- 11/5 New Smyrna Beach, FL



Nine-O-Nine receiving maintenance at Basingbourn. The bomber flew 140 missions without an abort.

\$1,250 3rd Quarter Donations Received

Dale Asbury
Rick Gravesteijn

Donna Bogusz

In Memory of

Steve Perri, 323rd
Dorothy (sister)
Karen and Robin (nieces)
Jack (nephew)

Ted Skawienski, 323rd
Lisa Hammerly

President's Corner**Mick Hanou**

My main message is to book your hotel room as soon as possible for the Reunion 2018 May 16-19, Dayton. It is a very busy week due to a convention and hotel space elsewhere is limited. Please book a room even if you aren't quite sure - you can cancel (through me) up to two weeks beforehand if you change your mind. You can use link: tinyurl.com/91HotelOH to book online or call the hotel at (800)228-9290. Please be sure to mention the 91BG to get the good rate. Important – the Board has agreed to fund hotel costs for our WWII veterans and hope to see you at this most important Reunion.

The itinerary has not been decided as it is waiting some Museum plans to be finalized. I suggest you book all four nights. The firm events are a day at the museum for the rollout on the 17th and the banquet on the evening of the 19th. I will be arriving early and we may have some informal activities on the 16th or 20th for those who wish to come earlier or stay longer. Again, please book soon as it really helps me plan the Reunion if I know what attendance we expect to have.

Fall of 1942 is when the group arrived in England and started flying missions. So, this starts a series of 75th anniversaries. Arrival at Kimbolton and the move to Bassingbourn is one. November 7, the first mission, is another. I like to read the Haavelaar book a few pages at a time to remember each 75th date!

I wish you Happy Holidays all around.

Mike Banta's Web Ring**The First to 25?**

I think we all know that the *Memphis Belle* wasn't the first as is so often assumed, the *Hell's Angels* B-17 of the 303rd BG having completed 25 five days earlier and two B24s: *Jerks Natural* of the 93rd BG and *Hot Stuff* also of the 93rd also via credible reports having accomplished that milestone earlier still. I had never heard about *Delta Rebel II* having preceded the *Belle* to that milestone and wondering if you or one of the other Ring participants can confirm and provide a date?

Thanks,

Jerry Ritter, Oregon Chapter, 8th AFHS

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Please send Folded Wings information to Jody Kelly.

January Ragged Irregular submissions must be received by **December 15th**.

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91st on the Web

www.91stbombgroup.com
www.facebook.com/groups/91stBGMA

Hi Jerry,

As the Ringmaster of the Ring since its inception, I can tell you that this question has come up time and time again. Below is my determination as to the answer. Other ring participants may have other information that contradicts my conclusions. If they do, they will let us know.

George Birdsong, first pilot of the crew assigned to *Delta Rebel No. 2*, was the best pilot in the 8th Air Force and he had a most remarkable crew. He and his crew would have been out-standing as representatives of the 8th Air Force. I don't know if you are familiar with his mission to Hamm, Germany. If you are not, take a moment to read the attached file, "The Hamm Massacre." There was a pilot who kept his cool under incredible circumstances and brought his crew home safely.

The American public fell in love with the beautiful and rugged B-17 Flying Fortress. It not only looked like an American four engine bomber should look, But it could take a licking and keep on ticking. It should be honored.

My best information regarding the first 8th Air Force Bomber to complete 25 combat missions follows:

B-24 Liberator *Hot Stuff*, 93rd Bombardment Group, completed its 25th combat mission on February 7, 1943

B-17F Flying Fortress, *Hell's Angels*, 303rd Bomb Group, completed its 25th combat mission on May 13, 1943

B-17F Flying Fortress *Memphis Belle*, 91st Bomb Group, completed its 25th combat mission on May 17, 1943

B-17F Flying Fortress *Delta Rebel No. 2*, 91st Bomb Group - From Ray Bowdens' wonderful book on named 91st Bomb Group B-17s:

“Considerable controversy has surrounded *Delta Rebel No. 2* ever since *Memphis Belle* was claimed as the first Fortress to complete 25 missions over Europe. There is some suggestion that after detailed study of the combat records of *Delta Rebel No. 2*, the plane may have completed its 25th sortie as early as 1st May, two weeks before *Memphis Belle* flew her well-publicised 25th mission. The evidence is contradictory however and there are other claims that the date was 15th May or 17th May. It was in any case a close run thing among several 91st aircraft and in the event it may well have been down to the film maker's preference for the nose art of *Memphis Belle* that decided which plane would be immortalised on film.”

THE HAMM MASSACRE

Written by Dan F. Bauer

Once they started operations, the Germans could not stop the Flying Fortresses of the 8th Air Force. However, that did not mean they couldn't suffer horrifying losses. On 4 March 1943, 71 Boeing B-17 Flying Fortresses from four bomb groups took off into a gray dawn to attempt the first deep penetration attack by the Eighth Air Force against targets in Germany.

The Fortress crews had been briefed to bomb the Hamm marshaling yards. The yards were located just outside of the Ruhr Valley and 160 miles inside the outer ring of German defenses. Heavy overcast and cloud formations forced two of the groups to turn south and bomb Rotterdam, a last resort target. The third group returned to its base with bomb loads intact. Above the “overcast,” 16 B-17Fs of the 91st Bomb Group flew alone to the target overcoming heavy flak and the attacks of an estimated 150 German fighters. Smoke partially obscured the target, but the objective was bombed in accordance with the briefed instructions.

Because of the determination and valor in attacking alone such a heavily defended target the 91st Bomb Group was awarded the first Presidential Citation to be given to a unit belonging to the Eighth Air Force. Some months later,

Target Germany, and official publication of the Eighth Air Force, stated that the Hamm mission, flown without fighter escort or supporting fire from other bomb groups, had convinced doubting officials in Washington DC. The prior belief had been that in a theater as strongly defended as the skies of Germany and in a climate where weather conditions provided so many obstacles, high altitude precision daylight bombing was unsound and would lead to large losses of air crews and planes. The successful bombing of Hamm gave a much-needed boost in morale to the promoters of the daylight bombing doctrine.

However, the strike against Hamm was not achieved without loss. Four Flying Fortresses failed to return and practically all the other B-17s making the attack suffered major damage. No mission of the Eighth Air Force, escorted or not, was ever beaten back by German flak or fighters. The attack against Hamm by the 91st Bomb Group is a part of that proud tradition. What follows is the story of the fateful and bloody mission that has become known among the members of the 91st as simply “The Hamm Massacre.”

At 3:45 am on 4 March 1943, Captain George Birdsong was awakened by Corporal Street. Street informed Birdsong that briefing would begin at 5:00am. Rubbing his eyes which Corporal Street's flashlight had temporarily blinded. Birdsong slowly struggled out of the warm bed to face the cold English morning. Birdsong stumbled over to the wash basin, turned on a small light, and doused his face with cold water. The shock of the cold water was just what Birdsong needed to get going. Gathering his clothes and combat gear together he dressed in cold silence.

Birdsong, a veteran pilot, attached a sheathed hunting knife just above his left ankle. He then strapped a holstered Colt .45 automatic pistol under his left arm. Making sure he had no personal articles in his pocket, Birdsong collected two plain handkerchiefs, an extra clip of ammunition, and checked to see if his dog tags were in place around his neck. Now completely dressed Birdsong left quietly into the black night.

Bob Abb, a bombardier, was waiting for Birdsong outside the front door. Using a diffused lens flashlight to check for landmarks and obstacles Abb and Birdsong wended their way along the blacked out route, crossing the soccer field in front of the officers' mess.

After finishing breakfast Birdsong hurried over to the group briefing room to get a report over to the group's status and to check on the crew. Gene Remmell, Birdsong's flight engineer, said the *Delta Rebel II* was ready to go, however, the radio operator, B. Z. Byrd, was down with the flu and wouldn't make the mission. Birdsong cursed softly under his breath, he hated crew substitutions.

Just before roll call, the assistant operations officer approached Birdsong with two strangers in tow. Birdsong was informed that his crew has been selected to give them newcomer “rides.” The two men were from one of the recently arrived bomb groups and would take the place of

the regular copilot, G. Joseph Reynolds, and the bombardier, Lt. Robert Abb. The two crew substitutions and the sickness of radio operator Byrd made Birdsong uneasy. Bomber crew integrity was essential, to be 100 percent combat ready, and any unnecessary crew substitution for experienced members was like playing Russian roulette. The new copilot informed Birdsong that he was a first pilot, and that how and his bombardier were fully trained and represented one of the best crews in their group. The copilot asked Birdsong how much time he had in B-17s and was impressed when Birdsong answered "twelve combat trips."

The conversation between Birdsong and his replacement copilot ended as the briefing began. There were loud gasps from the assembled crews when the target map was unveiled. The string led across the map to a target deep inside Germany, a city called Hamm. Hamm was adjacent to the Ruhr Valley, vast steel and arms producing industrial area, which hosted the most flak batteries in Germany. The railroad marshaling yards at Hamm was large and important as they carried eastbound traffic from Ruhr. Yard capacity was 10,000 cars in 24 hours as compared to a 3,000 car capacity of the medium size marshaling yards.

As Birdsong looked at the wall map he recalled the lines of a RAF song he has heard recently, "You can send me twice a day, to the Pas de Calais, but don't send me to the Ruhr, send me to Paris or a target in France. Any old place where I might have a chance..." "Today," thought Birdsong, "we are going to see why those lyrics were written." "Sunshine" Atwell, the 91st Group's weather officer, told the men that the weather would be passable for takeoff and assembly, but deteriorating over the English Channel, once across the Dutch coast the weather should improve. Target visibility should be excellent, briefed Atwell, as a large high-pressure center was over mid-Germany.

The intelligence officer briefed the men on what opposition they could expect. The aircrews heard a grim briefing indicating large concentrations of flak and fighters. Opposition would heavy; the Germans could be expected to react violently to any bomber coming over to Reich. When the briefing officer warned that over 200 enemy fighters could be encountered a sobering silence settled over the room.

There was never any attempt to belittle the adversary, or to pretend that the Germans were not good. The pilots and aircrews knew that they would face resourceful, determined, courageous Germans flying superb heavily armed fighters. On one occasion a misguided company back in America had put out an advertisement showing an insane-looking bomber pilot grinning cheerfully and demanding, "Who's afraid of the new Focke-Wulf?" A member of the 91st had pinned the advertisement on the group bulletin board with the laconic note underneath. "Sign here," the note said. Every combat officer in the Group signed; including the Group Commander, Colonel Stanley T. Wray.

After the briefing Birdsong took a jeep ride with the replacement copilot to the off base revetment area where the squadron aircraft were parked. Birdsong and the copilot got off the jeep when it reached the *Delta Rebel II*.

Soon the assistant ops officer jeeped by with a substitute radio operator and told Birdsong there was going to be a ground spare aircraft available. The spare B-17 was "Pappy" Rand's new *Stormy Weather* would be parked next to the control tower if needed.

Finally the "Start Engines" signal was received and the big, heavily loaded B-17s began to maneuver to the takeoff position, the morning air throbbing with the sound of the powerful Wright Cyclone engines.

Soon after takeoff the *Delta Rebel II* had a power failure in the number three engine. With a feathered engine Birdsong knew the *Rebel* would be unable to keep up with the group. He decided to land and transfer to the spare B-17 *Stormy Weather*.

Upon landing the ground crew was waiting, and helped the crew of the *Delta Rebel II* transfer gear and ammunition over to the spare plane. Soon *Stormy Weather* was airborne and flying at top speed to overtake the rest of the 91st Bomb Group. The 91st was leading the bomber formation, with the other three groups, the 303rd, 304th and the 306th following behind.

Birdsong spotted the rear group and using maximum power moved his new B-17 from group to group, and eventually fell into a "Tail-end Charlie" position with the 91st. Two of the original planes, which began the mission with the 91st, had aborted and Birdsong counted 16 planes, including *Stormy Weather* in the formation.

Birdsong could have flown back to the field after losing the engine in the *Delta Rebel II* and sat out the Hamm mission, but it was typical of him to transfer to another plane and continue on. Anybody with wings on his chest who shied away from flying sorties, misrepresented, and was a disgrace to the professional corps.

Hell, we were all scared, but pride, peer pressure, and maybe a little patriotism, kept the "regulars" going. Some figured they owed the government something for making it possible to get those wings and bars.

During the mission to Hamm, *Stormy Weather* would run a gauntlet of fighters and flak. That the plane and crew would survive the mission would be due to the teamwork, experience, luck and the leadership and flying skills of George Birdsong.

Bob Abb, who flew many missions with Birdsong while serving as the bombardier of the *Delta Rebel II* admired and respected his first pilot.

To describe George Birdsong is difficult. George was a typical of Mississippi. He had a drawl that made Texans think he was a foreigner. His home was in Clarksdale,

Mississippi, and he never let anyone forget it. His build was that of a halfback on a varsity ball team. His disposition was that of a St. Bernard: cool, wonderful, calm and happy. He was always happy and easy going. Once on a combat zone, he became methodical to perfection.

He was an excellent formation flier even though the *Rebel* was not one of the fastest planes in our squadron. George also excelled at "fire control" - he was an excellent spotter for incoming fighters and called them in nearly as often as the top turret or bombardier. He did his job superior to most and instilled confidence on the crew that was unbelievable. We all believed that we had a magic touch on that crew; that if only one plane ever came back, it would be ours.

For fun and games, George was first in line for the railroad station to London when time was available - then we all went first class by taking suites at the Savoy Hotel in London; ordering Mum's '29 Champagne in magnums and proceeding to have one whale of a time. He took his fun as he took his flying-- he gave it everything!

George came as close to being "fearless" as it was possible to in combat strain of those days. He imparted it to his crew and this pulled us out of many a tight spot. Getting this crew to abort for mechanical reasons was difficult. They took chances with badly operating engines on several occasions to be able to stay in the fray, but some of George's skill invasive action made up for any mechanical shortcomings we may have had.

Leading the 91st Bomb Group to Hamm was a 22 year old squadron commander named Paul Fishburne. Fishburne grew up in Montgomery, Alabama, and acquired the flying bug in life: Maxwell Field was in Montgomery. I knew when I was 13 or 14 what I wanted to do - I used to watch Captain Claire Chennault and his flying Trapeze practice in their Boeing P-12s at Maxwell. I tried to get to West Point or Annapolis but my old man voted the wrong way in a local election so I didn't get the chance. I couldn't get to the Academy so I waited tables in the boarding house in the summers and saved my money. I got through two years at Auburn and the applied for both the Army and Navy Flying Schools. The Army came through first and I graduated from flight school on 29 May 1941. I originally checked out in a B-18 Bolo, but when the war broke out we got checked out very quickly in B-17s. Fishburne was in the right seat if a B-17 named *Chief's Fly*.

He recalls his role as leader of the mission: At that time Squadron or Group Commanders didn't have their own plane - they always took a lead crew and ran things from there. I was in the copilot's seat. Mine was one of trying to control things, as well as driving the airplane. As the B-17s climbed the weather began to deteriorate. "We climbed through a whole bunch of overcast," recalled Fishburne. William Beasley flying the B-17 *Motise* felt the weather was terrible: At altitude we got into a mist - it was not thick enough for instrument conditions but you couldn't see more than a quarter of a mile. We could see our own group all right and we continued on our course.

As the 91st broke out of the mist at 22,000 feet they found they were crossing the German border. None of the other three groups were in sight. "We were supposed to stay roughly in contact," remembered Fishburne, "but we got separated in the weather and we had radio silence and I didn't know what the other three groups were doing." Two of the other groups discouraged by the soupy weather, had bombed the shipyards at Rotterdam, and one group returned to base with their bomb loads. As the 91st crossed the German border, Fishburne debated what to do. He had no idea of what had happened to the other three groups. All he could see were the 16 B-17s of the 91st Bomb Group heading unsupported into German territory.

Fishburne knew he had to make a decision to continue toward the target or not. Where in the hell were the other groups? Should we go on? The weather was getting better now. I asked tail gunner how many ships we had. "Sixteen, sir." Sixteen Forts - against best defenses Germany had to offer. Should I risk those 160 boys' lives to bomb Hamm? It was an important target, but the other groups had apparently gone to attack an alternate. Nothing would be said if I turned back.

We went on. The 91st continued on alone toward the target. The German fighter controllers apparently were confused by the various bomber trails for the first German fighter planes didn't appear until the B-17s were only a half hour from the objective. Neither the appearance of the Luftwaffe, nor a heavy flak barrage disrupted an excellent bomb run that planted the bombs of the 91st right on the rail yards.

Once the bombers turned for home the German defense system was well alerted and fighter opposition became intense. William Beasley flying *Motise* remembers the heavy fighter opposition as the bombers left Hamm behind: Apparently we had gotten into the jet stream and if I remember correctly we were making a ground speed of about 90 mph fighting against the jet stream. There was a time when my copilot was flying when I looked from my left on around to the right and was just counting fighter aircraft in groups of five or six and I counted in the neighborhood of 65 fighters. We had night fighters on us and every other kind of fighter the Germans had. I can remember a group of JU-88s pulling up ahead and turning into us head in and suddenly we could see streamers coming toward us apparently from some kind of rocket, but we avoided them through evasive action.

I lost two engines, which I assumed were knocked out by the fighter attacks, but when I got back I found out that both my inboard engines had been hit by .50 caliber shells from the tail gunner of the lead ship. We had been bobbing up and down through his gunfire. For over an hour as they withdrew from the target the B-17s of the 91st Group were subjected to relentless German fighter attacks pressed home with great daring. "The German fighters came in closer than I had ever seen 'em in the movies," observed Sergeant Arthur Cressman, a gunner. "I could almost have shaken hands with one of those fellows." Luckily the attacks were uncoordinated. Had the Germans coordinated their

attacks, as they learned to do later in the war, it is likely that all 16 of the B-17s who made the attack on Hamm would have been shot down.

Captain "Tex" McCrary was on board the B-17 *Invasion II*. McCrary's reason for being there was newsreel photography. His mission was to get good pictures of German fighter attacks. McCrary was standing quietly in the radio hatch when suddenly: The radio gunner landed against my back, knocking me through the passageway, down onto the curve top of the revolving ball turret. My foot caught in the turret gears. A little panicky, I tried to yank it loose. But looking at my hands, I saw blood washing down the rubber-matted floor and curling over my fingers. I had never seen so much blood before. I didn't know where it could have come from. It was strangely impersonal - just so much red paint.

And then I looked beyond my hands slowly. Crumpled on the floor was the radio gunner. The strong legged boy who had just snapped on my oxygen mask for me not ten seconds ago. I saw his face; it was twisted with pain. The red that was sogging my gloves and flying boots was burbling out of a wound in his back. A slug had crashed down through the bomb bay and struck him squarely. After the incident, McCrary would have little time for photography. He would spend the rest of his time manning the wounded operator's machine gun. McCrary would survive Hamm mission and co-author with David Sherman, a book dealing with the early days of the Eighth Air Force entitled, *First of Many*.

Stormy Weather, piloted by Birdsong, had taken hits from 20mm shells just before reaching the initial point of the bomb run. Birdsong had to feather his number three prop. "The fighters were attacking with determination loading on desperation," recalled Birdsong. "We had never been under such a siege. Some of the fighters seemed like mad dogs as they recklessly hurtled themselves at our formation. We took some flak fragments on the left side by the waist gunner." Birdsong had to take positive action on two occasions to avoid being rammed by German fighters. It also became difficult to maintain close formation because of the evasive action being taken by the individual B-17s.

The crews seemed to realize that the chance of returning home depended on using every trick possible. Suddenly Birdsong felt the plane shudder. "We were hit hard." A cannon shell fired from an FW-190, head on, pilot's side. Birdsong felt a sharp pain in his face and left eye: A quick glance over at the copilot, the left side of his face was laid open like it had been hit with an axe. I could see his skull. Never realized it was so white. The blood gushed spurting all over.

Number two engine was fast losing power and I tried to feather it, but no luck. Oil was spewing over the wing. Frantic call from the bombardier saying the navigator had a bad wound on the inside of the thigh. I realized I could not see out of my left eye. Fragments in my face and oxygen mask. Copilot was thrashing with arms and legs, and

slipped from his seat belt down out of his seat, jamming control column and rudder pedals. The copilot passed out and was a limp rag on the control column. Rimmell (flight engineer) came to the rescue, and managed to pull him free, and the RO helped get him back to the radio room.

Looking out the windshield, Birdsong found they were 400 yards behind the group. He put the two good engines on maximum power but still continued to drop back. Rimmell returned and tied a compress bandage on Birdsong's eye. Though seriously wounded Birdsong would do his best to bring *Stormy Weather* home. Up ahead Birdsong noticed two other straggling B-17s. "I wagged my wings for them to close in. They did, and we had ourselves a three-ship formation for mutual support. It was all we had, for the group was just tiny specks in front." The B-17 on Birdsong's right was *Stupn Takit* piloted by "Charlie" McCarthy and on the left was *Hell's Angels* piloted by "Happy" Felton of the 322nd Squadron. Both planes were shot up with engines out. Suddenly from McCarthy's 3 o'clock position an FW-190 came boring in, machine guns and cannon blazing. McCarthy's B-17 took hits all over and disappeared in one giant ball of fire. At almost the same instant Felton's B-17 took hits from a Me-110. Birdsong watched helplessly as "he just pulled right up and rolled right over, almost on top of us and went straight down, spinning slowly."

Birdsong took a quick appraisal of the nasty situation and figured there were at least 20 fighters, getting ready to attack. Realizing the odds were hopeless where they were Birdsong called the crew and said, "Hold on everybody we're going for the deck!" *Stormy Weather* was about 20,000 feet when Birdsong began to dive. He watched as the airspeed indicator went over 310 mph, the maximum speed the B-17 was supposed to be flown, finally at 350 mph, Birdsong eased back on the stick and leveled off a few feet above the ground. By flying at a low level the fighters were now hampered in their attacks. They could not roll in and dive away. The tail gunner reported to Birdsong that most of the fighters had followed the wild dive to the deck. With only two good engines the B-17's airspeed had dwindled to 115 mph. Fighting to survive Birdsong began to use desperation tactics. When the German fighters started any attacks from the ten o'clock sector, "I would turn directly into them, doing my damndest to ram their asses. On other attacks, I'd try to do something else unpredictable. Now they were the ones to blink, duck and dodge." *Stormy Weather* took more hits in the next 20 minutes but nothing vital.

As the North Sea came into view, there was just one German plane left flying parallel to Birdsong on the right, just out of gun range. The Me-110 skidded closer. Birdsong could see the pilot, as he pulled forward, "and he carefully gave us a good once over. Then he slowly waggled his wings, gave us a salute, and chandelled to the right back to land."

Finally alone, Birdsong dropped the B-17 down to just over the green waves of the North Sea and pointed the nose of the plane for home. As *Stormy Weather* skimmed over the

waves the radio operator, who had been attending to the wounded copilot, came back on the intercom and asked Birdsong what he wanted to do about the bombs? "Bombs? What Bombs?" thought Birdsong. It had been standard operating procedure for B. Z. Byrd, the radio operator, to notify the crew when the bombs left the bomb bay, but B. Z. was back in Bassingbourn with the flu. "Had the bombardier actuated the manual release, standard operating procedure after electrical release?"

After he came up to the cockpit, the bombardier notified Birdsong he had forgotten to actuate the manual release. "This was his first mission," recalled Birdsong, "and he was green as grass. I didn't blame him as much as the phony crew substitution system."

Birdsong and his crew now found themselves in, to say the least, an interesting position. Only two of *Stormy Weather's* engines were running, and they had been going full speed for over an hour. The bombs they were carrying were RDX bombs, which were very sensitive. You had to climb to at least 4,500 feet to drop them to be sure the plane wouldn't receive structural damage in case the bombs exploded. Standard bombs could be salvaged at a much lower altitude with little risk of detonation.

The control tower at Bassingbourn was expecting Birdsong as he neared the field. Setting up a straight approach, Birdsong dropped the landing gear and began letting down for the landing. We floated a bit down the runway before I could get *Stormy* to accept the ground, and got on the brakes lightly to get a feel for steering control. There was no feel! Pumped brakes, but both toe pedals, completely to the floor, meant no pressure; the main brakes were out! Tried emergency brakes but that system was also inoperative... (I had to) try a ground loop before we got off the end of the pavement.

Hang on! The end of the runway passed beneath us, and we cut through the perimeter fencing, rolled barb wires in large coils like it was a plate of spaghetti. We were really moving! Rolled across the main road, which bordered the station, bounced through a large ditch, and just squeezed through two telephone poles. Was careening across a Brussels sprout field when I saw a large haystack in front. Had to ground loop it now! We made the 180-degree turn in just a few seconds, and I quickly shut down both engines. As *Stormy Weather* ground looped to a halt amid Brussels sprouts, the number three engine blazed up as the air pressure had been holding the fire down. As the crew was evacuating, the wounded fire trucks came racing up and the fire-crews began spraying volumes of Foamite on the flames.

Later Birdsong looked over the damaged B-17. He found over 20 gaping holes made by the enemy cannon shells and hundreds of smaller holes made by shrapnel and bullets. "What an airplane!" he thought.

Invasion II with photographer Tex McCrary aboard had landed earlier. "The medics raced out to our bomber from

the ambulance," wrote McCrary. "Men swarmed inside. Our gunner was stretched out through the side entry, as gently as men who admire courage can lift a mortally wounded boy. He died a few minutes later. He never had a chance. His spine was severed."

Birdsong was rushed to the hospital. His eye was saved and he went on to finish his tour of 25 missions. He would fly combat missions again in Vietnam, logging 212 primarily in the A-1 Skyraider, a fighter-bomber used mostly for close air support. After the mission the gunners of the 91st would claim they destroyed 13 German fighters but the cost would be high with four bombers lost, one damaged beyond repair, and some damage to all the rest. There were 33 men reported missing, one dead, and five seriously wounded.

Although other missions and dangers would soon follow, the men of the 91st would never forget their first foray to the Ruhr. "A bunch of us used to kid each other," remembered Gene Remmell, the flight engineer of *Stormy Weather*, "when we were going to breakfast early in the morning before a mission. We used to say, 'Would you like some Hamm for breakfast?' And, of course, the answer was definitely a big 'Hell No!'"

There was talk of court-martialing Paul Fishburne because he had led the 91st alone to Hamm. "He was literally demoted after the mission," remembered Bill Beasley. Once the strike photos came back, however, talk of a court-martial for Fishburne ended. "My ass was saved by a news photographer aiming his cameras down through the bomb bays" claimed Fishburne. "We did lose all our photo ships and we couldn't prove anything except for this newsreel guy. He, fortunately, got the pictures which probably save me."

In April 1943, Paul Fishburne received the Distinguished Flying Cross for his leadership on the Hamm mission. The award was given to him by none other than the "Father of the RAF" - Lord Trenchard. The 91st would receive the Presidential Unit Citation for its courage in flying unescorted to Hamm. But the award was not made until 1947, reflecting perhaps command fears that if the heroics of such an action were overemphasized other formations of inadequate strength might attack rashly with disastrous results.

In May 1987, George Birdsong returned in the wartime home of the 91st Bomb Group, Air Station 121, Bassingbourn, England. He journeyed down to the end of a long runway with vivid memories of a day long ago, By the end of the field where *Stormy Weather* had come to a stop, Birdsong stood and gave a quiet inward chuckle, "funny to see it now," he thought, "the damn Brussels sprout are still here."

Sheet No.12 Entry 323rd Bombardment Sqd. Station 121 Month of March, 1943. Prepared by Capt. Alexander H. Bright

MERSEBURG RAID MEMORIES

Compilation of articles from the October 1987 and January 1987 *Ragged Irregular*



Paul Chryst

The November 2, 1944 raid on one of Germany's most fiercely defended synthetic oil refineries at Merseburg was another "Black Thursday" for the 91st Bomb Group of the 1st Air Division. This November 2, 1987 marks the 43rd Anniversary of that terrible day. Many who survived the running battle with the Luftwaffe and intense flak are beginning to write us their vividly remembered stories.

Research by Historian Hilary "Bud" Evers and personal diary documentation by others of our group reveals we lost thirteen B-17s, a third of the 37 launched on the mission by the 91st Bomb Group. Reports show we lost four B-17s to enemy fighters, two to accurate flak, six to unknown causes, and one that crash landed near Ipswich, England en route to Bassingbourn. (This was a 401st Bomb Squadron plane piloted by Lt. Buchkannon)

Overall, Eighth Air Force losses were 41 B-17s, and 11 "Little Friends". Luftwaffe losses were 208 fighters from an attacking force of an estimated 450 aircraft.

Memories remain clear to this day. Those who became POWs have reported accounts of comrades who were killed, or later died from injuries sustained, or unsuccessful parachute decent from disabled bombers.

The purpose of this is to accurately perpetuate the memory of those who did not return from their missions, and memorialize their bravery and supreme sacrifice.

The following is from Paul Chryst's personal diary:

"Awakened – 0500 hours; Briefing – 0630; Stations – 0800; Engines – 0830; Taxi – 0835; Takeoff – 0850; Lv. Base – 9,000 ft – 0950 with 401st Bomb Sq leading; ETR 1618 hrs. On oxygen for five hours for a total of 1150 nautical miles. Bomb load – 18 250lb GP which were dropped from 27,000 ft. Outside temperature -41 deg C.

The total Form 1 time was written at 825 hrs (LL-D Dog #42-102504)."

After interrogation, I wrote in my diary: "following Bombardier Briefing, I took serious Catholic Communion with Father Ragan and others while kneeling around the pot-bellied stove; then walked through the cold morning air to the equipment hut to get my flying clothes and four gun barrels for the Nose. Climbing and circling Bassingbourn in Deputy Lead position for an hour gave me time to reflect on the majestic vastness of the sky around us."

The steady droning of the engines on the long climb to cruising altitude almost put this Bombardier back to sleep. The bright morning sun warmed me and lifted my spirits to the point I felt a strong urge to write something. What could be more appropriate in such a sublime place than a prayer? Using an extra Navigator's log sheet, the words seemed to flow onto the paper with little effort. Approaching the coast of Holland, most of the writing was finished. But then disaster struck the formation.

A brand-new, shiny 401st B-17 ahead of us, flown by Lts. Askins and Archer, suddenly broke into flames, burning from the base of the top turret. (We later learned that a spark from a shorted electrical connection at the base of the turret ignited raw oxygen leaking from a loose transfer section tube.) With horror, I watched the crew bailout of the plane which was held in level flight by the courageous pilots. My diary reads: "all nine of the crew got out okay and they floated down near the German border; still on course to the target area."

Sgts. Roger Armstrong (Radio Operator), and Roy Loyless (Tail Gunner) were among the crewmembers who benefited from Askins' bail-out order to delay opening chutes until they fell clear of the formation. Bombardier Paul Collier and Navigator Tony Dellaporta joined the others on the ground and became POWs. My prayer was set aside as we approached and turned on the Initial Point.

The lead Bombardier made a long Path Finding Force run and we all dropped on his smoke marker at 100ft intervals, in train into the 10/10ths under-cast at 1243 hrs. The flak had stopped during the bomb run, but the 155mm guns fired at us just as we started a right turn away from the target area. *Jub Jub Bird*, flown by Lts. Chouinard, Nirckola and crew, received a direct hit amidship and blew up in sight of the whole formation. Its #2 engine disintegrated and the prop spun through the air like a toy. Angry flames ate their way back to the tail section, no chutes were seen to emerge from the *Jub Jub Bird's* flaming wreckage.

Then, it seemed as though all hell had broken loose as Tex and Kermit struggled to level our tossing Fortress. Walt, in the Top Turret, called out three enemy ME-163 fighters at 5 o'clock high. Bobby Pride, in the tail, called out 10 to 15 more fighters coming in at 6 o'clock level. The Luftwaffe bore through the entire formation, slipping into new positions vacated by the B-17s being shot down at random. These attacks lasted more than 20 minutes. Single Luftwaffe fighters, in curved lines, made daring passes at smoking bombers trying to "hold formation position." White puffs of smoke from exploding 20mm shells dotted the cold sky around us as our plane, No 504, held on miraculously. The evasive action we took while in formation felt like a grotesque ballet which would never end. The 323rd Sq, flying in the high position, sustained heavy losses.

We later learned at interrogation that Sgt. Joe Powers, Waist Gunner on Lt. Dick Gibson's plane, shot down an ME-109 which had positioned itself right over our tail, just before it could knock us out of the sky.

Flying the lead position did not allow us to look back at what was happening to the three squadrons we had left Bassingbourn with that morning. The radio stayed silent on both A and B channels for nearly 30 minutes. Our Navigator, Johnny Allen, found that an error was made on the course heading after the fighter attack on the lead ship. We broke the radio silence to advise Lead of the error, which they acknowledged, and corrected it from 330 deg back to 290 deg to avoid Hamburg and its guns. The Lead reported their magnetic compasses were knocked out and many of the remaining Forts were carrying seriously wounded aboard. God bless the P-51s who stayed with us all the way back to England..., "Home at last."

During the slow let-down en route to Bassingbourn the "Prayer of an American Airmen" was completed. How can I explain our survival that terrible day? Tribute must be paid to the sturdy Flying Fortress, the skillful pilots, accurate gunners, and the entire team of airmen who worked and prayed to survive to fly another day. Why were we spared? What happened to those who bailed out? That was my 26th mission, and I still had nine more to "sweat out." Perhaps writing that Prayer helped us all?

The intervening years since that fateful date and mission have uncovered some good news to the above. Periodically we learn of comrades who survived the dreaded POW camps and were finally released to return to their loved ones in the "land of round doorknobs." Charlie Hackstock, John Bunch, and Charles Hitchcock of the 322nds downed *Miss Slipstream* returned home OK. Many were not so lucky.

Bob Sponsel, one of the original Association members, lost most of his right arm on the mission and wound up as a POW. He praises and credits the German doctors

who perform the surgery on his mangled arm with saving his life. Bob made the first "return to Bassingbourn" trip in 1963 to dedicate the Silver Bowl the Association donated for the altar at the US Military Cemetery, Coton, near Cambridge, England.

The prayer I wrote appears in the issue at the request of those who heard it read by LtC. Peter W Brooks, Chaplain, USAF, as he presided over the Rededication Service held at the Bassingbourn Prop Memorial in May 1987.

Prayer of an American Airman

Dear God, listen while I begin my prayer to you. As I start, I do not find it difficult to express my thoughts. Phrases of truth, constructed in my mind, easily find their way through my heart and onto you.

Bless us, Lord and Savior, not only we men in this bomber; but every man up here in your cold blue backyard of clouds. We're climbing now; higher and higher to the sun – feeling more and more, your Holy presence.

Slowly, but steadily, we continue to approach enemy territory. Here we ask for safe guidance – as well as forgiveness. Please, dear God, help steer us through the flak-filled course in and out. Protect us in this vast sky en route and from the enemy fighters who lie in wait, like unto the tiger stalking his prey in the jungle.

Forgive us also, for what we are about to do; the spreading of death, horror, and destruction among a people – forced by crazed leaders to continue a war of bloodshed, hunger, disease, and continual strife.

God grant, through thy loving kindness and grace, that someday soon – we may all return to our homes and loved ones. Those who are single, to their girls and sweethearts; those of us who are married – to our wives, waiting in anxiety and impatience. Those who have neither, but yearn for the guardian love of a mother or a father. Those who have no parents or friends, but yearn, fight, and die for a Nation that will live forever for freedom, justice, and equality.

Some of us, it is true, may not be so fortunate to come back. But we who are still left to carry on the struggle, know that they have not died in vain – that their souls and spirits will shine brightly in the heavens at night – watching over us who remain to lead the struggle onwards toward final victory.

Humble and insignificant as we may appear now, high in this unfriendly sky above the crazy patch quilt of enemy soil below us, we do solemnly ask that Thou grant us the prayer of an American airman.

Amen.



Man-O-War

A Missing Air Crew Report completed after the raid recorded the weather and visibility when 1Lt. Leroy B Hare's *Man-O-War* was struck as being "9/10 under-cast at IP, 10/10 under-cast at target, cloud tops at approximately 13,000 ft" and location as "5110N-1214E."

TSgt. Maurice D Sherk and SSgt. Russell L Waggoner, 322 BS Crewman, witnessed *Man-O-War's* damaging from another plane and gave similar accounts of it. Waggoner's account follows:

"We were flying at approximately 27,500 ft altitude, when we were attacked about five minutes after "bombs away" by about 40 to 50 enemy fighters. Aircraft 42-38083 was hit in the trailing edge of the right wing and empennage. Fragments came off the wing and tail and the aircraft turned over on its side. It then fell back behind the formation. About 10 enemy fighters kept making attacks on subject aircraft. The ship then peeled off to the left, and remained behind the formation for about five minutes during which time some of the crew could have bailed out, however, I saw no one bail out or chutes open."

Eventually, Hare's stricken, struggling plane broke in half. The resulting casualties were buried in a cemetery at Gnetsch, Germany on 3 Nov 44, according to recalled subsequent conversations with 91st BGMA sources.



Miss Slipstream

John Bunch and Charles Hackstock, 91st BGMA members, provided personal accounts of the fall of *Miss Slipstream*. Hackstock was the Co-pilot, and Bunch the

Bombardier on 1Lt. Dale Brant's crew. Bunch closed his account with the statement, "Of course after 43 years details may be a bit inaccurate, but it's the best I can do at age 65."

Bunch says *Miss Slipstream* was hit by fighters attacking from the rear. He never saw any of them.

"Suddenly our two port engines were on fire," he writes. "I hung my headphones on the gun control handles after getting the "Bail Out" order from Dale, our pilot. My headphones suddenly just went up in the air and were suspended for a second or two before crashing to the cabin side."

"Gus, (Warren Gustafson, the Navigator) tried to get out through the escape hatch while still wearing his flak suit. I pulled him back in and tore off his flak suit. Then out he went and out I went."

"I delayed my jump as we had been instructed. When I finally pulled my ripcord I was probably only 2,000 feet up. I heard rifle fire and didn't know if it was directed at us or others trying to escape. On the ground I was reunited with our Engineer, John H Ludwig, who had a bad ankle sprain. Later Charles Hackstock, our Co-Pilot, ended up in the same POW camp I was in."

Charles Hackstock preceded his comments on his fall with, "It is so difficult to write anything as fact."

"We were flying No 8 position when hit by flak," he recalls. "Then the fighters took over and did their job. I believe we were the first plane to go down that day. In the film that was taken by the lead A/C, the first flash (appearing in the film), I believe was *Miss Slipstream* being hit by flak. I only saw that film once at the 1976 Colorado Springs 91st BGMA Reunion."

A copy of a "Mission Summary Report" submitted by Hackstock says, "There was none of the usual zig zag course to the target, none of the usual attempts to confuse the Luftwaffe fighter defense. Two groups of B-17s (91st and 457th BGs) had gone off course and were trailing the main bomber stream without escort, and as usual, this did not pass unnoticed by the Luftwaffe; in fact the largest force of enemy aircraft, some 200, concentrated on the 91st and 457th before the friendly escort could interfere,..."

Only three of *Miss Slipstream's* crew escape death or injury that day. They were Brunch, Hackstock, and, Hackstock believes, James Willy, one of the gunners.

A "Sgt. Smith" substituting for the regular Tail Gunner, George Grashoff, was flying on his 78th mission, Hackstock recalls. He adds with pride that all his six remaining crew members (some have died since the war) are members of the 91st BGMA - three joined this year.

An "Individual Casualty Questionnaire" filled by Hackstock after the war probably explains the death of *Miss Slipstream's* pilot, 1Lt. Dale Brant. Hackstock jumped just before Brant, after everyone else had left the ship which was hit five minutes after leaving the target. While making his freefall jump he noticed a parachute open above him and assumed, since he and Brant were the last to leave, it was Brant. When Hackstock landed he heard a considerable rifle fire.

Later, taken to the police at Weimar, he noticed flying boots with yellow, painted "K-8" on them and a bloodied B-10 Flying Jacket. Brant had "K-8" painted on his boots.

When Brant never appeared at any of the POW camps, Hackstock surmised that he had been shot by civilians despite a "hearsay" report that Brant had been seen later by a member of another crew in another POW camp.

Of the 18 men comprising the crews of *Man-O-War* and *Miss Slipstream* the following seven lost their lives on the 2 Nov 1944 Merseburg raid: Dale Brant, Pilot; Warren Gustafson, Navigator; Thomas F Harris, Top Turret; Floyd E Callen, Waist Gunner; and George F Hanson, Tail Gunner.

LL-A Sunkist Sue

Certainly the mettle of every 91ster who participated was tested during the 2 Nov 44 raid. Life member John J Ondrovic (401st) and his crew had their courage tested before and throughout the mission, flying LL-A, a "lemon" Fort.

Ondrovic writes LL-A, 44-6293, "was sluggish and had trouble maintaining position in formation. It was suspected there was some flaw in the plane."

Consequently, the ball turret was removed to improve its flying characteristics, and subsequently Ondrovic was approached and asked the fly the modified LL-A on 2 Nov 1944. After discussion with his crew they all agreed the fly her.

Ondrovic's "statement" on the "flying characteristics of LL-A minus the lower ball turret" written on 3 Nov 44 follows:

"Mission to Merseburg, Germany, 2 Nov 1944, flying the No 2 position in the second element of the lead squadron."

"The ship had four (4) new reconditioned engines."

"Assembly at 9,000', we climbed at 2200 RPM, 33"hg., 400'/min, cylinder head temperature at 180c. We started our climb over the Channel with settings at 2300 rpm, 35"hg. Reaching 15,000', we pulled 2300 RPM, 38"hg. This setting sufficed to 23,000', when we started to lag in formation. The #1 cylinder head temperature went up to 222 deg with cowl flaps opened about 3/4; the rest at 200 deg. All four engines were detonating, causing dark

smoke to flow from the engines. Mixture was auto-rich. We did not lean it out because of high cylinder head temperature. To stay with the formation we throttled back on #1 to 2300 rpm, 35"hg. (to keep cylinder head temperature at 220 deg) and boosted the rest to 2400 rpm, 41"hg. Cylinder head temperatures stayed at 220 deg on #2, 3, and 4 engines. Reaching 27,000, I tried cutting to 23-38 but it wasn't sufficient when the airspeed dropped to 140 mph. To regain 150 mph again, it was necessary to pull 2400 RPM on #2, 3, and 4 engines. When the formation flew straight and level at 27,000', 23-38 kept us in formation. Any slight deviation in air speed or level flight necessitated boosting rpm to 2400."

"Bombs went away alright, 23-38 was sufficient with a bomb load for evasive action. Shortly after the target, we were attacked by enemy fighters, coming in from 6 o'clock in the six ship waves for the initial attack. Then with the sun at 10 o'clock, we were attacked from 3 o'clock to 6 o'clock by pairs of FW-190s. Simultaneously, we were being attacked from 7 o'clock. After firing at our tail, the 190s would split "S" underneath our plane with their bellies up."

"FINAL CONCLUSION: In my opinion, removal of the ball turned for improvement of flying characteristics does not offset its value when attacked by enemy fighters."

Ondrovic's crew claimed five enemy fighters down during the Merseburg raid. Only Sgt. Ben Whittle received credit for his claim. Ondrovic proudly adds that all seven of his original crewmembers who survived 35 missions are now 91st BGMA Life Members – and all seven attended the 1986 Tampa Reunion.

He concluded that he believes LL-A was subsequently used as a weather ship.

An eye-straining study of historical microfilm files by 91st BGMA Historian Bud Evers has produced a list of crews and aircraft lost by the 91st on this mission.

The list contains the Sq number, pilot's name, and aircraft number. All the pilots held the rank of 1st Lt. unless indicated otherwise. The list follows:

401st (2)	Askins (44-6093) Chouinard (42-31883)
323rd (5)	Faris (43-37625) Harris (42-97234) Liekus (42-97563) Snow (42-97956) Rustand (42-97984)
322nd (6)	Capt. Hammer (42-98010) Burne (43-38202) Browne (43-38212) Hare (42-38083) Hamilton (44-6298) Brant (44-8208)

THE RAGGED IRREGULAR is published quarterly in January, April, July, and October. The purpose of the newsletter is to keep alive the Spirit of the 91st Bomb Group (H) and to maintain the fellowship of those who fought together in World War II from AF Station 121 in Bassingbourn, England from 1942-1945. Editor Gary Hall

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Folded Wings:

✪ **Steven J Perri 323rd Age 95**

August 13, 2017, West Caldwell, NJ



Reported by his wife Nancy
Steve was the Ball Turret Gunner on George Birdsong's *Delta Rebel* crew. In July 1943, the town of Long Branch, NJ welcomed him home with a hero's welcome. He received the Air Medal and Distinguished Flying Cross.

In later years, Steve became the 91st Bomb Group Memorial Association's historian and editor of the "Ragged Irregular".

Formerly married to Dorothy (née Bradley) who is deceased. He is survived by his wife, Nancy Perri; his son, James Perri; two daughters, Lynn (Frank) Payer, and Kim Barney; four grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.

✪ **Asay "Ace" B Johnson 324th Age 92**

September 1, 2017, Lake Havasu City, AZ



Reported by his daughter Mary Ann
Ace enlisted in the United States Army Air Force and was commissioned a Flight Officer and Navigator in the 91st Bomb Group. Shot down by flak over Berlin, he was a prisoner of war from February to April 1945.

Ace was on the 91st Bomb Group Memorial Association's Board of Directors for 18 years as Secretary and then Secretary / Treasurer.

Ace was preceded in death by his wife of 58 years, Gloria. He is survived by his daughter, Mary Ann Allen (Scott), and son Roger; three grandchildren; three great-grandchildren; and one great great-granddaughter.