



The Eighth Air Force in World War II

When I was 19 years old, I was living in a sixteen man quonset hut on a heavy bomber air base in the midlands of England called Grafton Underwood near Kettering. I was a crewman on a B-17 flying fortress. At about four in the morning a sergeant would come in the hut and awake me saying, "Be down at briefing at 4:40 AM; you are flying in the Ed Nicolai crew."

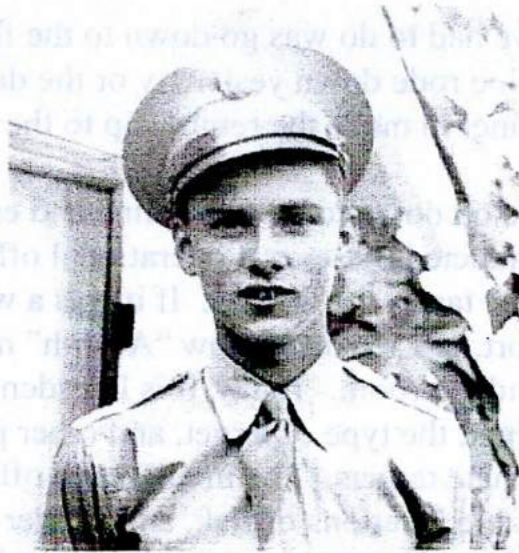
I would hurriedly dress, ride the little English bike down to the mess hall that we called "Tomaine Tavern" eat breakfast and then rush over to briefing. At briefing we were told the target for the day. If it was a location like Berlin, Hamburg, Leipsig, "a rough mission," you would hear a "moan" from the group of crewmen.

After briefing we put on our flying suits, picked up our parachutes and other equipment, and loaded on trucks that would take us out to the dispersed planes which were loaded with fuel and bombs. We then taxied out to the end of the runway and awaited our instruction to takeoff. Standing at the end of the runway was a minister, "Bro Billie," holding a Bible and praying for us as we roared down the runway and became airborne.

I am aware that very few people know what part the Eighth Air Force played in the defeat of Germany in World War II. The Eighth was the first armed force unit to attack Germany. They began these continuous attacks almost two years before D-Day. During these times, they destroyed factories, oil refineries, air fields and railyards. On these very dangerous missions, over 26,000 airmen were killed in action, and well over 20,000 became prisoners of war with untold thousands wounded. Too, there were over 6,000 planes lost in this deadly struggle.

Even on missions where 50 or more planes were lost, the Eighth never turned back. They never retreated. The average mission was about 10 hours long. We dressed in heavy wool suits and wore oxygen masks, flack suits and a heated-suit at an elevation of nearly 5 miles high and a temperature of down to 50 degrees below.

When I was flying in 1944 and 1945, we were required to fly 35 missions before we completed our tour and were allowed to return to the USA. Our crew consisted of nine members. Two of the crew were KIA and three others were slightly wounded. My pilot, Ed Nicolai and I, Eugene Spearman, flew back to the USA in May 1945, having completed our tour.



A Typical Mission

In 1944 and 1945, my parents were very concerned because their three boys were in combat in WWII. The eldest son of Creston Young and Claudine Hyde Spearman of Coffeetown, Mississippi, Creston Hyde, was in the South Pacific on Leyte and later Okinawa. The middle son, Dwight, was wounded just after D-Day in France, and the youngest was flying missions over Germany. I was the baby of the family, and my mother wrote so many letters, or V-mail, to me that I decided to write her describing a typical mission. I knew as soon as I finished the letter that it would never get by the censors, so I put it in my duffel bag, thinking that if the worst happened, she might still get to read the letter. I found the letter later. It was called:

A Typical Mission

The morning of February 15, 1945, started early for me when the sergeant shook the small bunk I was sleeping in and said, "Wake up, Spearman. You are flying today in Nicolai's crew in B-17, No. 242. Be down at briefing at 4:45." I, along with several other sleepy crewmen, struggled out of bed and hurriedly pulled on clothes. The place was Grafton Underwood, near Kettering, England, in the Midlands, home of the 544th bomb squadron, 384th bomb group, 2nd wing, 8th Air Force. Outside the small Quonset hut, I picked up the little English bike and pedaled down toward the mess hall, or chow hall. I had often wondered before on similar trips to the "Tomaine Tavern" (as the chow hall was known) just how many flight crewmen had owned the little bike I was riding. It was never necessary to buy a bike, nor did we have to wait any time after reaching the base before

acquiring one. All we had to do was go down to the flight line and pick up one that Bill, or Pete, or Joe rode down yesterday or the day before, but did not get back across the Channel to make the return trip to the Quonset huts.

After chow I rode on down to the flight line and entered the briefing room. Our briefing was conducted by several operational officers. First, the group commander told us the target for the day. If it was a well-known place like Berlin, Hamburg, Schweinfurt, or Liepzig, a low "Ah-h-h" mingled with a few moans usually echoed around the room. Today, it is Dresden. After giving us a description of the target, the type of target, and other pertinent data, he listed the first and second alternate targets. The intelligence officer then took charge and pointed out the probable locations of flak, and fighter concentration we would encounter. The weather officer told us the cloud conditions over the target, and the expected weather conditions at the base at our estimated time of arrival back to Grafton Underwood.

A navigational officer pointed out our route in, the time of the "Bombs Away," and the return route. With a wave of the hand and a "Good Luck, Boys," we would rush in and put on the heated suits, wobble out to the small jeeps that carried us to the dispersed planes. I always thought everyone else looked like stuffed toad frogs in those suits. After reaching the planes, I noted that for this particular mission, our plane, #242, was christened "Stardust." The fact that she had 29 small bombs painted on the fuselage did not impress me that she would make #30 roundtrip any easier. In fact, I shuddered to think what some German civilians would do to anyone who rode her down on German soil.

Our cargo consisted of several magnesium incendiary bombs and six 30-pound demolition-type bombs. In a few minutes we had pulled into the line of traffic of about 40 B-17's, awaiting our turn to pull on to the end of the runway. The roar of engines as they struggled to lift the heavy load of fuel and bombs was enough to awake all the residents of the Midlands. It was an impressive sight for this country boy.

Standing just beside the end of the runway, where we made that final check of instruments before releasing the brakes, stood a minister. I don't know what denomination he represented, but it was an inspiration to me to see him there. And then we were on our way.

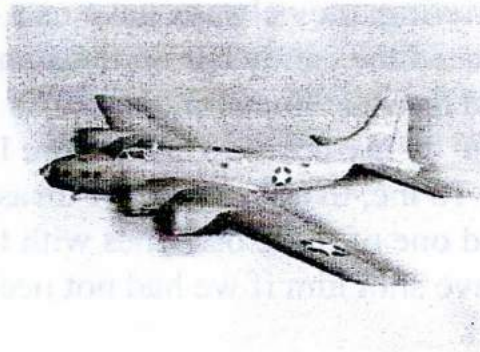
All whom I know who flew missions were superstitious. My superstition was

a candy bar. At the briefing, they always gave us a candy bar - Milky Way or Snickers. I always placed the candy bar on the small table in front of me and ate it just before we touched down at home on the return. On this particular mission, the ball turret gunner came by my position and before I could stop him, ate my candy bar just after takeoff. To me, that was a major disaster. It was as if all my luck had run out. He resembled one of these ostriches with that candy bar going down his throat, and I would have shot him if we had not needed the belly gun to protect our plane underneath.

It was a long flight in, with considerable flak, but few fighters sighted. A diversionary flight by B-24's up the North Sea toward Hamburg had caused Herr Goering to use up much precious fuel to try to keep the submarine pens at Bremen and Hamburg from being attacked, while some one thousand B-17's struck straight across Germany to Dresden.

The Germans used two types of flak. One pattern type is when they just shoot the 88MM guns into the air over the area they wish to protect. Another is the tracking flak where they use their radar to stay on the target as it moves above them. Oddly enough, the pattern flak was most effective. At the end of the 20th century, when they vote on the man of the century, I will cast my vote not for Einstein, Anderson, or Von Braun - but the man who invented this: Chaff! On a radar scope, it looked just like a B-17, and it saved a lot of country boys from having to get out and walk at 30,000 feet altitude.

It was a long flight back, but 11 hours after takeoff, we were back at the base. This mission was not one of the most important of the 8th Air Force, not was it our worst. It was just one of many that broke the back of the German nation, and it convinced the German people as well as their leaders that they lost the war due to the strategic air power of the Allies.



Mission to Bremen

First, I would like to say you should have been at Adrian and Robert's a couple of weeks ago. They had this young couple visiting them from Holland and I went by there to see them for a few minutes. Adrian gave me a cup of coffee and I became intoxicated and began telling true stories and just didn't know when to stop. Anyway, I really have wanted to talk about a "mission," so thanks for the opportunity.

I would like to take you back in time to when I, as a 19-year-old, found myself living in a small quonset hut with fifteen other young men in the Midlands of England. The hut had eight double bunk beds in it and I had an upper bunk. Some of the young men had flown almost all the required thirty-five missions and others had flown varied amounts. The location of the base was Grafton Underwood near Kettering, England; Home of the 384th BG and 544th Sqn. The larger town nearby was Northampton.

While picking cotton on my father's hill farm near Coffeerville, MS, a couple of years before, I was scolded by my father because I took so much time watching (from horizon to horizon) the young pilots flying the AT-6s as they flew from Columbus to Pine Bluff, Ark.

Just after completing high school, I went down to Greenwood and volunteered in the Cadet program. After basic at Keesler and being scratched from making the trip to Clemson and later to Penn State for more training, I was sent to radio school in Sioux Falls, S.D., and later to Gunnery school in Yuma, Ariz., then to Avon Park, FL, where I met the rest of the nine-man crew and took about six months of operational training. Later we picked up a new B-17 at Hunter Field, GA, and after bussing the bombardiers home at Staten Island, N.Y., we landed at Bangor, Me. Then we went on to Goose Bay, Labrador, and Iceland, and then to

Edinburg, Scotland, where we turned in the new B-17. We rode in trucks all night to Stone, England, near Birmingham, which was a distribution center. Later we were assigned to the base at Grafton Underwood.

About three or four o'clock in the morning, a sergeant would come into the little hut and wake the crewmen that were flying the mission that day. On March 30, 1945, after I had already flown twenty-three missions the sergeant woke me up and said, "Spearman, be down at briefing at 4:00am. You are flying in the Ed Nicolai crew." I got dressed and went outside and got on my little English bike and rode down to the mess hall. We called it Tomaine Tavern. I wondered how many other airmen had ridden this same little bike. You acquired the little bikes by going down to the flight line and getting one that some previous crewman left because he did not return from the trip over Germany. After breakfast we went to briefing where the flight commander would tell us the target for the day. If it was a rough target you would hear some aw's and groans. Today it was the submarine base at Bremen. Next the weather officer would tell us about the weather over the target as well as at the base when we returned. Then a navigation officers would talk about the route in and out of Germany.

Then with a "Good Luck Boys-Hit the Target" send off, we would file out, pick up equipment, parachutes, etc., and ride trucks out to the dispersed planes. Dressed in the heavy flight suits, I always thought everyone looked like stuffed toad frogs.

We then taxied out to the end of the runway and awaited our signal for take-off. Standing just outside the plane during most of my missions even in rain or snow stood a man, Bro. Billy, holding a Bible. His being there was such a blessing for me. Just knowing that someone was praying for me made me feel better.

And then we roared down the runway and into the air. The 384th history log showed the mission to Bremen was the 300th mission that was flown by the 384TH BG. There were 39 aircraft from Grafton Underwood and the total bomb load of 500-lb bombs was 105 tons. The elevation at target was 26,000 ft and bombing was by PF. Flak was moderate and accurate. We were in the left hand wing position and made a left-hand turn off the target and were struck by flak shortly after releasing our bombs. Pilot was slightly injured when cockpit plexiglas and copilot controls were hit. Waist gunner was hit by flak in upper chest but saved by flak suit. Tail gunner was KIA when flak hit the tail section. Two engines were

knocked out and plane left formation and dove into some clouds and came out "on the deck." Landed at Eye with some 200 holes in plane. Plane was called "Snuffy," and was S.N. 42-32106. We were crew #143. This plane, which I thought would have been scrapped due to flight damage, was later repaired and returned to service.

The pilot, Ed Nicolai, and I flew back to the USA after the tour of missions (34) was completed. I invite you to view on your computer 384thbombgroup.com for "the rest of the story."



Mission to Plauen

Our 18th mission was to Plauen, Germany. We had flown most of our missions all together with the same crew that we trained with in Avon Park, Florida. Our bombardier, Walter Robitzki, was chosen on this 18th mission to fly with the lead crew and we were given another crewman to be the one to act as targalier and drop the bombs from our plane.

In early 1945, we didn't have as many German fighters to worry about, but we did have plenty of flak shot at us. Walter's lead plane was also carrying hot cameras, so they were expected to leave the formation and get back to England with the bomb damage photographs as soon as possible.

After we dropped our bombs, we stayed with the formation and started returning to our base at Grafton Underwood, home of the 384th BG. Our engineer gunner, Joe Clemis, who lives in Spartanburg, SC, kept a private log of each mission and this is what he said: "No fighter opposition. Rocket almost hit our ship. The force from the explosion rocked our ship. Mission was 10½ hours, 5 hours on oxygen. Weather real bad over base, but visual over target. Saw Paris and Eiffel tower, also Brussels as we descended to a lower elevation." Our bombardier, Walter Robitzki, and crew were listed as missing and later declared killed in action.

I had tried for years to find out what had happened but was unsuccessful. In talks with my pilot, copilot, and others in the crew, no one knew any more than I did. They just didn't return. In 1993, when we dedicated the Heritage Museum, I asked a lady employee there if she knew or could help me find out anything about Walter's MIA status. This employee was Mrs. Phyllis Dubois from Alysham, Norwich, England. She promised to try and find some information and write me. Later, she sent me a casualty report that showed that the B-17, No. 4448808, was sighted over Ostende, Belgium, at 11,000 feet at 1655 hours with no apparent damage. In June 2002, while looking at a webpage on my computer, I noticed an

entry asking if anyone had any information about a crew that was MIA on a mission on 3-19-45. I answered the inquiry thinking that it might be someone who knew something about Walter. I was amazed and tremendously pleased to find that it was Walter's nephew.

Needless to say, we have shared pictures, stories, and just chatted back and forth by e-mail and letters, and still have lots of catching up to do on events that happened on 3-19-45. I just wish that Walter's mother was still living so I could chat with her.



Our New Home at Grafton Underwood

Just after we moved into the little Quonset hut as a replacement crew for the 384th BG and 544 BS at Grafton Underwood, an engineer gunner who had flown almost all of his required missions, told me about his crew being shot down on a previous mission. He said they had been hit by flak and crash landed in Belgium. His pilot made a wheels-up landing and as the plane skidded for several hundred yards, finally stopped in a large greenhouse or nursery. The large greenhouse with the glass roof was completely destroyed.

An elderly lady suddenly appeared, waving her arms and yelling loudly. She said the Germans had gone in a western direction and that her greenhouse had survived. The Germans had gone in an eastern direction and her greenhouse had survived. Then the allies went in an eastern direction and her greenhouse survived. Then an American bird came along and completely destroyed her greenhouse.

If an air crewman completed his required missions (35 missions while I was flying), it was standard practice for the other crew members and friends at debriefing to celebrate his good fortune by giving him our individual little glass or shot of cognac. We celebrated with one of my friends, who according to his records, had flown the required 35th mission, only to find the next morning that they awoke him and told him that their records showed he had flown only 34 missions. He was asked to fly the mission, but he refused. He was immediately charged with being AWOL and placed in the brig. Later I would see him picking up garbage around the base. I never did know just who made the error in counting the number of missions he had really flown.

One city we visited when we could get leave time was Northampton. The

large double-decker English buses made a scheduled run from Grafton-Underwood to Northampton. The last bus to leave Northampton was at midnight for the base at Grafton-Underwood. One weekend, I went on leave to Northampton and for some reason missed the last bus to depart for Grafton-Underwood. I knew that if I wasn't in my bunk and available to fly my mission at the wake-up hour of about 4 a.m., I would be declared AWOL and would be put in the brig. I immediately checked the remaining buses and asked if any were going near the base at Grafton-Underwood. One driver informed me he was going within about five miles, so I told him to let me off on the road at that point and I would attempt to walk the remaining distance and try to get there before wake-up time.

He finally stopped and told me that was where I should get off the buss. I got off at a dark, dark, cold and damp location and started walking in the direction he had pointed. After I had walked for what seemed like a long time, I suddenly saw a small light coming in my direction. I realized that I was completely lost and decided that I would have to ask whoever was coming in my direction which was the way to Grafton-Underwood. It turned out that the small light was on a bicycle. When the bicycle approached, I decided to tackle the rider and ask the rider for instructions on how to get to the base. My football-type tackle of the bicycle was successful, for it turned out the rider was an elderly, small, and scared-almost-to-death Englishman. I was able to hold him in my grasp long enough to tell him that all I wanted to know was which way is it to Grafton-Underwood. When I turned him loose, he left in a hurry, and I resumed my walk toward the air base. Fortunately, I made it back to the base in time to fly the next morning. I'm convinced that there was one elderly English bicycle rider on a dark, lonely road that night that wishes he had been somewhere else at that time in history.



Crew 56

The four giant engines roared as we raced down the runway. This runway ended at the very edge of the lake. It was September 1944 and crew 56 was taking off on their first flight since they had banded together as a crew in Avon Park, Florida. Lt. Edwin Nicolai was the pilot and Lt. Ross was the copilot. All knew that we had four or five months of operational training to complete before we would be send into combat. During that four months we made practice bombing runs, checking the skills of our bombardier, Lt Robitzki, as well as cross-country missions testing the skills of our navigator, F/O Gilbert Parker. Also, practice missions were made where the accuracy of the gunnery crew could be checked. Under the leadership of our pilot, we were inspired to do our jobs so that the missions would be successful.

In January of 1945, we arrived at Hunter Field, Georgia, where we were given a new B-17. We flew from there to Dow Field, Maine, after buzzing the home of Lt. Robitzi on Staten Island; then on to Goose Bay, Labrador. There the snow was so deep that we had only a few inches of light above the top of the outside windows. Canadian ski troops dressed in white operated around the air base.

After a few days we took off on the snow-cleared runway, only to have a wing tip hit the snow bank on the edge of the runway. We made it into the air, but had to land again to check for structural damage. After a couple of days we again took off and headed to Rekyavick, Iceland. There I was assigned guard duty on the cold, damp, rocky side of the airport near the ocean, to guard our plane. There were no trees or grass anywhere in sight. Next we flew on to Edinberg, Scotland,

where we left our new B-17 and took trunks on a long, cold ride down to a distribution center near Birmingham, England, called Stone, England. After a few days we were assigned to the 384th bomb group and 544th squadron base 106, at Kettering, England near Northampton in the Midlands.

We enlisted men were assigned to a little quonset hut where other crewmen were assigned. Some of the other crewmen in the hut had flown from one to 34 missions and had plenty of stories to tell about different targets in Germany that they had bombed and about flak and fighter planes they had faced in bombing the target.

Our trips to the flight line and mess hall were made on little English bikes. These we acquired by going down to the flight line and getting one that a previous crew member who failed to make the return flight from over Germany had left.

One crewmember near my bunk was superstitious and wore the same socks on every mission. Another also wore the same overalls. Another insisted he had completed his required 35 missions, but operations personnel records showed he had only completed 34, so when he refused to fly the next mission, he was put on AWOL, and was assigned to garbage detail at the base.

It seemed like the weather was always rainy and cloudy. This made the take off and getting into formation a real challenge. On our first attempt we were unsuccessful and had to abort the mission and drop our bombs in the North Sea.

By early February the missions came real often. Early in the morning, an operational sergeant would come into the little quonset hut and say, "Wake up, Spearman, you are flying in the Nicolai crew today. Be down at briefing at 4:00 am." After the mission, we would be debriefed. There we were given a small glass of cognac to unwind and asked to tell about any unusual event we saw on the mission, such as enemy fighters, V2 rockets, B-17s falling, etc.

One thing that I was thankful for was that a minister or priest stood holding a Bible beside the runway just before we released the brakes and raced down the runway on every mission, rain or shine. On every mission there was flak, but as the missions added up, the sighting of enemy fighters seemed to decrease. Fighter escort by the P-51's and P-47's was always a welcome sight, but one friendly P-51 just got real close and slid almost into the space between the right wing and tail to wave at me. I was glad to see him move out a few feet. Most of the flak were dark puffs in the sky and especially over the target, but occasionally the white tracking flak would start closing in on us. This would cause the tail gunner or ball-turret gunner to yell for me to throw out more chaff. Chaff was a bundle of little eight-inch aluminum strips that looked like more B-17s on the German radar.

The ball-turret gunner, Pete Bongiorno, credited this chaff for saving my life over Dresden once. Most of the missions we received flak holes somewhere in the plane, but until the 3-19-45 mission to Plauen, our crew remained safe. On this mission, Lt. Robitzki, our bombardier, was asked to fly with the Lt. Kramer crew as lead bombardier. (Lt. Kramer's plane was sighted over Belgium at about 11,000 ft. headed back to England after the mission. His plane never did get back to the base, and is presumed to have gone down in the English Channel.) On our 25th mission on an attack on the submarine pens at Bremen, the flak seem to zero in on our plane, No. 42-32106. First one engine went out and then another. Flak hit the cockpit and slightly wounded the pilot and shattered the plexiglass windshield. It would have wounded the copilot if he hadn't just relinquished control of the plane. Flak struck the tail of the B-17 killing Sgt. Bill Pleeler, and knocked the waist gunner down and backward. Some two hundred holes were counted in the plane. One unexploded shell went through the left wing just outside my station. The fabric was ripped off the trailing edge of the left wing. Later the waist gunner and I found the little piece of shrapnel that hit his flak vest on his right shoulder. Even though it was real small, Charles Whitworth kept it as a good luck symbol.

With two engines out, and losing altitude, our condition was extremely critical. Some of the control cables had been severed. Some thoughts were given of going to Sweden or Switzerland, but finally "Nick" dove the plane into some clouds and headed back toward England at an extremely low altitude. Since I grew up on a farm in Mississippi, I could relate to what I saw just below the crippled B-17. There was a farmer plowing two horses single file just below us and the plane had caused his horses to "run away" [made him lose control of them]. Except for the skill shown by the pilot and navigator during this mission, and the durability of the plane, we would have crashed. I had witnessed other planes firing the red flares on the return to the air base, but this time we were the ones firing the red flares to

indicate killed in action or wounded on board.

On one of our missions we were to bomb an airbase in Germany at a lower than usual altitude, around 19,000 ft. Since they, at briefing, had told us there was to be no flak, I decided to remove my flak suit and stand up and watch the bombs fall on the target. Just as we released the bombs, several big black clouds of flak appeared and shook the plane. I immediately sat back down and put the flak suit on, resolving to not believe those briefing officers again.

I, along with the pilot and copilot, always wore a black parachute. The rest of the crew wore a front chute that snapped on when you got ready to jump out of the plane. After the morning briefing, you always were asked to pick up your parachute as you went out to the plane. On my last mission, when I was asked which chute I wanted, I requested my back chute and asked for and was given a front chute also. I really wanted to be prepared on that last mission.

After the morning briefing, we were given a chance to pick up a candy bar. I always chose a Milky Way candy bar and placed it on my radio table to eat only after the wheels touched down on the return to home base. On one mission just after we took off, the ball turret gunner, Pete Bongiorno, came by my station and before I could stop him, ate my candy bar. This was a major disaster to me, and I was afraid my luck had run out. I sure was glad when that mission was over.

After my missions, the pilot "Nick" and I were given orders to fly back to the States. After we had flown about eight hours, and while others on the flight back home were up near the cockpit, leaving me alone in the radio room, the plane suddenly dropped violently and bounced me all around the radio room. My thoughts were that I had survived all those missions and now I would be killed returning home. Then the plane settled down and I made my way up to the cockpit, where they were laughing and celebrating because they had sighted the good ole USA.

Two of the original crew 56 members had made the round trip.*

Edwin Nicolai Pilot

Eugene Spearman Radio Operator

*

Other members of the original crew came back to States later in 1945.

Original Crew 9-44

Edwin Nicolai P
Robert (Bob) Ross CP
Gilbert Parker N
Walter Robitzki B
Bill Lafink EG (d. 2005)
Eugene Spearman RO
Charles Whitworth WG
Peter Bongiorno BTG
William Peeler TG

Crew in 1945

Edwin Nicolai
Robert (Bob) Ross
Gilbert Parker
Walter Robitzki MIA
Joe Clemis
Eugene Spearman
Charles Whitworth
Peter Bongiorno
William Peeler KIA

Status in 12-2005

Died in 1994
Died in 2005
Died in 1-06
MIA in 1945
Living in S. C.
Living in Miss.
Died in 1983
Died in 1980
Killed in Action
1945