SILVER WINGS AND THE EIGHTH AIR FORCE

By

Lt. Col. Wallace Storey, USAF (Ret.) and Mrs. Martha L Storey

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8th Air Force/Grafton Underwood, England

Battle of the Bulge,December 16 to January 22, 1945

After the American and British Armies had crossed France, bad winter weather developed over the continent, some of the worst weather of the century. The Germans determined to make one grand effort to split the American and British forces and to, hopefully, win the war. I recounted earlier about the Battle of France when the Germans attacked through the Ardennes and surprised the French and British Armies. Surprisingly, the Germans planned the same thing in the winter of 1944. The Americans had left the Ardennes very lightly defended with only about four Divisions there. They were using this as a rest area for troops who had just been removed from combat. The English were north of there under Montgomery and the American 3rd Army under Patton was south of there. So the Germans decided to launch a maximum effort between the two Armies through the Ardennes. The Ardennes, in southeastern Belgium and part of Luxemburg, is very hilly country with deep ravines and heavily wooded. The highest mountain in Belgium, slightly over 2000 feet, is in this area. The Allies, mistakenly, thought that it was unlikely for the Germans to attack through that area, especially with the heavy snow on the ground, and repeated the 1940 French mistake.

On December 16th the Germans launched their massive surprise attack. They waited until the weather was bad so that the American 8th and 9th Air Forces couldn't intercede and then attacked with forty Divisions, many of which were Armored. They also used over 600 fighters, the most that they had used since shortly after D-Day during the Battle of France. The German plan was to attack through the Ardennes towards Brussels, which was about 120 miles away. Then from Brussels, where there were large aviation fuel storage depots, they would sweep to the sea at Antwerp, cutting the Armies in two. They would also, by capturing Antwerp, cut off the supply of the American and British Armies from that port, which was the major port being used. Prior to the British capture of Antwerp, everything had to be brought all the way across France by trucks. This was called the "Red Ball Express" and was a major logistics operation. One reason that the Allied advance had stalled in December, in addition to the weather, was these long supply lines being incapable of supporting the troops. By splitting the Armies and recapturing Antwerp, the Germans hoped to regain everything they had lost.

Once the Allied Generals realized what was happening, starting about the 20th of December, we were awakened each morning and briefed to be dispatched

in support of the ground Armies. We would go to the planes and be ready to take off but the weather was right down on the ground and there was no possibility of the 8th Air Force leaving England. The weather was also bad over the continent and the Germans were making tremendous headway because the 9th Air Force planes, based on the continent, which were close ground support planes, were not able to fly either. Each morning we went to the planes and the mission would be scrubbed.

Mission #29, Kirch Gons, Germany, December 24, 1944

Finally, on December 24th, General Doolittle, in his Field Order, advised the 8th Air Force that the situation was so bad (the Germans were only sixty miles from Brussels) that the 8th Air Force would be launched no matter what. If they weren't able to get back to England, planes would have to land wherever it was possible on the continent. We were told at briefing that we should carry extra blankets, K rations, and be prepared to do whatever was necessary because the situation was that critical.

I might comment a little about the Battle of the Bulge. Many people don't know much about it and it doesn't receive a great deal of publicity, and yet this was the greatest battle in which the Americans have ever been involved in any war. There were 1,200,000 US ground troops and airmen involved in this battle. There were three times as many as were on both sides at Gettysburg. The losses during the Battle of the Bulge, on the ground and in the air, were over 50,000 casualties. To give some comparison and scope to this, the Normandy invasion involved far less troops and only 4900 casualties. So there were ten times as many casualties during the Battle of the Bulge as on D-Day in Normandy. Of course, the Normandy invasion was a critical turning point because nothing else on the ground would have been possible if the landing had not been successful.

Our target for the 384th BG on Christmas Eve 1944 was a German Luftwaffe air field at Kirch Gons, Germany. The German Air Force had been doing such damage that the 8th Air Force was diverted from strategic operations and was directed against air fields, bridges, marshalling yards, and other targets that would stop the Germans from being able to reinforce their troops or use their air power. Many of these targets were small and difficult to hit, but every effort was to be made to stop the German advance.

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We were in our planes early but the weather was so miserable that they delayed take off, so it was about 1000 before we finally took off and even then, as I taxied out to the runway, the only thing I could see was the tail of the plane in front of me. Visibility wasn't more than fifty feet as we taxied so we proceeded very slowly and cautiously. At the runway, it seemed that I could not see more than ten yards. We took off normally in thirty second intervals, so as each plane left, since you couldn't see signals, you would time yourself and then take off. We had to take off on instruments that day because of the poor visibility. What I did was to accelerate the plane watching the edge of the runway, which I could see in some places ten feet and some places seventy-five feet, to try to keep myself lined up with the runway as we barreled along at 80 to 90 miles an hour until we reached take off speed, while Sweeney stayed on instruments. In the event that I lost sight of the runway and he had to take over, he would be acclimated to instrument flight. It took a few seconds to change from visual to instrument flying, which was a few seconds too many in critical conditions. I was able to keep the edge of the runway in sight as we gained speed and we lifted off safely into the soup at about 1020. All the planes in our Group managed to get airborne except one ship. He didn't climb fast enough as he took off in instrument conditions and he clipped a telephone pole and crash landed beyond the village of Grafton Underwood.

Other Groups weren't so lucky. After we were airborne we climbed straight ahead until we came out through the top of the overcast. When we came out there were planes on all sides of us and in front and back. But everybody was keeping a straight course, so, hopefully, you wouldn't have a collision. But we saw four or five columns of smoke coming up through the overcast from other Groups where planes had apparently collided or were not able to get airborne. The weather above the undercast wasn't too bad so our Group assembled satisfactorily about 1200 hours at 10,000 feet. Our Wing assembly was good and we departed the English coast about two minutes late over Clacton at 1153 at 10,000 feet.

We crossed the Belgian coast about 1230 at 16,000 feet. As we approached the target over Belgium, the weather cleared. It was absolutely clear and was the most beautiful day you ever saw. Everything was white because of the heavy snow which, of course, made it very difficult for the troops on the ground, but it was a beautiful Christmas Eve sight from the air. My college roommate, Frank Mahon, was in the Engineer Corps and was behind the front lines on this day. He told me later that he had never seen such a sight as the contrails of the 8th Air Force as they

came over the front lines. The bomber stream, as we called it, one Group behind the other, was so long that the first Bomb Groups were turning away from their target and heading back to England while the last Bomb Groups were still taking off and assembling. . In a book about the Battle of the Bulge, "To Win the Winter Sky", the chapter on December 24th is entitled "The War's Most Beautiful Morning". I am sure that is the way it looked to those troops on the ground. I could well imagine the joy of the ground troops who had been fighting bravely to hold their ground at seeing such tremendous air power coming to their aid. One of the great feats of arms was the dogged defense of Bastogne by the US Airborne troops and their refusal to surrender even when surrounded

We were bombing with 100 pound bombs being dropped on intervals of about 100 feet so they would be gradually released. We bombed from 22,000 feet at 1430 hours that day. We had been briefed for a sharp left diving turn off the target after our bomb run. However, just as we began to drop bombs, another Group from the 1st Division was on a collision course with us at about 60 degrees. So the Group leader had to make a sharper turn sooner than he had expected. I was leading the low six ship element so as he turned I had to slide under him as otherwise I would have stalled my wingmen if I had stayed inside his turn. I, therefore, slid under the lead ship. You can imagine this; I am the lead ship of two three ship elements and I slide up right under the lead ship and his two wingmen. The bombs were coming down on each side of me from his wingmen and just in front of my nose from him. You can understand the terrible feeling that we had here as you had little means of slowing the plane down and had to try to stay in perfect formation without over running him as the bombs would fall on you and your wingmen. Unfortunately, I was slowly speeding up and overtaking the lead Squadron above me. I yelled to the Co-pilot to open the cowl flaps and I hoped that would slow us down enough to hold our position. I told him to be ready to partly drop the landing gear to give us additional drag, but, luckily, the cowl flaps slowed us enough to prevent over run. Fortunately, my two wingmen were able to stay in position off my wing and slightly behind the wingmen of the lead ship, so all nine planes were glued together in a tight turn with bombs falling from each ship. I would like to have a motion picture of that as it would be a fascinating film. If all had not flown perfect formation we would have had a disaster with some of the planes being hit by the falling bombs.

Flak over Target
Magdeburg, Germany, 1944

Similar to B-17 that Landed Behind
Storey At Spitfire Field (Bad Weather)

Part of #678 Crew Goes Home to USA, 1/45
Brickner, Tod, Nelson, Stone, Hassard, and Sweeney

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As I said, the Germans had also launched the greatest number of fighters that they were still capable of putting in the air. By this time, they didn't have the fuel because we had been bombing the oil refineries, so they stockpiled all the fuel for this maximum effort of 900 planes. We saw several Jet fighters, both on our way in and our way out, but, fortunately, they were attacking other Groups and not the 384th. A large percentage of the German fighters were also being used in tactical ways against the ground forces.

The weather was still bad when we got back to England and we had four of our aircraft that were unable to land at Grafton Underwood when they got back. But I was able to get down satisfactorily so we were "home" for that Christmas Eve night. There were 2046 four engine bombers launched by the 8th Air Force that December 24th. This was the greatest number of four engine bombers launched during the war and will be the greatest number ever launched in history, because air forces are no longer the size they were and technology is now different. One mission by one plane is called a sortie. On that day, when you put together the 8th Air Force, the British 2nd Tactical Air Force, the RAF Bomber Command, and the US 9th Air Force, there were 5,555 sorties flown. That was the largest number of sorties flown at one time in World War II.

Years later, in the book "To Win the Winter Sky", about the air war over the Ardennes, the appendix lists attacks on the German airfields by the Allied Air Forces. It is interesting that, on December 24th, there were thirteen German airfields attacked, eleven of them by the 8th Air Force. They list the number of tons that were dropped on each field and the number of days the field was unserviceable. This ran anywhere from three days to little effect, but the field where most damage was done was Kirch Gons, which was bombed by the 384th. It was out of action for thirteen days for the Luftwaffe. The 8th must have had a major contribution on the outcome of the Battle of the Bulge. This book about the "Winter Sky" is one that I highly recommend to anyone interested in the details of the Battle of the Bulge.

Mission #30, Altenahr, Germany, December 27, 1944

Our mission today was to attack a German railroad bridge near Altenahr. We departed the English coast at 1030 hours at 15,000 feet and flew without incident to the Belgian coast, crossing at three miles north of Ostend, at 1054. I

was leading the high element of the lead Squadron. At the IP, the deputy lead aircraft took over for G-H bombing and led the Group on the bomb run. We expected G-H bombing but with the possibility of a visual drop due to broken clouds. As we approached the bridge, the bombardier wasn't able to pick it up, so we made a 360 degree turn off the target for a second run. The Flak was extremely accurate and I watched it popping just ahead of the lead ship. It seemed that any minute they would correct their aim and hit him. I thought it was just a matter of time, but, luckily, he was leading a charmed life and didn't get hit. When we got back Nelson told me that they were tracking us just as accurately from his view in the nose.

We were unable to locate the target since it was a small bridge, so the Group leader decided not to start a third bomb run and we proceeded to our secondary target. The weather there was what we called CAVU, ceiling and visibility unlimited, so we were able to make a visual bomb run from an altitude of 25,000 feet and very accurately hit the marshalling yards at Coblenz, putting the railroad out of action for quite some time. On this bomb run, Lieutenant Nelson, flying ship #083 had a direct Flak hit right behind the ball turret. This severed the tail of the plane and he went down. However, three parachutes were seen to emerge from the plane as it fell.

On this mission, all of my crew except Brickner, Sweeney and I, completed their thirty-five mission tour. So Hassard, Nelson, Hepner, Stone, Tod and Carson would soon be leaving to head back to the States. Of course, this meant that I would have seven different people flying with me on my last missions. Some people, who were superstitious, considered it unlucky to have to fly with a new or different crew. However, Brick and I decided we would do our best to train them right and we hoped they would be as competent as our veteran crew that was departing.

Mission #31, Linburg, Germany, December 30, 1944

On this mission with new crew members, I flew as the deputy lead on Captain Laboda's wing, in the high Squadron, with Potter as navigator and Kell as bombardier. I flew plane #678 as usual. Captain Laboda was the pilot of the crew that Jim Sweeney was on when they went overseas. Jim Sweeney, a very good pilot flew Co-pilot with me and this was one of his last few missions. On this mission we attacked the railroad marshalling yards at Linburg, near Kaiserslauten.

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This was another tactical mission during the Battle of the Bulge. The weather was heavily overcast and we bombed by PFF and didn't know what the results were.

Mission #32, Gerolstein, Germany, January 2, 1945

Our first target of the new year was again during the Battle of the Bulge, a railroad junction at Gerolstein. I was flying with the same crew except for the bombardier, and again flew Deputy Lead of the Squadron. The weather was clear and you could see all over Germany, but the target, which was small, was hard to pick up. The bombardiers did not see it the first time so we had to make a 360 degree turn and make a second bomb run. We caught some Flak in the area but there was no Flak at the target, so we had an uneventful run. Wehe, who was flying as my bombardier, was tracking the target with his bombsight, even though we would be dropping on the lead ship. He began a countdown of the final seconds, "five, four, three, two, one, bombs away." To show his accuracy and agreement with the lead, just as he said, "bombs away", the lead ship dropped. He was exactly on the money. Our tail gunner reported very accurate bombing and that rail head wouldn't take traffic for a good while after that.

Mission #33, St. Vith, Belgium, January 3, 1945

Most of you have probably heard of the town of St. Vith. It was right in the center of the Battle of the Bulge. Bastogne and St. Vith were the two major towns that had a part in this battle. Our mission on the third was to attack an enemy strong point and transportation hub at St. Vith to further disrupt the German attempts to salvage their Army. On this mission I had Janovic flying with me as a Navigator and Wehe as a Bombardier, with Fred Hollingsworth as the Co-pilot again. This was Brickner's last mission so after this one I would be the last of the Mohicans.

We were awakened at 0315 hours to go to breakfast, briefing, and be ready to start engines at 0615. Everything went according to schedule and we departed the English coast at 1000 hours at 21,700 feet. We crossed the Belgian coast at 1020 at Ostend at 23,000 feet. The weather over Europe was clear and we didn't have any problems as we approached the target. I was flying number two, the Deputy Lead, not pulling any power to speak of, and having an easy ride.

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Just as we turned on the bomb run and opened our bomb bay doors, the right waist gunner called me on the intercom, "Sir, can we have contrails from only one engine?" I looked out at my number three engine and bluish white smoke was pouring out of the nacelle. I popped in the feathering button for this engine, but even before the prop ceased turning, the cowling flew off the engine. By this time I had pulled out to the right of the formation and dropped below them. I could see the smoke bombs where other Groups had released their bombs over the target and intended staying in trail of the formation to get rid of our bombs. I could see no Flak and hated to miss credit for a mission after coming so far. My mind was changed before long, however, as the ship began to vibrate very badly for some reason and I started losing altitude. The tail gunner called me and said he was being bounced back and forth so severely that he feared the tail assembly was going to disintegrate. Reasoning that I would much rather be over friendly territory if things got worse, I aborted and headed back. By holding the ship perfectly level and descending about 140 miles per hour, I succeeded in stopping the vibration. Whenever a turn was started, the vibration began again, however. As we were over the overcast and above France, we couldn't salvo our bombs. I called Cycle Relay, a B-17 with relay equipment for long range messages, and asked for a position in the Channel or North Sea to drop the eggs. He came back with a position too far at sea to risk, however, so I decided to drop them in the Channel if possible.

We had been at 25,000 feet and, by the time we reached the English Channel, we were at 6000 feet, just skimming the tops of the clouds, as we had not been able to hold our altitude. Six P-51's pulled up beside us and escorted us until we reached the Channel. As I had no VHF "C" channel, I couldn't contact the fighters. Unable to salvo the bombs through the overcast and losing altitude until we were in the tops of the clouds half the time, I decided to get under the weather while over the water. The weather had been very bad that morning when we departed and now it was bad all over England. We were crossing the Channel at the narrowest point, heading towards a huge emergency airfield on the English coast which we could use if I found it necessary. I had my radio man contacting Grafton, trying to get a report on the weather conditions there. They said that the weather was fairly good and to use my own judgment about coming back. Heading down through the soup I began to pick up a great deal of ice, but broke out about 1000 feet above the water before it built up severely. And there, to my dismay, was the largest convoy I had ever seen---aircraft carriers, cruisers, and scores of freighters and smaller vessels. Nearly all of them seemed to be blinking

code to us with their Aldis lamps. I had the Navigator flashing our recognition code with our Aldis lamp and Brickner was shooting the "colors of the day" with our flare gun. Not daring to open our bomb bays, we kept the bombs and could not drop in the Channel. A couple of P-47's came up to look us over as we passed Dover and, satisfied, waggled their wings and peeled off.

Getting back to the field, we found the weather satisfactory, better than it had been for some time, in fact. I made a long approach to the landing runway, due to having one engine out, the heavy bomb load, and the fact that the other three engines had been pushed to their limit in parts of the flight. As I approached the runway, but still probably three quarters of a mile off, another B-17 was cleared to take off and pulled out on the runway. This plane, which should have never been there if the Tower had been on the ball, got his left wheel off the runway and got stuck. I then had to give my three good engines full go-around power and hope that none would fail as we passed over the field to make another attempt. I told the bombardier to be ready to salvo the "safe" bombs in case I could not gain altitude. Fortunately, I was able to fly a circuit and get us on the ground with no more problems. Needless to say, I voiced my strong displeasure to the Tower Operator for allowing this to happen.

We found out, on inspection, what had happened to the number three engine and what caused the severe vibration. A wrist pin on one of the connecting rods had sheared off and the piston kept right on going, blowing off the head of the cylinder and the cowling. The cowling hit the underside of the right horizontal stabilizer and ripped a gash about six feet long. The wind, trying to peel the aluminum back, had caused the vibration that could have easily been much more serious. We were lucky that the plane flew as well as it did, although I had to handle it with kid gloves, and brought us safely back to Grafton Underwood. A few days later, we were all gratified to learn that we were given credit for this mission.

Mission #34, Neiber-Briesig, Germany, January 5, 1945

Another mission during the Battle of the Bulge was an enemy airfield at Neiber-Briesig. The weather was still clear over Europe and the mission was uneventful until we got towards the target. The Flak was much more severe than we had been briefed and had expected to see. Things that I had read about World War I, had always made light of Flak or, as it was called then, Ack-Ack. It was

said that they couldn't hit their targets, it was very inaccurate, and the pilots didn't worry about it. This was as far from the truth as you could possibly state anything compared to what we faced. The Germans were tremendously accurate with their 88mm anti-aircraft guns and their radar tracking. It is amazing how close they could come to a formation when you were flying at 25 or 30,000 feet. The weather over the Rhine was clear and you could see for miles. The gunners below made good use of this opportunity. They threw up some of the most accurate Flak on this mission, right on the Lead Ship, and we were lucky to have no one hit. Janovic had a piece of Flak that knocked his oxygen mask off his face. You wouldn't want anything any closer than that. It passed between his feet, hit his mask, and went over his shoulder. But all that matters is what really happens and no one was injured and we got safely home on Mission #34. So there is only one more to go. Unfortunately, on this mission, Lieutenant Festersen and Lieutenant Starr, ships #994 and #459, went down. There were no observations made on these aircraft and they possibly landed on the continent. We didn't hear anything about them while I was still in England.

Mission #35, Kyllburg, Germany, January 8, 1945

We were awakened at 0315 this morning. This was the last time I would have an orderly come by and say, "Breakfast at 0415". I got up and dressed, went to breakfast, and through briefing, and we took off while it was still dark, about 0630. We flew thirty-nine aircraft on this mission which was a railroad marshalling yard at Kyllburg. We assembled over the field, which was somewhat difficult because it was still dark, but we finally got everyone together and departed at 15,000 feet around 0830. We crossed the French coast at 0945 at 20,000 feet and headed towards our IP. The weather was undercast so we were going to take a G-H run on the target. Our bombing altitude was 26,600 feet. I couldn't have asked for a better mission to complete my thirty-five. The Flak wasn't too bad, but then something went wrong. At bombs away the radio man told us that half of the bombs, six 500 pounders, were still on one side and had failed to drop. I tried salvoing them with the Pilot's salvo switch, but they still hung. Later the Bombardier, Sienkowitz, found that he had forgotten to turn on the rack release switches for that side. This meant that we lugged half of our bombs back to Grafton Underwood.

When we got back to England, it was snowing very hard. It was very difficult to even see the runway because everything was white. But I managed to

make a good landing and taxied old #678 back to our dispersal spot, Hardstand #22, for my last touchdown in England in the 8th Air Force. It gave you a mighty warm feeling to know that you had completed the thirty-five missions that long ago you thought there was little likelihood of ever accomplishing. Of course, everybody congratulated you and saluted you at the Officer's Club. You were known as a "Happy Warrior" when you completed your tour. I now had to get everything ready to await my orders for going back to the States. I sent a telegram to Mother and Daddy saying that I had completed my missions and would soon be home.

Two days later, however, there was a sad occurrence. On January 10th, I heard the orderly awake Ed Pluhar, who bunked next to me. He was the young man who kept telling me that he wouldn't finish his missions. He had just congratulated me the day before. I heard the orderly wake him up and he went on the mission that day, flying as Squadron formation control Officer in the Tail Gunner's position of Major Arthur Stone's plane. Stone, our Squadron Commander, was flying the Lead Ship on the mission that day and was leading the Group to a target over Germany. The plane was seen to leave the formation but wasn't heard from any more. It was awfully sad to find that Pluhar's fears had been realized. He and Major Stone, who had checked me out as First Pilot, and the other seven men on the crew had gone down. When I look back at the records now, I see the names of Pilots who were listed as missing with their crews on the missions that I flew. I will list them now:

Lieutenant Chadwick
Lieutenant Brodie
Lieutenant Busbee
Lieutenant Birchead
Lieutenant Drake
Lieutenant Champ
Lieutenant Hale
Lieutenant Hoppen
Lieutenant Nelson
Lieutenant Festersen
Lieutenant Starr
Lieutenant Van Pelt
Lieutenant DeFraniesco
Lieutenant Mackeller

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Lieutenant Pluhar
Lieutenant Hicks
Major Stone

I heard nothing further concerning the fate of any of these crews before I left England. Subsequently, I heard nothing further until finding some of the names in the 8th Air Force Cemetery at Cambridge in 1995.

Of course, I felt very proud and always would about being part of the Mighty Eighth Air Force. Reports after the war gave full credit to the Eighth for what they did in helping to bring the war to a close. Perhaps, it is fitting to quote a few things here from Germans and others which will put this in context. General Herhudt Von Ruden said that the Allied invasion of Europe would have been impossible without strategic bombing. Field Marshall Albert Kesselring and FM Karl Von Runstedt were in agreement and Kesselring's words were, "Allied air power was the single greatest reason for the German defeat". Luftwaffe General Karl Bodenschatz said, "I am very much impressed with the accuracy of American daylight bombing, which really concentrated on military targets and factories", Reich Marshall Herman Goering said, just before his suicide at the Nuremberg trials in 1945, "Without the United States' Air Force the war would still be going on and not on German soil". And then the man who knew most about German production because he was the Minister of Armaments, Albert Speer, says in his book, "Inside the Third Reich" that, "I will never forget May 12, 1944. On that day the technological war was decided. With the attack of 935 daylight bombers of the 8th Air Force on fuel plants in central and eastern Germany, a new era in air war began. It meant the end of German armament production."

The 8th Air Force suffered 46,456 casualties in the aerial bombardment from August 17, 1942 to May 8, 1945. They flew 330,523 sorties and dropped 686,406 tons of bombs. They were surely the "Mighty Eighth."

Now I would look forward to leaving England and going back to the dear old USA.

Storey, in his WWII "office," the left seat of a B-17G Flying Fortress.

Photo was taken on the occasion of his last flight in a B-17 made at the request of the Experimental Aircraft Association, to brief TV and newspaper people at Greenville, SC, in October 2007.