

GENERAL CASTLE'S LAST MISSION

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One of the 8th Air Force's significant missions did not gain the attention of others such as the two Schweinfurts, several to Berlin, etc. I refer to No. 760 of Dec. 24, 1944, which stood out for several reasons. It was the largest in history, considering the number of 4-engined bombers dispatched. It occurred in the early phase of the so-called "Battle of the Bulge" when the attention of most was on the ground action, and it resulted in the loss in combat of the 8th AF's third general, Brig. Gen. Fred W. Castle, C.G. of the 4th Bomb Wing (P), 3rd Bomb Division.

Castle was one of the "founding members" of the 8th AF, having departed LaGuardia Field in Brig. Gen. Ira C. Eaker's party of seven, on Feb. 4, 1942, for England and the establishment of that AF in the U.K. The other five in the group were: Lt. Col. Frank A. Armstrong, Jr., Maj. Peter Beasley, Capt. Beirne Lay, Jr., 1st Lt. Harris B. Hull, and 2nd Lt. Wm. S. Cowart, Jr. Bad weather delayed their flight via Bermuda and the Azores so that they did not reach Hendon Airport outside of London until Feb. 20th. For about 2-1/2 years, Castle served as A-4 specializing in logistics and planning for air bases and depots at 8th Bomber Command HQ, going from Capt. to Col. in two years. In mid-June 1943 he volunteered to command the 94th Bomb Group at Bury St. Edmunds (known to a lesser extent as Rougham) and then moved up to C.G. of the 4th Bomb Wing on the same base. His first star had come through on Nov. 14, 1944 and by Dec. 23rd, he had put in 29 missions in B-17s.

Mission 760 involved the scheduled dispatch of 2,034 B-17s and B-24s, which included FAS's (Formation Assembly Ships), "war wearies," and almost anything else that could fly and carry a bomb load. At the apex of this bomber stream was B-17G No. 44-8444 of the 836th Bomb Sq. of the 487th Bomb Group, carrying Castle in the right seat and the crew, less the tail gunner, of 1st Lt. Robert W. Harriman. Others in this lead crew included 1st Lt. Claude L. Rowe in the tail turret as OTG (Officer Tail Gunner), 1st Lt. Paul L. Biri as Bombardier, 1st Lt. Henry P. McCarty as DRN (Dead Reckoning Navigator), Capt. Edmund F. "Misch" Auer as PN or PPN (Pilotage or Pin-Point Navigator), 1st Lt. Bruno S. Procopio as RN (Radar Navigator) or M/O (Mickey Operator), T/Sgt. Lawrence H. Swain as ROG (Radio Operator Gunner), T/Sgt. Quentin W. Jeffers as EG (Engineer Gunner), and S/Sgt. Lowell B. Hudson as WG (Waist Gunner).

Intermittent research over many years has merely reduced the number of anomalies, conflicting statements in written matter and by individuals, but some aspects of Mission No. 760 probably never will be resolved. A key document has been the 4th Bomb Wing (H) investigatory report of Jan. 11, 1945; however, it reflected the de-briefing of only bombardier Biri and DRN McCarty. The team investigating the "disappearance" of Brig. Gen. Castle was led by a rated

pilot, Maj. Ralph S. Hayes, Jr., a medical officer, Maj. James W. Brooke (who, by fate, was the Group Surgeon of our 486th BG), and an Intelligence type, Maj. Jack A. Crichton.

The key “buzz word” during November 1944 was bad weather, particularly as pertained to the Continent. The 486th BG, e.g., was able to carry out eleven missions from Sudbury/Suffolk in East Anglia. During the first half of December it was “atrocious,” according to one history, and the 486th mounted five missions. The day after that, on 16 December, the Wehrmacht initiated its surprise attack at 0530 and the 486th went out to the Stuttgart M/Y (Marshalling Yard). It did not fly another mission until the 23rd to Hamburg. That was the day that the Continental weather “broke” as the so-called “Russian High” pressure cell moved backward to the West. Previously, the 8th AF was able to dispatch 963 heavy bombers on the 18th “against M/Y’s at Coblenz-Lutzel, Cologne-Kalk, Ehrang, and Mainz and against road choke points between Luxembourg and the Rhine.” On the following day, 328 heavies attacked the Ehrang M/Y again and a number of road centers West of Coblenz. Then, nothing until the 23rd.

On Dec. 23rd, the major planning for the following day's mission was in the final, detailed stage at all 8th AF units. At Bury St. Edmunds and the 4th Bomb Wing's operations office, Col. Nicholas Perkins, Chief of Staff, and others were talking about mission details with Lt. Col. MacDonald, who was scheduled to lead the 4th Wing in a maximum effort with everything that could fly, “whether or not they had guns.” Then the word came through by teletypewriter that the 4th BW would lead the 3rd Division. Briefly, according to the 94th BG unit history by Lt. Col. Harry E. Slater and later writing by Roger A. Freeman, Gen. Castle came into the operations room “looking very tired” and mentioned merely that he was back from a tour of other BW bases, asked if the morrow's mission was “stood down,” was told, “No,” and walked out saying that he had to get to bed. But he was back in less than a minute asking who was leading the Division. In answer to his next question, he was told the 3rd Division was to lead the 8th AF and that brought the response that he would have to displace LTC MacDonald the next morning.

Early in the morning of the 24th, the key weather traits were fog and snow haze and on the hardstand of Lavenham A/F and crew chief, Sgt. James B. Ackerman, the unresolved mystery of the shortage of two chest type parachutes developed. An example of the effect of this surface weather is illustrated by the situation with the 457th BG at Glatton A/F whereby the dense, persistent fog delayed the take-off of its B-17s led by Major James A. McGuire until 1024 GMT. Six aircraft made the IFR take-off, but the seventh, of Lt. Sundbaum, crashed at the end of the runway. All others were put on standby until the early afternoon and continuing fog and haze necessitated IFR take-offs. After all that, 34 B-17 's made it to a point east of Clacton when they received a recall order cancelling their part in the mission. But this example typifies what was occurring at bases of the 8th Fighter Command and what set up the delayed rendezvous with the leading 487th BG, which had been able to commence its take-offs at 0900 GMT. Then the 487th assembled at 7,000 feet in “perfect” weather aloft with Wing and Division assembly on time and start of climb and at CP 1 (Control Point 1) over Felixstowe near the English coast. Ostend, on the Belgian coast CP 2, was the point of landfall, still in a climb attitude. The course of 120°

Magnetic (115° True heading) was established for the long straight-line trip to Prum, Germany.

Then, the 487th BG was 17 minutes late at Control Point (CP) 3, between Brussels and Liege on the 5-degree East Longitude line at 50° - 35' North Latitude, at 1223 GMT “on account of an unexpected wind shift.” The Air Leader's report of Dec. 26th by Capt. Mayfield Shilling, who replaced Gen. Castle as mission leader, stated that “we had reached Belgium at 1130, still climbing.” The 487th reached bombing “altitude at CP 3 and had just leveled off when we were attacked by fighters, causing the lead aircraft to abort.” The type of GAF fighters has often been questioned because some sources said “ME-109’s” and others stated “FW-190’s.” It has been developed, however, that both types of GAF fighters participated in the initial attack or “ambush” and what was, for them, a “Turkey Shoot.” Also, interviews disclosed, what Capt. M.R. Shilling could not have known at the time; that No. 1 engine had been throwing oil prior to the initial Luftwaffe attack. By about 1229 and 23' east of CP 3, Gen. Castle called over VHF radio with his R/T c/s (call sign) that he was aborting because of the engine oil problem, and the 44-8444 B-17G was banked briefly down and to the left, with some of the lead Squadron starting to follow him (apparently some did not “get the word”). However, Castle then attempted to regain the lead at about 1230 and when the first Me109’s were sighted. These made their first as a non-firing pass from 9 o'clock and such reflected the GAF's confidence, chutzpah or schnauze because they knew (or felt) that they had the whole sky and scene to themselves. This was with good reason for the 8th Air Force Fighter Command escort was nowhere to be seen by any participants.

This GAF ambush was in the tradition of and akin to that encountered in the old American West. The B-17s in a line of Wings were analogous to the “covered wagon train,” while the “Indians” were the GAF fighter interceptors, and the “U.S. Cavalry,” in the form of the 8th AF fighters, had not yet arrived.

At about 1232, just after the first GAF non-firing pass, Gen. Castle again decided to abort the lead because of that bothersome No. 1 engine, plus some influence, possibly of that first Me-109 “bounce.” In any event, he again banked downward to the left with intent to join up with the 487th C or Low Squadron that was aft of and below the Lead (A) Squadron. In fact, a Lt. Rierts, evidently a survivor of the Low Sq., stated in the post-mission debriefing that the “Air Leader made no attempt to reduce air speed so the low Squadron could catch up,” but this evidently was observed prior to the second abort move. The 487th BG’s MAR (Mission Analysis Report) of 25 December also noted that the “low squadron was almost a mile behind the lead squadron and attempting to catch the formation. “Then-Capt. Mayfield R. Shilling, from his position as Deputy Group leader in No. 2 position, echeloned to the right, of 44-8444, took over the lead of the 487th and the 8th AF's bomber-stream. About that time, a single Me-109 made a pass at 44-8444 from 2 o'clock level and wounded the radar navigator (RN) or “Mickey Operator” (M/O), 1/Lt. Bruno S. Procopio, who was located with his APS-15 set across from the radio operator (RO), T/Sgt. Lawrence H. Swain, on the starboard side of the fuselage.

It has been difficult to identify firmly the source of the ME-109's that made the first attacks upon the 487th BG, but it is more than likely that they were of JG.3 "Udet" and vectored to the Liege area in an unusual move that far ahead of the front lines by the Fighter Controller at Deelen, Jagdführer-Holland. Jagdgeschwader.3 (USAAF Wing) was a unit under 3 Jagddivision, commanded by Oberst (Col.) Walter Grabmann, under II Jagdkorps at Flammersfeld and commanded by Gen. Maj. (USAAF Brig. Gen.) Dietrich Pelz, under Luftlotte Hauptquartier West, which was commanded by Gen. Lt. (USAAF Maj. Gen.) Josef "Beppo" Schmid at Limburg. The most likely GAF units which operated Me-109s were I and III Gruppen of 3 Jagdgeschwader, with the former using the G-10 variants from Paderborn A/F (Airfield) and the latter equipped with the G-14 and K-4 variants from Lippspringe A/F.

The ME-109 G-10 or "Gustav-Zehn" was the fastest of the "G" sub-series with the Daimler-Benz DB 605D engine putting out 1,800 HP at sea level and attaining 428 m.p.h. at 24,250 feet. It carried two Rheinmetall MG 131 13-mm. machine guns above the engine that had a firing rate of 900 rds/min. at a muzzle velocity of 2,370 ft./sec. Wing-mounted guns or cannon generally were not carried, but a Rheinmetall MK 108 30-mm. cannon mounted in the engine (and firing through the propeller boss) was optional. It had a rate of fire of 450 rds./min. at a muzzle velocity of 1,600. ft./sec. The Me-109 G-14 was the last of the G-Series to reach operations. In addition to the two MG 131 guns above the engine it had a Mauser MG 151 20-M cannon in the fuselage with a firing rate of 780 rds./min. at 2,656 ft./sec. muzzle velocity. Provision existed for mounting two more MG 151s underwing in trays or gondolas. It carried one of at least 6 versions of the DB 605 engines available. The Me-109K-4 variants probably were brand new at Lippspringe since it had just been service-tested in the early Fall of 1944. They carried the DB 605ASC/DCM 12-cylinder, inverted Vee, liquid-cooled engine with MW (Methanol-Water) injection producing 2,000 HP at 2,800 r.p.m. for take-off and a speed of 377 m.p.h. at sea level. At about 20,000 feet it turned up 1,800 HP and produced a maximum speed of 452 m.p.h. Armament consisted of two Mauser MG 151 15-mm. machine guns (Maschinen Gewehr) over the engine and a Rheinmetall MK 108 or 103 30-mm. cannon inside the engine shaft.

The above were likely the GAF fighter-interceptors that made the first onslaught against the 487th BG and the 4th BW at about 32 minutes past noon and at 22,000 feet near 50°-30'N and 05°-15'E, or about 10 miles (16 km.) south of Liege. Immediately after the firing pass that wounded the M/O, Lt. Procopio, three Me-109s came into 44-8444 from 3 o'clock level, hosing the B-17G with cannon and machine gun fire and setting No. 1 and No. 2 engines on fire. During the Me-109 action B-17 aircrew reported a fuselage badge or insigne that provides a clue as to the Me 109 unit. Specifically, they were noted to carry a "red animal's head," which could have been of 2/JG.3 or the 2nd Staffel (Sq.) of I Gruppe. While the insigne of I/JG.3 was the frozen image of an undulating dragon or crocodile that was mostly head with open jaws and colored green, its 2 Staffel carried the same figure in red. Another possibility was 8/JG.2 "Richthofen," whose red insigne was an erect horse with outstretched legs and mane; however, the bomber aircrew reports' use of "head" and that emphasis would tend to point it more toward 2/JG.3. A complicating factor is that German sources also reported the Me-109G-14s of II/JG.2 as being in the Aachen-

Bastogne area on Dec 24th and 8 Staffel would have been a part of II Gruppe. B-17 aircrew of the 487th BG further reported that the Me-109s with the red animal's head also carried "black and white spinners." The latter is no clue, however, to any particular unit since such were common, either half black and half white or a black spinner with a white spiral that was intended to distract a gunner firing at an oncoming GAF Fighter.

It should be realized that the Luftwaffe was aware of Mission 760 and its magnitude early in the morning of Dec. 24 because of its monitoring of the many radio checks occurring in East Anglia at the 8th AF bomber and fighter bases. Then, once aloft and headed across the North Sea to Ostende, the leading B17s must have been tracked by early warning Freya radar augmented later with the shorter range (45 miles) Würzburg-Riese radar, the latter whose parabolic antenna was 25 feet in diameter, took on the KW function although used primarily for gun laying (flak) and fighter directing of GAF night-fighter aircraft. Thus, the GAF signals units first picked up the leading B-17s, giving the fighter control center information to enable the center to steer the fighter-interceptors toward the B-17s. Since the weather was CAVU aloft; e.g., Cologne was reporting only 1/10 cloud, a simple heading to the B-17s plus map squares (actual examples but not near Liege were: Caesar-Anton 4 and 7; Papa-Oscar 4 and 5) were sufficient in combination with the great visibility aloft to put the GAF on a good course toward the leading 4th Wing from their bases just east of Dortmund.

Early on in the abort and GAF attack sequence the pilot and the bombardier rapidly discussed jettisoning the bomb load. Pilot Harriman called P.L. Biri on the intercom and told him to jettison, but Biri replied with their position still over Allied-held Belgium and the presence of Allied troops and Belgian civilians below them. Release of that bomb load would have given 44-8444 much more maneuverability but evidently Gen. Castle sided with that view and the bombs were not released. Bombardier Biri has since stated that the Arming Switch on his control panel was in the "Safe" position at the time, which is where it should have been until the IP (Initial Point) was reached. That meant that if the bombs had been salvoed, deliberately or inadvertently, their fuses would not have been armed and the bombs should have been inert upon ground impact. Either pilot could have salvoed the bombs from a toggle or button switch on the upper rim of their instrument panel, but Castle made the decision not to jettison in spite of the likelihood that the bombs would have been inert at impact. Thus, the maneuverability of the damaged "Hotshot Able" (c/s) 44-8444 was severely decreased as it continued out of formation, in the open and a choice target for the GAF fighters.

Very shortly after the Me-109s set Nos. 1 and 2 engines on fire the bail-out words were spoken on intercom by either pilot Harriman or Gen. Castle. As testified to the 4th BW investigation by P.L. Biri and DRN McCarty, it was Harriman, but PN/PPN "Misch" Auer recalls the voice as Castle's. In any event the DRN went through the forward hatch first, followed by Sgt. Jeffers, the flight engineer, then Capt. Auer and 1/Lt. Biri. Quaintly, Biri and Auer still disagree as to who was the last through the hatch, with Auer stating that he "pushed" the bombardier out. In any event, there was brief talk between pilot Harriman and Biri about the

'chute situation. Harriman had not been able to find his chest 'chute, which should have been tucked in behind his bucket seat. He had left his seat while Castle was endeavoring to maintain control of the B-17 (he was wearing his own back pack) and had come down into the fuselage section adjacent to the hatch. A minute or so earlier, Auer had picked up Biri's chest 'chute, but the latter had shown Auer his stenciled initials on the pack and took the 'chute. Capt. Auer claimed that he then located his own 'chute in the forward section, did not use any spare 'chute, but the spare evidently was not in its place near the hatch for Harriman's use. According to the debriefing, Harriman told Biri to wait for him as he was unable to locate his own 'chute and that both of them would use Lt. Biri's 'chute. This was actually impractical since it is doubtful that both could get through the hatch with Harriman hanging onto Biri. Also, Harriman was of large build and weight, and those traits would have complicated their ground impact. Lt. McCarty estimated that he went through the hatch at 1236, made a delayed jump and landed uninjured about 7 miles Southeast of the town of Xhos, or at 50°-24'N and 05°-41'E. Both Biri and McCarty were picked up by American troops of the 125th AA Battalion, Biri with an injured knee.

In the aft section ROG Swain, M/O Procopio and OTG Rowe were able to bail out, with ground evidence in the tail gunners compartment showing that Lt. Rowe had been wounded in the air action. In any event, he was DOA on the ground. Sgt. Swain was found in an open field without his parachute and 1/Lt. Procopio was taken to a Liege hospital with a broken left ankle, bullets in his right leg and a burned face. He later passed away from these wounds and/or injuries from the ground impact.

Just prior to bailout in the forward section, FW-190s joined the air action. They were of IV/JG.3; 13, 14 and 15 Staffeln, operating FW-190A-8s and A-9a from Gutersloh A/F. This base was a few km. west of Lippspringe A/F and northeast of Dortmund. However, it is not known which GAF fighter hit 44-8444 with a 20-mm. cannon burst in the right outer wing panel and Tokyo tank. The resultant explosion sheared the right wing at station 16, or at the first rib of the nacelle of engine No. 4, and the resultant violent spin to the right doomed Castle and Harriman. Lt. Biri testified to the 4th BW personnel that the initiation of that spin aided his rapid departure from the forward hatch. He estimated that they were at 12,000 feet when they left the B-17. It soon ruptured at Station 5 in the fuselage at the bulkhead separating the radio room from the bomb bay. There was evidence of fire in the aircraft before this section sheared off by a slight scorching in the radio room when it was examined on the ground. The residual tail section also showed that it had sheared at fuselage Station 7 or just forward of the leading edge of the first elevator rib. Scorching of the interior indicated the presence of fire before the shearing action. Small caliber and 20-mm holes in the tail section and gunner's compartment, plus extensive blood stains at the OTG's position, indicated the wounding of Lt. Rowe while in the compartment.

By now, the FW-190s were enjoined with the lead 487th Group and their presence was confirmed by the BG's MAR, as well as sightings by DRN Sam Alvine, Jr. of 44-8192 in the "Tail-end Charlie" slot of the Low "C" Sq., and a Rougham 94th BG co-pilot, Gordon Glower, of

the 331st Sq, in the 94th "D" slot on Dec. 24 1944.

The Me-109 s with the red animal's head were seen among a mix of 23 FW-190s and Me-109s that made individual attacks on the 487th BG with the pursuit curve approach from four o'clock. These attacks were carried within 100 yards of the B-17s at 5:30 o'clock and ended with a sharp breakaway to the rear. Colors seen on the FW-190s included white or "grayish" fuselage with black tails; others had orange color under their wings.

Following immediately after the above attacks, 7 or 8 FW-190s came through the Low Sq. singly from 5 or 6 o'clock level and attacked the Lead Sq. Then at about 1237 GMT, as 44-8444 was spinning and at 50°-30'N and 05°-40'E, "company front" attacks were carried out by 25 to 35 Me-109s and FW-190s from 6 o'clock level. They were in two transverse lines, one stacked above the others with each line consisting of 12 to 16 fighters. The aircraft had originally come out of the sun to the right of the formation, but positioned themselves astern for this attack. Break-offs were to the right and left.

Between Werbomont and St. Vith the 8th AF fighters finally arrived on the scene (time unavailable), "screaming in" from the west and mixing it up with the Me-109s and FW-190s. Naturally, this arrival of the P-51D "Mustangs" took the pressure off the B-17s and resulted in a vicious dogfight with the Focke-Wulfs. The air leader of 13/JG.3, Haupt. Wolfgang Kosse (11 air victories), and Oberfeldwebel Egon Schulz apparently were shot down, for they were never located. Five other pilots of IV/JG.3 were shot down by the B-17s gunners or the P-51 escort and were captured. JG.3 itself took the highest pilot losses of all the Geschwader -- 20 -- that day. As the leading B-17s crossed the front lines on the ground the air battle increased in intensity with the P-51s attempting to keep the GAF away from the B-17s and with fighters of JG.13 "hanging on" to shoot down a few more bombers.

F/O Sam Alvine, Jr., was one of the first in the 487th Group to spot the FW-190s as "black objects flying around off to the left" as Liege passed below the left wing of their B-17G, S/N 44-8192. 2/Lt. Ken W. Lang was its pilot and 2/Lt. Howard R. Miller the co-pilot. Dec. 24 turned out to be their eighth and final mission for the 8th AF. Although he didn't realize it at the time, those FW-190s had already made a pass at the leading "A" Sq., but Alvine's Low "C" Sq. was about to catch hell from the GAF fighters. Tail gunner Sgt. Chas. Haskett hollered about the FW-190 and Me-109 "company front" forming up for an attack from 6 o'clock level, which occurred at about 1237 as mentioned previously. The tail section, fuselage and nose section were riddled and DRN Alvine picked up a large piece of Plexiglas that struck him in the leg. He held it up in the Astrodome to show it to the two pilots and noticed that their windshield was "full of holes" but couldn't tell whether such was caused by enemy fire or empty .50 caliber gun cartridges falling aft from B-17 s ahead and above his. He got no reaction at all from the pilots and noted that they had "blank expressions on their faces." The nose Plexiglas was gone.

F/O Sam Alvine, Jr. then heard the voice of the flight engineer and top turret gunner, S/Sgt.

Charles Weber, shouting (with or without the intercom) that No. 2 engine was on fire: “She is burning like hell. Let's get out. Hit the silk, boys!” As the left wing started to burn, the DRN ripped off his oxygen mask helmet and flak jacket and jammed on his chest ‘chute. With “Murphy’s Law” going full blast, his navigator’s seat got stuck in the catwalk or tunnel to the forward hatch, but he “tore it out” of the way with the aid of high-pumping adrenalin. He pulled the pins on the hatch, but the stupid thing wouldn't drop away, and so he rammed it out with both feet and catapulted through space. After a delay as he felt he was slowing down and “felt like a feather,” he pulled the D-ring, felt a terrific jerk and found himself “floating down under that beautiful umbrella.”

The parallels to occurrences in Castle's 44-8444 are quite unusual. Before going out of the hatch, the DRN noted no response to the bail-out shout from the flight deck and he feels that they did not react to his holding of the Plexiglas in the astrodome because both were dead. Five of the crew from 44-8192 and 44-8444 survived their bail-outs; both B17s incurred GAF fighter hits that started engine fires, exploding a wing and causing the bomber to spin in; neither right nor left seat pilot would or could leave the flight deck for a last minute bail-out after egress by the others of the crew. S/Sgt. Weber even went to the tunnel entry to the flight deck to shout again the bail-out call to the pilot and co-pilot, but neither “moved.” He subsequently landed all right and with no injuries.

While drifting downward, Alvine noted “ships” falling all around, quite a few ‘chutes and a fighter diving straight for the ground, “blowing up on impact.” A “black” fighter was noticed at a distance coming straight for him and he had “no other vision but that of being helplessly strafed.” It was later hypothesized that UM 1/Lt. C.L. Rowe of 44-8444 had been shot in his ‘chute by a GAF fighter, but it was not possible to prove this because of his earlier wounds while in the tail turret. The savior of Alvine was a silver P-51 “Mustang” with a red checkered tail that zoomed up under him and engaged the FW-190 “in a mad dogfight.”

For Capt. B.S. Auer, his luck also held but he was strafed in his ‘chute by a GAF fighter that missed him and went on to other targets. As Alvine landed he heard rifle fire and that made him think he was on German held-held soil, or near the front lines. As it developed he dropped onto a river bed and got out of his harness before falling on the river bank. As he stood up, men, women and children suddenly appeared with guns and knives. With a .45 automatic pistol in his ribs he finally was able to convince the Belgian partisans that he was American, was taken to a house near the center of the small village near which he had landed and awaited an American patrol in a hospitable environment. The U.S. troops moved him on to Brussels and from there he was sent back to England.

A few minutes earlier, “Misch” Auer apparently had drifted farther to the west than his crew associates who also had bailed out of 44-8444, and headed toward Hody, also on the Meuse River, but southwest of Liege. He can testify to having been fired upon by a GAF fighter pilot while in his ‘chute, but he grabbed his legs and attempted to curl himself up into a “ball,” making

the smallest possible target and the GAF “jock” missed him. He estimated that he was descending from east to west aligned with a road that had power cables along one side while attempting to avoid the wires he noted troops on the ground whose rifles were pointed at him. Not knowing who they were, he considered himself lucky that no one fired at him as he approached the ground and was unable to avoid a farmhouse with several stories. Its ridge pole was aligned North and South and Auer just cleared the peak to drop on the down slope, take three steps and then float on to a furrowed patch that might have been the garden. A left knee wrenching later required ligament surgery, but he was quickly surrounded by U.S. soldiers. Then, to crown a wild ride in a B-17 and parachute the housewife came out to him with a bottle of cognac which she offered to him only, and the two of them proceeded to toast his good luck, the liberation of that part of Belgium, King Albert, Pres. Roosevelt and anything else that come to mind. Auer, now of Ft. Wayne, IN, and Alvine, now of NJ, had gotten their “kicks” for Sunday, Dec. 24th.

The “black”FW-190 that started a firing pass at Alvine (in his ‘chute) most likely was of the former assault (“Sturm”) IV Gruppe of JG.3 whose FW-190A-8s carried the black spinners with white spirals. Its top front decking was painted in RLM blackgreen (Schwaragrün 70), the underside of the wing in light blue (Hellblau 65) and the fuselage sides in Hellblau 65 with mottling of dark-green (Dunkelgrün 71). The top of the wing carried a zigzag camouflage pattern with alternating black-green and dark green. The overall effect, depending upon the angle of attack, might have appeared to be “black” to F/O Alvine.

The FW-190A-8 was an armored fighter with 3-mm. armor in its cowling and 14-mm. plate behind the pilot's head. It was powered by one BMW 801D-2 fourteen-cylinder, air-cooled, twin-row engine that was rated at 1,700 HP for take-off and 1,440 HP at 18,700 ft. With a 50:50% methanol-water injection boost (MW-50), the engine put out 2,100 HP for take-off. The A-8 was armed with two 13-mm. MG 131 machine guns in the upper cowling or deck, two 20-mm Mauser MG 151 cannon in the wing roots and two of the same cannon in the wing and outboard of the propeller (free firing). Its maximum speed was 355 m.p.h. at sea level, 402 m.p.h. at 18,000 ft. and 408 m.p.h. at 20,600 ft. The A-9 differed from the A-8 only in having a BMW 801F engine with different supercharger gear ratios and 2,000 take-off HP before MW-50 injection.

The wrecked B-17G, 44-8444 was found in four sections (tail, waist and radio, right wing, and nose and central wing sections), all about 1/2 mile from one another at 50°-31'N, 05°E. Examination of the nose and main wing section, about 300 yards from the Chateau D'Englebermont near the village of Hody, Belgium, concluded that it had struck the ground in an inverted configuration at an angle of 30° while spinning. At impact, the bomb load exploded (indicating that Amatol was more impact-sensitive than some thought), scattering aircraft and occupant fragments for 200 yards.

A single “dog tag” confirmed Gen. Castle's presence (S/N 0319375) and later fingerprint

analysis verified the two occupants as Castle and Harriman. Their remains were later transferred to the American Cemetery at Henri-Chapelle, northeast of Liege.

Since Dec. 24th was significant in the “Battle of the Bulge,” known to the Germans as Feldzug or Unternehmen “Wacht-am-Rhein,” a brief description of the ground situation seems to be relevant. Although Dec. 24th fell only eight days after the start of this battle that stretched out into late January, 1945, it was the peak or high-water mark. Further to the West and South of Liege the tip of the 2nd Panzer Division had moved past Marche and had reached the hamlet of Foy-Notre-Dame or five miles from the Meuse River. This was the end of the westward movement as the 2 PzDiv. lost several “point” tanks under heavy tank or gunfire from the U.S. 2nd Armored Division and the British 29th Armored Brigade. From that point, on the road to Dinant on the Meuse, it was all back-off and retreat to the East. Farther to the northeast and near the track of the 8th AF's bomber stream, St. Vith had been recaptured by the U.S. 7th Armored Division and 106th Infantry Regiment on Dec. 23rd. To the northwest of St. Vith at La Gleize, Belgium, Obersturmbannführer Jochen Peiper and his “Kampfgruppe Peiper” of the 1st SS Panzer Division also had reached a high-water mark and initiated his retreat about 0100 on the 24th to the South and through rugged terrain with frequent gorges and heavy woods that were pertinent for mountain troops rather than grounded tankers and walking wounded. By the time the lead B-17s reached a point on their course just south of Trois Ponts and coming up on St. Vith, Peiper was a few km. to the northwest with about 800 men of the 5,000 who jumped off on Dec. 16th. It had been a debacle for the Kampfgruppe (Battle or combat group) of the LAH (Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler) or the 1 SS Panzer Division, the premier division of the Waffen SS and about 22,000 strong on Dec. 16th. By Dec. 24th, when the Americans entered La Gleize just after Peiper's walk out, they found the wreckage of 30 tanks and over 100 half tracks; 28 tanks, seventy half-tracks and 25 artillery pieces were intact. Three hundred wounded and 50 able-bodied SS surrendered early that morning, while a pocket of 50 SS north of the town was wiped out to the man. Today, a Pzkwf 6 King Tiger (Tiger II) with Henschel turret is parked in the town as a monument. This tank's turret shows scars as mere gouges in the armored face from American anti-tank firepower. It has a KwK L/71 88-mm. cannon.

The extreme fluidity of the front lines beneath the B-17s' flight path also shows in the American unit action. Airborne infantry of the 505th Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, were withdrawing northwestward by orders of their Maj. Gen. James “Slim Jim” Gavin and Field Marshal Bernard L. Montgomery to hold facing eastward on a line from Trois Ponts to Manhay. Opposing units and patrols “withdrew through the enemy” passing each other in the gullies and gorges of the Ardennes and exchanging only light, occasional fire probably due to caution, haste, anxiety and exhaustion on the part of each side. On two separate occasions, the walking tankers of Peiper's remnants ran into American patrols while stumbling southward in parallel to the Ambleve River. Even the generals had problems. The day before, at Stoumont, on a ridge between La Gleize and Stoumont, Maj. Gen. Matthew Ridgeway tried to hold a briefing conference in a modern chateau with Brig. W. Harrison, the local commander. Ridgeway, as usual, carried a carbine and hand grenades at his belt and simultaneously, two U.S. howitzers and a 155-mm,

cannon were firing high explosive shells at Peiper's remnants in La Gleize from a position near the chateau.

As the fighter air battle expanded over Werbomont, Stoumont, La Gleize, St. Vith, etc., it moved northward toward Aachen, and 3 Jagddivision at Wiedenbruck ordered the Me-109G-14s and K-4s of I/JG.27 from Rheine A/F into the action. Also sent into the fray against the 8th AF were all 3 Gruppen of JG.6, including more FW-190A-8s from Delmenhorst and Quakenbruck A/Fs and Me-109G-10s from Bissel A/F. Fierce infighting among the opposing fighters developed over the High Venn, which was a ridge oriented North-South about 20 km. south of Aachen with a length of 30 km. and width of 6 km. By now, more and more contrails were etched and laced across the clear blue sky, forming whirls, spirals, lines and curves and quite a show for those on the ground. In the words of German author Werner Girbig, "Never had these countryfolk seen so many aircraft drop out of the sky" over the High Eifel. And the local farmers, coming upon shattered aircraft of both sides, "would gaze at the charred, twisted strips of scrap metal and the broken bodies within them and wonder what kind of sense it all made." The Allies estimated that about 800 Luftwaffe fighter sorties were flown on Dec. 24th by the 450-500 pilots participating in interceptor operations.

Notes:

1. Auer must have bailed out before Biri. Auer landed near Hody, about 5 km from the crash site, and Biri landed 100 yards from the crash site. Also, General Harbold's report states that MacArty, Jeffers, and Auer bailed out, in that order. Biri was waiting for Harriman, and he bailed out or was thrown out as the plane began spinning.

2. Civilian witnesses on the ground saw a German fighter strafe Lt. Rowe in the air, and they saw him being hit by the gunfire.

3. Hody, Belgium is 5 km due west of the Ourthe River, a tributary of the Meuse. Liege lies at the confluence of the Meuse and Ourthe Rivers.

Mr. Norman J. Valentine sent me the article in March 2003. Norm Valentine was General Castle's driver at 4th Bomb Wing Headquarters in Bury St. Edmunds, England. In May 2003 Mr. Robert A. Harper sent me a copy of the article from the 486th Bomb Group Association newsletter.

Paul M. Webber
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