

Bill Lawley, Walter Truemper, and Archibald Mathies

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Sometimes Getting Home Is The Hard Part!

Operation Overlord



From the moment the United States entered World War II,

American war planners focused upon one primary strategic accomplishment—an amphibious assault across the narrow passage of water that separated Great Britain from the European continent known as the English Channel.

- The British envisioned what eventually became the D-Day Invasion as requisite to protecting their own island nation from invasion by Germany.
- The French Resistance saw the arrival of Allied troops on their shores as the only means of liberating their cities and countryside from the occupation of Nazi troops.
- The Russians were desperate for any action in western Europe that would force Adolph Hitler to pull back resources from his Eastern Front.
- United States military commanders, convinced that the only way to win the war was with “boots on the ground,” were convinced only a ground assault on occupied France would provide the means to attack and defeat the German army in a drive to Berlin.

Virtually every other plan and every other directive issued to commanders in the field was predicated upon the invasion that came to be called “Operation Overlord.” Even the Pacific war, half a world away, revolved around the cross-channel crossing in Europe. General MacArthur’s army, Admirals Nimitz and Halsey’s navies, and General George Kenney’s air force, were all relegated to simply containing Japanese aggression in Asia and the Pacific until after the cross-channel Allied assault brought the Third Reich to its knees.

Invading Fortress Europe was the focal point of discussions among President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill, as well as the Allied war planners of both nations, at the Arcadia Conference in January 1942, just weeks after the United States entered the war. Franklin Roosevelt promised both Churchill and the Soviets that American ground forces would engage the Germans before the end of that first year of the war, and it was assumed by most parties involved that this meant a cross-channel invasion before December 1942, or very early the following year.

Six months later with American troops arriving in Britain, Winston Churchill began questioning the wisdom of an immediate cross-channel attack and sharing those concerns with President Roosevelt. Nazi forces were well-entrenched in France; the Luftwaffe ruled the skies over western Europe and was prepared to use its aerial supremacy to promptly decimate invading ground troops. Prime Minister Churchill's concerns were quickly validated.

Early on the morning of August 19, 1942, more than 6,000 Allied troops, most Canadian but including 50 U.S. Army Rangers and 1,000 British soldiers, crossed the English Channel for a dawn landing at the French port of Dieppe. A chance encounter with German ships during the Channel crossing cost the invasion force the element of surprise. By nightfall, the Allied invaders at Dieppe had suffered more than 60% casualties amid a desperate, but hardly effective, effort to rescue the survivors. Aerial support from the Royal Air Force and the Royal Canadian Air Force became virtually nonexistent in the face of Hitler's mighty Luftwaffe. The British and Canadians lost 119 airplanes to only 46 of the enemies.

The failed Dieppe raid was mute testimony to the obstacles the Allies faced when the moment came to make the full-scale invasion and breach the Atlantic Wall. It was, further, a poignant message to Allied war planners that before Operation Overlord could be successfully launched, there was a lot of preparatory work to be done.

President Roosevelt kept his Arcadia Conference promise, attacking Hitler's forces before the end of 1942. That amphibious assault, which included U.S. ground troops already in England and one force dispatched from the United States, landed throughout North Africa on November 8, 1942. Operation Torch was the largest amphibious assault in world history, and one of the most successful. The President's controversial decision, urged upon him by Prime Minister Churchill, to postpone invading occupied France by crossing the English Channel which measures only 150 miles at its widest point in favor of crossing thousands of miles of the South Atlantic to land in North Africa, was a fatefully wise decision. Of the nearly 125,000 American and British soldiers that landed in North Africa in Operation Torch there were fewer than 1,500 casualties—half the number suffered by the 6,100 Dieppe Raiders in their cross-channel attack on occupied France earlier that year.

In January 1943, one year after Roosevelt and Churchill's first face-to-face war council in the Arcadia Conference, the two leaders (along with French commanders Charles de Gaulle and Henri Giraud) met in newly liberated North Africa for the Casablanca Conference. The importance of this meeting is evident in the precedents set by President Roosevelt: It was the first time an American President had ever visited Africa and the first time in U.S. history that a sitting President had ever left the country during a time of war.

Much of the strategy detailed by the Allied leaders and their top military commanders at Casablanca concerned the continued Allied efforts in the Mediterranean, including amphibious and airborne invasions of Sicily and Italy. But again, as before, the focal point of the conference was on the anticipated cross-channel invasion of northern France. The successful campaign in North Africa and the planned operations across the Mediterranean were to be but a strategic effort to force Hitler to divide his forces, thereby weakening his military might in France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Only then could D-Day commence.

Pointblank

During the Battle of Britain, the German Luftwaffe had validated the previously under-recognized value of strategic bombardment. It was only the sheer guts and determination of the British citizenry under the valiant leadership of Prime Minister Churchill that had prevented utter destruction and surrender a year before the United States entered the war. America's decision to at last enter the war that had been going on for years was precipitated by Japan's unprecedented lesson in the power of military aviation. As a result, for the first-time aerial combat strategy became a major concern for Allied war planners. The air effort and the conduct of strategic bombardment against Germany were addressed in the President's war plan in early 1941 and in the post-Pearl Harbor Arcadia Conference.

Though the U.S. Mighty Eighth Air Force had been conducting bombing operations for six months prior to the Casablanca Conference, their impact on the war effort had been negligible for lack of aircraft and due to the transfer of much of their assets to North Africa for Operation Torch. All of that changed in January 1943 with the Pointblank directive that ordered around-the-clock, the unrelenting bombing of German targets (the R.A.F. bombing at night, the Mighty Eighth striking in daring daylight missions.)

Targets defined by the Pointblank directive were broad: submarine pens, enemy airfields, factories, bridges, railroads, and anything else that contributed to the success of Germany to carry on the war. Early in 1943, the Eighth Air Force struck primarily against the submarine pens that flooded the Atlantic with U-Boats with

which to rule the seas and prevent American soldiers and war materials from reaching Great Britain.



Though there were no *safe* targets, compared to that which

was to come these early missions at least limited the time heavy bombers had to remain over enemy-controlled land where they were subject to anti-aircraft fire or land-based fighters. On January 27, 1943, General Ira Eaker, commander of the Eighth Air Force, sent more than fifty bombers across the North Sea to bomb the shipyards at Vege sack. It was the first American air strike into Germany since the end of World War I. By summer, with the arrival of additional bombers and aircrews, General Eaker was able to field larger and larger formations and on July 17, 1943, his assets had increased to the point that he was able to field his first formation of more than 300 heavy bombers.

Large bomber formations were crucial to Eaker's daylight, strategic bombardment approach to the Pointblank directive. The RAF flew only at night when darkness provided some shield from enemy fighters. But the same darkness that hid them from gun crews on the grounds and enemy pilots in the air also masked targets from the bombardiers. R.A.F. bombardiers used radar bombing, a rudimentary method of identifying their targets by contrasting the radar echoes of water and land, to try and map out the terrain otherwise unseen below, in order to locate targets. The practice resulted in bomb loads falling across large areas, hopefully, some striking the intent ended targets, a method that became known as Area Bombing.

With the newly introduced Norden bombsight, General Eaker believed that daylight missions gave his bombardiers the ability to rain greater destruction with pin-point accuracy on enemy targets. Visual bombing in broad daylight was the controversial strategy of the Mighty Eighth, an experiment opposed by the R.A.F. but subsequently argued successfully by Eaker at the Casablanca Conference. Inbound to target the American bombardiers were able to actually SEE and identify the assigned aiming point through the Norden bomb. The computerized bombsight then actually flew the aircraft

to enable the bomb load to be delivered with considerable precision. An ancillary advantage to the visual bombing was the post raid intelligence gleaned. Bombs dropped at night on an image reflected on a radar screen could only be seen as exploding blossoms of light far below. There was no way to tell how many actually hit their targets, or for that matter if the image on the screen was truly the assigned target. Photo reconnaissance the following day was also unreliable, as it was difficult to distinguish damage inflicted from the previous night's raid from damage that was days, or even weeks, old. During visual bombing raids, it was relatively easy to watch the trail of falling ordnance, noting how the pattern fell on or near a visually recognizable aiming point.

Daylight visual bombing, despite its advantages, was a dangerous practice. In clear, well-lit skies, Eaker's bombers more vulnerable to enemy fighters which swarmed the combat theater, especially by the summer of 1943. In 1942 only 38% of the Luftwaffe's fighter force was operating on the Western Front, with 43% in the east and the remainder in the Mediterranean. By the summer of 1943 nearly half of Hitler's fighters had been shifted to defend against Allied aerial attacks mounted on France, Holland, and Germany from Great Britain.

On short-range missions, General Eaker's bombers found some protection from fighter escorts, but as the targets became more distant the limited fuel the fighters carried prohibited them from making the full trip. On long-range missions when the fuel-starved fighter escort was forced to turn back, Eaker's bombers were forced to fend for themselves, relying solely on their impressive array of machine guns and the collective might of their sizable formations.

On Saturday, July 24, 1943, General Eaker sent more than 300 bombers on a 2,000-mile attack on German industrial plants in Norway. Most of the trip was the flight over the North Sea and little resistance was met over the target; the Eighth lost only one bomber. In the following days, his airmen were not so fortunate when they struck in Hamburg, Hanover, and other targets deep inside Germany. These long-range missions, the first into the heart of Germany's war production facilities, were the basis of the Pointblank directive. Reaching these important targets, however, placed the inbound formations over occupied territory for a dangerous period of time and casualties began to mount. Eighty-eight bombers were lost during Little Blitz Week and more than 900 American airmen were killed, wounded, or missing in action.



On August 17 the Eighth Air Force celebrated the

beginning of their second year of combat operations by dispatching 376 heavy bombers against Schweinfurt, where half of Germany's ball bearings were produced, and also against the Messerschmidt factory at Regensburg. The deepest penetration of German territory by American bombers to date, it cost 60 bombers destroyed (16% of those sent) and 55 damaged beyond repair.

Undeterred by the high casualties, the Eighth Air Force continued to pound Germany's war production. A September 6 mission against the ball bearing works at Stuttgart cost 45 of 262 bombers dispatched (17%), and a series of raids the week of October 3-10 that sent a total of 855 Flying Fortresses and Liberators deep into enemy territory cost another 88 bombers (10% casualties). That latter period became known as Black Week, but the worst was yet to come.

On October 14 the Mighty Eighth returned to Schweinfurt with 257 heavy bombers, including fifteen B-17s of the 305th Can Do Bombardment Group. As quickly as the formation's fighter escort was forced by their limited fuel to turn back, German fighters moved in with abandon. In less than an hour, 28 heavy bombers went down to enemy fighters or to flak, and 31 heavily-damaged bombers fell from the sky trying to get home after dropping their bombs. A sixtieth bomber was forced to ditch in the English Channel and five were abandoned in the air or crash-landed in England. The 23% casualty rate was stunning, marking the date as Black Thursday.

At Chelveston Air Field in England, two badly shot-up Fortresses of the "Can Do" Group managed to land and taxi to a stop. Anxious ground crews milled around, scanning the skies for the remaining thirteen bombers of the 305th that had taken off earlier that morning. "Where's the rest of the ships?" the group commander reportedly inquired.

"Sir," answered a haggard veteran of that deadly mission, "there are no more ships. We are the only ones left."

Throughout the summer and fall of 1943, the men of the Mighty Eight had valiantly risen above the obstacles they faced on a near-daily basis over enemy territory to carry on their mission. The fateful October mission to Schweinfurt, by Allied estimates, had cut German ball-bearing production in half. But Black Thursday struck a blow to the psyche of the airmen that was hard to recover from. In order to accomplish the job, set before the Mighty Eighth of destroying Germany's ability to fill the skies with fighters, and wrest from the Luftwaffe aerial superiority over France before ground troops crossed the English Channel, something had to change. The Eighth Air Force could not sustain such heavy losses and continue operations.



In the early days of the war, American bomber

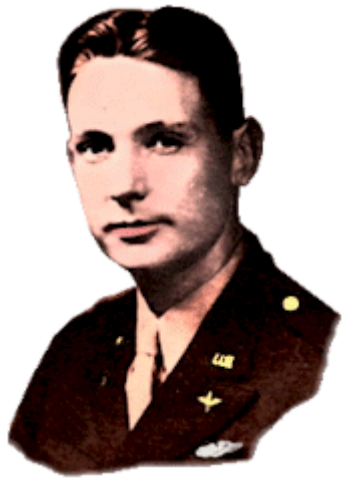
formations were escorted across the Channel by British Spitfires with a fuel supply that enabled them to travel only 175 miles from their home fields. The P-47 Thunderbolts that arrived in May 1943 were formidable fighters, but their range was little better than that of the Spitfires until the innovative American airmen began adding 70-gallon belly tanks, extending their range to 340 miles. By fall, when the Eighth Air Force began striking deep into Germany, 108-gallon drop tanks gave the fighters a range of 375 miles, enabling them to escort about as far as Hamburg.

In November the first long-range P-51 Mustangs arrived at Boxted Airdrome in England. With auxiliary drop tanks, these new fighters were capable of escorting bomber formations 850 miles, enabling them to protect a formation all the way to targets deep in Germany and back home again.

In December the Mustangs flew their first missions, demonstrating their long-range capabilities across the North Sea during the Battle of Bremen. Still rebuilding from the heavy losses of October, the Mighty Eighth mounted missions primarily across the North Sea into northern Germany. Not until more Mustangs arrived would they fly again so deep into Germany.

Meanwhile, the 305th Bombardment Group struggled to recover from the loss of 13 of 15 bombers and 130 of the 150 airmen who had flown the Schweinfurt mission.

Lieutenant William "Bill" Lawley



Twenty-three-year-old William Robert Lawley arrived at

Chelveston, England, in November as a B-17 replacement pilot for the Can-Do Group. Born and raised in the small town of Leeds, Alabama, he enlisted for flight training in August 1942 and earned his wings in April 1943.

Lieutenant Lawley and his 9-man crew trained in Florida in the late summer, learning to work together to fly their big Fortress, navigate accurately to an assigned location while gunners defended their bomber, and accurately release their bomb load on an assigned target. Each man in the Flying Fort had specialized skills, but the success of a bomber crew demanded the highest level of teamwork under the guidance of the pilot, who was the aircraft commander.

Lieutenant Paul Murphy flew in the right-hand seat as Bill Lawley's co-pilot, while the crew's two other officers, Lieutenant Seraphine (Navigator) and Lieutenant Harry Mason (Bombardier), performed their own important work below the cockpit in the clear Plexiglas nose. Behind the cockpit, Staff Sergeant Rowley manned the top turret guns, a position usually assigned to the Flight Engineer. Behind the bomb racks were the radio room where Staff Sergeant Dempsey handled communications, and immediately behind and below his cubicle hung the Ball Turret where Sergeant Kobierecki literally filled one of the most uncomfortable, yet critical, positions in the bomber.

Behind the hatch of the Ball Turret were open windows on either side of the fuselage from which the waist gunners manned their swiveling 50-caliber machine guns while frigid air streamed in at 400-miles per hour. At bombing altitude, the temperature was often minus forty degrees—and colder, and Sergeants Speers and Ralph Braswell suffered through much misery to rain fire on would-be attackers from either side.

Finally, after a long crawl through the narrow confines of the tail section, Sergeant Alfred Wendt crouched to protect his airplane from attacks on the bomber's rear in the Tail Gunner position. The stinging bite of the tail gun had claimed many German fighters, and the enemy quickly learned that attacks on the nose were usually the safest route of attack, despite guns manned by both the Navigator and Bombardier when the ship was under siege. In fact, outside the cockpit, every man in the bomber regardless of his rank or his specialty, was a gunner—prepared to fight off German

fighters should they move in to intercept a bomber on a mission.

Bill Lawley's Crew



*Standing (L-R) Lawley,
Murphy, Seraphine, Mason.
Kneeling (L-R) Wendt, Kobrecki,
Braswell, Speers, Rowley, Dempsey*

Such mutual responsibility demanded that every aircrew learn to work as a team, and the men often became close friends. The officers relied upon the crew's enlisted men, non-commissioned officers all of them, to do whatever was necessary to protect their ship. The NCOs in turn, quickly developed confidence in their officers in general, and their pilot in particular, to skillfully guide them all in performing their mission and then do whatever was necessary to bring them safely home. Lieutenant Bill Lawley was a bright, well-trained, and caring leader that inspired confidence and pride in the men of his Flying Fortress.



Ralph Braswell & Bill Lawley

Following training in Florida Lieutenant Lawley and crew were

assigned to duty in England and flew north to prepare for their trans-Atlantic flight. Traversing the east coast, they were forced to land in Maine to have an engine replaced, and while on the ground Lieutenant Lawley found an artist to paint the name "Cabin in the Sky" on his B-17. After reaching England however, the crew was separated from their newly-christened bomber and sent by railroad train to Chelveston to help rebuild the 305th Bombardment Group.

Following initial combat training upon arrival in England Lieutenant Lawley and his crew, at last, began flying their first missions. As was customary, the first flights were made with more experienced aircrews, and Lawley's team found itself shifted around to fill in for vacancies on other ships in the Can-Do Group that was still recovering from the heavy losses of the Schweinfurt mission. From December to mid-February Lieutenant Lawley and most of his men each flew nine missions, sometimes with other crews, sometimes together in whatever B-17 was available.

Tail Gunner, Sergeant Alfred Wendt, was the crew's first and only casualty. While filling in on a vacant position for another bomber crew Sergeant Wendt's Fortress went down over enemy territory. He spent the rest of the war in a Prisoner of War camp, and Sergeant H. A. Malone was transferred in as his replacement for Lawley's crew, a team that was still in search of their own airplane.

Aircrews were not all that were shuffled around as needed in the fall of 1943. Prime Minister Churchill and President Roosevelt had met in Quebec in August; again, the chief topic of discussion was a cross-channel invasion of the European continent. That invasion began taking shape during a series of meetings in Cairo and Teheran from November 23 to December 6. The Allied leadership councils of war included Chiang Kai Shek, Turkey's Ismet Inonu, and others as war planners hammered out details of their global mission, including the war in Asia. But as always before, it was the invasion of the European continent that was foremost in the minds of the strategists and planners.

After three days of meetings in Cairo, the American President and British Prime Minister met for three days in Teheran with Russian Premier Joseph Stalin. They promised the Soviet leader that the Western Allies would give priority to Operation Overlord and Operation Anvil, the invasions of both Northern France and Southern France. The representatives of the three nations also laid out their goals in the "Declaration of the Three Powers" that stated:

"We-The President of the United States, the Prime Minister of Great Britain, and the Premier of the Soviet Union, have met these four days past, in this, the Capital of our Ally, Iran, and have shaped and confirmed our common policy."

"We express our determination that our nations shall work together in war and in the peace that will follow. As to war-our military staffs have joined in our round table discussions, and we have concerted our plans for the destruction of the German forces. We have reached complete agreement as to the scope and timing of the operations to be undertaken from the east, west and south."

"The common understanding which we have here reached guarantees that victory will be ours."

At the First Cairo Conference (November 23 – 26) Winston Churchill agreed to a United States command for Operation Overlord. Following the Teheran Conference (November 28 – December 1) Churchill and Roosevelt returned to Cairo to settle the details which included establishing a unified command in the Mediterranean under General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson. General Dwight D. Eisenhower was appointed to become Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force effective January 1, 1944.

D-Day was set for May 1, 1944 – four months thereafter.

The problem of Germany's continued aerial supremacy over Western Europe remained a major obstacle to Operation Overlord. British Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder was chosen to become Eisenhower's deputy and a realignment of the U.S. Army Air Forces command structure was ordered. Already the 9th Air Force Command had been moved from the Mediterranean for close tactical support of Operation Overlord. From December until the invasion began, however, the rapidly building 9th Air Force committed its assets, including newly arriving P-51 Mustangs and medium-range bombers, to supporting the Mighty Eighth in Pointblank. Just how critical that mission became clear on December 3 when Air Chief Marshal Charles Portal sent a memo to the Combined Chiefs of Staff advising that Pointblank was three months behind in relation to the tentative May 1, 1944, date for D-Day.

On December 9, one week after the end of the Second Cairo Conference, U.S. Army Air

Force Chief Hap Arnold began realigning his Air Forces to accomplish the goals set out by the Allied Leadership and to get Pointblank back on schedule. In one of Hap's more controversial decisions, General Eaker was ordered to the Mediterranean to become commander of the Mediterranean Allied Tactical Air Forces (MATAF) which included the 12th and 15th U.S. Army Air Forces and the British Desert and Balkan Air Forces. While the move was seen as something of a promotion, General Eaker protested in vain his transfer from the Mighty Eighth that he had worked so hard to build.



During December General Eaker prepared to depart

England with a big show of force, demonstrating how far his Eighth Air Force had come since their first mission eighteen months earlier when two-dozen American bombers had made a quick sortie across the channel into France. Repeatedly Eaker's Flying Fortresses and Liberators pounded shipyards at Bremen, Wilhelmshaven, Kiel, and Emden in northern Germany. On December 13, of 710 bombers dispatched, 649 reached and bombed their targets, the first Eighth Air Force mission to exceed 600 bombers in number. By the end of the month, more than 13,000 pounds of bombs were dropped by Eighth Air Force bombers on German targets, marking the first time in the war that American bomb tonnage exceeded that of the R.A.F. On December 30 more than 650 bombers struck deep into Germany for the first time since Black Thursday, attacking the chemical works at Ludwigshafen. This time, escorted to target and back by P-51 Mustangs, they suffered the loss of only 23 bombers.

On January 5, 1944, while more than 400 heavy bombers were striking targets in Germany and France, General Jimmy Doolittle flew from North Africa to England to assume command of the Eighth Air Force. General George Patton sent his friend a congratulatory letter to which Doolittle responded: "Don't know whether or not congratulations are in order. I have a bigger and more interesting job, but at the same time it is infinitely more difficult than the one I had down below (North Africa) ... Down there, where you were not 'under the guns,' any modest success was apparently appreciated. Up here miracles are confidently anticipated."

The day after Doolittle's arrival, 420 of his bombers returned to Ludwigshafen to bomb the Farben Industrie plant, one of Hitler's two largest chemical plants. This time only twelve American bombers failed to return. It was to be the calm before the

storm.

By the time General Doolittle inherited the Mighty Eighth, despite the heavy losses of the previous year American determination in production gave him 25 heavy bomber groups and 15 fighter groups at his command, augmented by 18 fighter groups of the Ninth Air Force (to support Eighth air force operations until D-Day.) The first long-range P-51s had arrived in England and demonstrated their capabilities throughout the previous month. Amid intense pressure from the Combined Bomber Offensive (CBO) to strike often, strike hard, and strike in large numbers against Pointblank targets in Germany, the stage was finally set to fully demonstrate the value of daylight strategic bombardment and to validate the USAAF mantra, verbalized by General Kenneth Walker in 1931 and spelled out in AWPD-1 that: "The well-organized, well-planned, and well-flown air force (bombing) attack will constitute an offensive that cannot be stopped."

Cloudy winter weather now seemed the only obstacle for mounting massive formations for deep penetration missions to destroy the German war machine. In the winter of 1943-44, the weather seemed to be allied with the Axis and presented formidable opposition to achieving the results the CBO was calling for from Doolittle's frustrated bomber crews. From October through February major storms moved across German targets and the English Channel nearly every three days. Even when the cloud cover over England was light enough to allow Eighth Air Force bombers and fighters to take off and assemble information over the Channel, the impenetrable carpet remained almost continuously over the European continent, masking critical industrial targets that cranked out a daily supply of new German fighter aircraft.

The Mighty Eighth had learned the previous winter how difficult the winter weather could make mounting daylight, visual bombing raids. To enable daylight raids through cloud cover, H2X radar-equipped Pathfinder airships of the 482d Bombardment Group had begun operations in the fall of 1943. Each of the specially fitted B-17s with their highly trained aircrews was tasked with leading formations to target when cloud cover made it impossible to locate the aiming points through the Norden bombsight. Each Pathfinder bomber would lead a wing of sixty heavy bombers to the target, marking the aiming point with parachute flares for the inbound formation. The practice was an area bombardment technique, similar to that practiced at night by the R.A.F., and but for luck, tended to be all-too-often ineffective. Radar, in 1943-44, was in its infancy and still a rudimentary science. The terrain was reflected on the Pathfinder's screen in shades, indicating a dark pattern for bodies of water, a lighter pattern for land, and bright areas for towns or cities. Targets such as Bremen which was located on the northern coast of Germany were relatively easy to find with accuracy, but targets deep inland melded into an almost unbroken light shade on the screen, except in those unusual situations where a large river broke up

the pattern. This fact, perhaps far more than the heavy losses sustained in the October missions deep into Germany, accounted for the fact that most of December's missions had been flown against Bremen and other targets on Germany's northern coast.

On January 11 the cloud cover at last lifted enough for General Doolittle to dispatch 633 bombers to attack Luftwaffe fighter plants at Oschersleben, Halberstadt, and Brunswick, the deepest penetration into the heart of Germany since the tragic Schweinfurt mission nearly three months earlier. As the formation reached the European continent, however, the weather closed back in and inclined Doolittle to recall the mission when the lead flights were only 50 miles from the target. Most turned back but General Robert Travis, commanding the First Division, elected to continue towards his objectives at Oschersleben. Despite the round-trip, P-51 Mustang escort, and a valiant one-man stand against 30 enemy fighters that earned James Howard a Medal of Honor, more than 500 German fighters tore the First Division apart. Of 238 heavy bombers (including the leading combat wing of the second formation) that ignored the recall and continued to target, 60 were lost. This reflected a 25% loss rate and Eighth Air Force veterans of the previous year recalled the January 11 mission as the Second Schweinfurt.

On January 16 General Dwight Eisenhower assumed duties as Supreme Commander of all Allied forces in Europe and set up the Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEP) at Bushey Park in London. Four days later General Carl Spaatz assumed responsibility for command of the U.S. Strategic Air Forces in Europe (USSAFE). It was a move designed to coordinate all Allied aircraft in the theater towards the common goal of paving the way for Operation Overlord and then lending tactical support to ensure its success. It placed Doolittle and his Eighth Air Force under General Spaatz, along with General Nathan Twining's Mediterranean-based 15th Air Force. The concept was to unify command for the bombardment of Europe, in contrast to the Luftwaffe's structure of having separate commands for Germany and France. Under Spaatz, Doolittle's bombers would attack from England, while the 15th Air Force heavy bombers struck from below to attack targets at the far range of the Mighty Eighth.

On January 24 Jimmy Doolittle dispatched the largest bomber force yet, 857 bombers, to attack transportation and industrial targets inside Germany. Poor weather and heavy clouds and contrails over the English Channel made it nearly impossible for the bombers to form up, and again General Doolittle called his bombers back. It was an inauspicious beginning for the new commander of the Mighty Eighth and drew a prompt rebuke from his friend and boss, General Spaatz.

On January 29 a massive flight of 763 heavy bombers was led deep into Germany by Pathfinders to hit the war industries at Frankfurt/Main. Weather not only precluded visual bombing but caused 46 bombers to deviate from their planned bomb route to

attack Ludwigshafen as a T/O (Target of Opportunity.) Doolittle's bombers met heavy enemy resistance but only 29 bombers were lost. That 3% casualty rate was half the "acceptable rate of casualty" (6%) that had been the norm in the previous months and validated the importance of the new long-range Mustang escorts.

On January 30 another 701 bombers were dispatched to attack Brunswick, suffering only 20 losses. Again, however, the overcast relegated the mission to blind-bombing and forced 51 crews to unload over T/Os instead of their primary target. The scenario was repeated again two days later when more than 200 of the 433 heavy bombers sent to attack the railroad yards and industrial plants at Frankfurt/Main unloaded on T/Os.

In the first six weeks of the year 1944, the poor winter weather allowed Eighth Air Force crews to fly missions on only twenty-one days. Of those missions, only six were accomplished by visual bombing, and only two of those six were against major industrial targets inside Germany. The situation was no better for the Fifteenth Air Force, based in the Mediterranean and tasked with attacking German from below. With D-Day looming and now less than three months away, the German factories continued to operate at near capacity, these Pointblank targets shielded by weather that precluded the kind of missions the CBO had envisioned or when Pathfinder missions were flown despite the weather, hidden from accurate bombing by consistent 10/10 cloud cover.

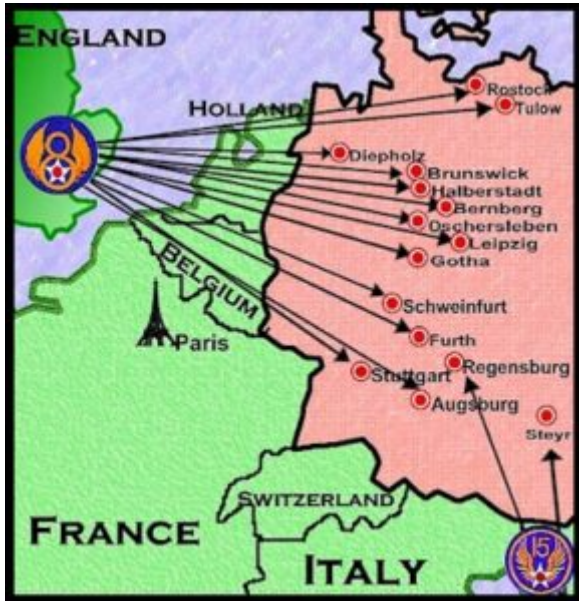
The urgency of the nearly-stalemated air war was reflected in the CBO directive issued on February 13, ordering: "The progressive destruction and dislocation of the German military, industrial and economic systems, the disruption of vital elements of lines of communication and the material reduction of German air combat strength, by the successful prosecution of the combined bomber offensive from all convenient bases." That new directive further established the priorities for targets with industries focused on German fighter aircraft production (including ball-bearing production) at the top of the list. It was a refinement of the Pointblank directive that was welcomed by the American aircrews, all of whom were eager to destroy the Luftwaffe and claim aerial superiority over Europe. It was the embodiment of a mission code-named Argument that had been designed the previous fall, modified repeatedly throughout the winter, and postponed again and again because of the prohibitive weather.

With the heavy influx of new aircraft and crews, increasing numbers of P-51s for escort, and the misery of the cold, damp weather gnawing at morale, the Mighty Eighth was poised for a massive strike. Only the weather stood in the way of launching Operation Argument.

On February 19 a pressure area began developing over the Baltic and Allied weather forecasters, for the first time in months, saw hope that it would move southeast to

clear the skies over Europe. Operation Argument was ordered operational, and mission directives were sent to General Doolittle in England and General Brereton in the Mediterranean to order a maximum effort for the following morning.

Big Week (February 20 – 25, 1944)



By eight o'clock on the evening of Saturday,

February 19, orders were received by Group commanders across England and the Mediterranean announcing the following morning's mission. Throughout the night and into the early morning hours the typewriters in scores of fog-shrouded headquarters hammered out details of the most impressive American bombing raid ever mounted. All of the targets were inside Germany, fully a dozen of them, and they would be attacked from two directions, by two American Air Forces (8th and 15th), mounting more than 1,000 bombers and escorted by 17 American Fighter Groups and 16 R.A.F. Fighter Squadrons.

The operational orders marked the opening day of Operation Argument, a week of heavy, sustained, around-the-clock bombing of critical Luftwaffe production facilities including return missions to Schweinfurt and Regensburg. From Sunday, February 20, until the following Friday, more than 3,300 bombers of the Eighth Air Force and more than 500 Fifteenth Air Force bombers would drop 8,231 tons of bombs—nearly as many as the Mighty Eighth had unloaded in its first year of operation, on nearly two-dozen targets deep inside Germany. In that six-day period American fighters' planes of the Eighth, Ninth, and Fifteenth Air Forces would fly 3,673 sorties. At night the R.A.F. would keep the pressure on, mounting a nearly 600-bomber mission against the Messerschmitt factory at Augsburg.

With conditions favorable for visual bombing of most targets, the offensive was not only massive, but effective in the destruction meted out to enemy aircraft production. Perhaps more importantly however, American fighters and bomber gunners claimed more than 517 German aircraft shot down in the air and stricken from the Luftwaffe arsenal. It was a rate of loss from which the enemy air force would never

recover.

Big Week, as the six-day Allied blitzkrieg came to be known, was an impressive display of how far American aerial warfare had progressed in just two short years of combat. It came however, at great cost. The three fighter commands lost 29 pilots and planes. The Eighth and Fifteenth Air Force lost a total of 226 heavy bombers, each with a crew of ten men.

At Chelveston Airdrome Lieutenant Bill Lawley got the wake-up call at 0300. One hour later the mess hall began serving breakfast to the more than two-hundred airmen of the Can-Do Group that within hours would be flying into history. For Lawley and most of the men in his crew it would mark their tenth mission and, with their assigned target the Messerschmitt assembly plant at Leipzig, it would be their first mission deep into Germany. It was also to be his crew's first mission in their own airplane, Cabin in the Sky III. As Lieutenant Lawley prepared to takeoff with the dawn however, there were no letters on the nose to note his Flying Fortress' name. There hadn't been time to christen it.

The B-17 was brand new and flying its first mission.

Launching 1,000 big bombers and 500 fighter aircraft nearly simultaneously from scores of small airfields across England was no small feat. Never before in U.S. Air Force history had so many airplanes been mounted for a single mission in any theater of war. On this morning, despite the promises of mostly clear weather over the targets inside Germany, the weather across England seemed no different than in previous days: cold—barely above freezing, damp, misty, and overcast with cloud cover at 3,000 feet.

The challenge was to get the various bomber groups stationed in scattered airdromes across England fueled, armed, and warming up near the runways well in advance of the launch time. When the command to take off was issued a signal flare was fired from the observation deck. Across the field, dozens of big four-engine bombers, each with more than 2,000 gallons of fuel, more than two tons of bombs, and ten dedicated American airmen, had ten minutes to warm their engines and get in position for takeoff. Take off order was critical to assembling in formation once airborne, and timing was crucial. The big bombers lifted off in thirty-second intervals, usually to climb blindly through the low cloud cover until they broke through to clear skies high above. Then each bomb group would seek out and form up with the other groups that had lifted off from other airfields to form a bomber box for an orderly run to target and, hopefully, successful completion of their mission.

To the casual observer, the process would have looked so well-choreographed as to be

quite simple. To the men in the cockpit, it was quite another matter. All of the training and all of the experience in the world could not make up for the unexpected, and the proverbial Mr. Murphy was present for every launch to enforce his own law that if something can go wrong, it will!

At Polebrook Airdrome, home of the 351st Bomb Group, the flare lit the Sunday morning sky at 0845. One-hundred sixty engines roared to life as forty B-17 Flying Fortresses moved into take-off position. The 351st was dispatching two different flights, the first a box of twenty Fortresses to join the formation attacking Leipzig, and a second formation to join up over the channel with the 91st and 381st Bomb Groups to attack Oschersleben.

Leipzig was the more distant target and the twenty bombers assigned that mission was the first to take off at about 9:00 a.m. Fourteen Fortresses lifted off in neat order and headed out over the English Channel before Murphy's Law intervened. The fifteenth bomber, fielded by a relatively new aircrew, was moving out along the perimeter track to turn onto the runway when it suddenly veered to the right. The cause of the mishap was never confirmed; one explanation indicated that the pilot had veered to avoid a jeep that had crossed its path on the track leading to the runway. Whatever the cause, the right main wheel of the B-17 with tail numbers 42-31763 slipped up to its axel in the soft mud along the track. It was certainly an inauspicious beginning for an aircrew recently arrived and hoping to take off for their second combat mission.

Lieutenant C. Richard Nelson and the Crew of Mizpah



Lieutenant Clarence Dick Nelson watched in frustration as the

other bombers of his group maneuvered around his marooned Flying Fort to take off for the Leipzig mission. Meanwhile, the ground crews worked to dislodge the thirty-ton bomber from the axel-deep mud. By the time they succeeded in pulling the airship back onto the perimeter track the Oschersleben formation had priority on the runway. A man of lesser commitment might have chalked up the situation to bad luck, aborted, and waited for the next opportunity content with the knowledge that every formation included at least one spare bomber to replace a plane that failed to take off or had to abort en route to the target.

Not until 9:40 was the last Fortress of the Oscherslieben formation airborne. By that time no doubt Nelson's comrades had already broken through the clouds, formed up with the other groups headed for Leipzig, and began their trek across the English Channel. Determined to do his job Lieutenant Nelson moved onto the runway and lifted off into the clouds. Five minutes later he broke through into clear sky and adjusted his settings to give him a climb rate of 700 feet per minute at an airspeed of 150 miles per hour, perhaps just enough of an advantage to enable him to catch up to his formation.

Slightly more than an hour later Lieutenant Joe Martin, the aircraft's bombardier, sighted the other nineteen bombers of the 351st Bomb Group at 15,000 feet, miles ahead and slightly below Nelson's trailing bomber. The direct route plotted by his navigator, Lieutenant Walter Truemper, combined with Nelson's own skill at coaxing maximum climb and speed out of his bomber, at last, enabled him to slide into his assigned position on the left side of the formation that was the low box in the larger formation headed for Leipzig. Nelson and the crew had already accomplished a considerable feat in a day that would mark their team forever in Air Force history.

Ten Horsepower

Ten Horsepower, the B-17 with tail numbers 42-31763, was something of a veteran. The relatively-new bomber had been assigned to the 510th Bombardment Squadron in January and had flown five combat missions with four different crews in February. The fifth crew that lifted off in Ten Horsepower on the morning of February 20, 1944, were quite new to aerial combat. In fact, the men of that crew had never met prior to their assembly six months earlier at Alexandria, Virginia, where ten men of different talents and personalities were assigned together to become the crew of a B-17 bomber.

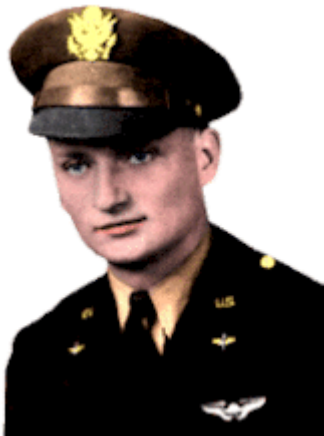
Second Lieutenant Clarence Richard Nelson, Jr., was the leader under whom that new aircrew was to serve. The twenty-four-year-old pilot from Riverside, Illinois, had been around, having enlisted in the Army early in 1941 as a private. His first duties were an assignment to an Army medical battalion. In the fall of 1942, he began Air Corps training at Nashville, Tennessee, earning his corporal's stripes on March 3, 1943, during pilot training at Maxwell Field in Alabama. He earned his wings and commission at Blytheville, Arkansas on May 28, 1943.



Flight Officer Ronald Bartley of Underwood, North Dakota, was

assigned to fly in the cockpit with Lieutenant Nelson. The crew's co-pilot had served as a radio operator and gunner on B-25s in Egypt in 1942 and early 1943. Upon rotating home after his first tour of duty the young combat veteran promptly did the two things that were important to him: he married his sweetheart Bernice, and then traveled with his bride to San Antonio, Texas to begin flight training. He graduated on August 30, 1943, and was promoted to Flight Officer. It was a rating granted to enlisted men who earned their wings but who did not have the requisite formal training to receive an officer's commission.

The air crew's two chief officers complimented each other well. Nelson was a natural leader and commander, but he was also an officer who did not become obsessed with his rank or his authority. Known to his friends simply as Dick, but for military protocol, he would have been comfortable to be on a first-name basis with his men. Ronald Bartlett stood out for his sense of humor and likable personality. Both men were certainly competent in the cockpit. Bartlett experienced some difficulties landing, but in-flight formation he was as good a co-pilot as Dick Nelson could have had seated next to him.



Second Lieutenant Walter Edward Truemper was assigned to Nelson's

crew as navigator. The clean-cut twenty-four-year-old from Aurora, Illinois started his military career as an enlisted artilleryman before gaining an appointment as an Aviation Cadet and navigation school at Ellington Field, Texas. Truemper completed his training earning his commission and rating as a navigator on August 26, 1943. His aptitude and navigational abilities marked him a stand-out and his superiors planned to keep him state-side to train others. Lieutenant Truemper requested instead, an assignment to an operational bombing squadron. In early September he took his place

at the navigator's table in the nose of Lieutenant Nelson's bomber. Joining him "upfront" in the Plexiglas nose was Lieutenant Joseph Martin from Burlington, New Jersey. Martin was a deeply spiritual officer who did not smoke, drink, or gamble. He was also a non-judgmental person who neither condemned or tried to convert, the men who did not share his personal convictions. For the most part, however, the highly efficient bombardier stayed to himself.

It was these four men that were tasked with flying their bomber, navigating to target, and unloading their ordnance with precision and effectiveness on enemy targets. Six enlisted men, all non-commissioned officers, rounded out the ten-man crew.



Staff Sergeant Archibald Mathies and four of his fellow sergeants

arrived in Alexandria from Peyote, Texas, early in September for their own assignments to the Nelson crew. Mathis was a twenty-five-year-old former coal-miner from Finleyville, Pennsylvania. The United States was his adopted country; Archie was born in Scotland and spent the first three years of his life there until his family came to America.

Mathies was an easily likable young man who left the coal mine to enlist in the Army in 1940. He attended Airplane Mechanic School at Chanute Field, Illinois, graduating in October 1941, just weeks before the United States entered World War II. He served stateside until February 1943 when attended Flexible Gunnery School in Florida, before additional training in Peyote.



Staff Sergeant Mathies was assigned as Nelson's flight engineer, one

of the most important and demanding positions outside the cockpit. The flight

engineer was responsible for all aspects of his ship and often knew its nuances better even than the pilot himself. A well-trained and experienced flight engineer could hear changes in the sound of an engine that indicated something amiss or anticipate problems in the intricate machinery of the bomber from nose to tail. He was responsible for servicing the airplane in flight and on the ground and was a critical link between the pilot and both his bomber and its crew.

When the bomber was under attack it was normally the Flight Engineer who manned the Top Turret gun directly behind the cockpit, placing the NCO strategically close to the pilot to respond to almost any situation. A qualified Flight Engineer was not only a leader (among the other NCOs of the crew), but also a very versatile member of the crew who understood the unique workings of the team and could react quickly and with confidence to almost any unexpected situation.

Sergeant Carl Moore of Williamsport, Pennsylvania, was qualified as a flight engineer with training in both aircraft maintenance as well as aerial gunnery. His comrades remembered him best, however, not for his training and skill, but for his beautiful singing voice. He joined the crew as one of its Gunners along with Sergeant Thomas Sowell. Sowell, who considered himself a Texan despite his Arkansas birth, similarly was qualified as both a Flight Engineer and Gunner. In 1942 Russell Robinson had left a job as a tractor mechanic in Springfield, Colorado, to become an Army Air Force pilot. To his disappointment, his twenty-seventh birthday arrived before he completed his pilot qualification examinations. The maximum age for pilot candidates was twenty-six, so Robinson joined Nelson's crew as yet another gunner—as well as the “old man of the crew”.

Sergeant Joseph Joe Rex of Defiance, Ohio, was the youngest member of Nelson's crew at age twenty-one. He was assigned as the airship's radioman. Among the five NCOs of the crew only Rex—the youngest man in the team, and Russell Robinson—the oldest man in the crew, were married.

Shortly after their arrival at Alexandria, the five NCOs were joined by Sergeant Magnus Mac Hagbo of Seattle, Washington. Tom Sowell recalled, “Mac was a good old Norwegian. He was really witty. I wouldn't want to describe his sense of humor on the radio, but he was very intelligent.”* Mack would become the bomber's Tail Gunner, the loneliest place in the airship.

Thus, it was that these ten individual men were brought together in Alexandria, four officers and six enlisted men, men from eight different states ranging from coast to coast and border to border, each with a unique background and individual personality, in order to create a team that would become...



Standing (L-R): Mathies, Rex, Moore, Robinson, Sowell, Hagbo
Kneeling (L-R): Nelson, Bartley, Truemper, Martin

Just how much these ten men learned not only to work together but to develop mutual respect for each other, gives unusual understanding to the incredible actions that would in one single air mission, make them the most decorated aircrew in Eighth Air Force History. Of their team leader, Russell Robinson recalled,

*“Nelson was a fun guy. He was no dyed-in-the-wool officer. He was a soldier. He was just there because he had to be. Nelson wasn’t a man to lord his rank over the enlisted men. He was one of the guys. The crew thought the world of him. And Nelson had a lot of concern for the crew. Our welfare was uppermost on his mind. He would ask if we needed anything, and he was very sincere. He always made sure we had money to go into town or whatever. He took good care of us.”**

Lieutenant Nelson was patient through the training process at Alexandria as slowly but surely, amid good-natured teasing from the crew, Lieutenant Bartley, at last, learned to land smoothly and without bouncing the tires on the pavement five or six times before taxiing to a stop. Nelson also took advantage of those weeks of training flights to occasionally turn over the controls to the enlisted members of the crew. It was more than simply a kind gesture to allow them the thrill of actually flying their bomber; Nelson realized that in the extreme, both he and his co-pilot could be killed or seriously wounded. A few weeks of training flights in Alexandria would never make his men capable pilots, but some basic instruction might enable them to

steady the plane long enough for the crew to bail out in an emergency situation.

One of the most telling examples of the respect the men had for each other, and the deference they demonstrated, was the matter of Sergeant Moore's problem with air sickness. Joe Rex recalled, "I don't remember any time we took off in that plane that Carl didn't get airsick. I don't know how he kept on flying. He took airsick pills, not every time, but they didn't work very well."* Moore could have requested a transfer to a ground element, but he was determined to stay with the team. Sergeant Mathies, who would normally have flown in the Top Turret behind the pilot and co-pilot, willingly gave up his position for the cramped confines of the Belly Turret—a B-17's most undesirable position, on behalf of his crewmate. Standing in the Top Turret, when Sergeant Moore became ill, he could turn and bend over the bomb bay to empty his stomach. Tom Sowell recalled,

"Me and Mack Hagbo, we were real close. We went out together all the time. And we'd play poker. Hagbo was a good gambler. I did O.K. too. All told, I won a healthy pot full of money. I sent it all to my mother to put in the bank in my name."

"Joe Rex never did play poker. He preferred pinochle, and we'd all play that sometimes. He might have gone out with Carl or Archie a couple times, but he didn't much associate with me or Mac 'cause we'd drink beer and gamble." Joe was real religious. That was important to him, and we respected it. He was a good kid.

"Carl Moore was a straight-laced, religious man. He was quiet in manner, but he had a smile for everyone. Carl'd go out with us once in a while, but he didn't drink. He could still have a good time though."

"Archie was very friendly. He laughed all the time. Never seemed to have a serious though really, but he knew he had an important job. I don't know that he went out all that much. He spent a lot of time with the plane.

*"Lieutenant Nelson was a fine commander. He was real pleasant and easy going. He wouldn't ask you to do anything he wouldn't do himself. Now Ron Bartley, you couldn't beat him. He just laughed all the time. He was always pulling something, always kidding somebody."**



Ron & Bernice Bartley/Mauverdene & Russell Robinson
Front: Joe Rex & Carl Moore

Though as a general rule in their free time the officers

and the enlisted men went their separate ways to find diversion and entertainment, they also found occasion to share some of that free time together. They not only came to know each other but to meet the families of their comrades.

In early November Dick Nelson wrote home to advise his parents that he expected his crew to be deployed in the very near future. Richard Nelson, Sr. and his wife Florence drove down from Topeka to say their "goodbyes" and meet their son's crew. Florence Nelson later wrote in her journal:

"We arrived on Sunday, November 14th, where our pilot and his crew gave us a rousing reception...Monday evening the crew invited Dad and me to a lovely dinner just outside of Alexandria. While there, Carl Moore, the Assistant Engineer, sang with the orchestra, as he has a lovely voice..."

"During dinner the boys asked me to name their new plane, which they would be picking up shortly. This was quite a surprise to me, and quite an honor, and I begged time in which to think. After a few moments, the name 'Mizpah' came to me. I told them, and they were especially delighted when I explained that it was a Bible name found in Genesis 31:49, and means 'God be with you until we meet again.' They accepted gratefully, and felt that being from the Bible, the name alone should protect them..."

*"On Tuesday the three boys – Dick, Wally Truemper, and Joe Martin – drove as far as Little Rock, Arkansas with Dad and me. The boys went on to Memphis to see May Lane, and Dad and I went on to Topeka. At the station when we bid the boys good-bye, I hugged and kissed them, and said that was from their mothers too. Little we realized this day, Tuesday, November 16th, was the last time we would see our pilot."**

Within days Nelson's crew was on its way to Kearney, Nebraska, to take possession of a brand-new B-17 bomber, in which they would fly to England and the war in Europe. The flight from Kearney to Syracuse, New York, on November 30, the first step in

their trip to England, was but one more vivid demonstration of the teamwork and consideration the ten men of the Nelson crew had for each other and their families.

“Walter Truemper was deeply devoted to his mother, who was in poor health and was confined to a wheelchair. Seeing an opportunity for a personal ‘good-bye’ gesture, he instructed his sister Ann to have their mother waiting near the sitting room window at a certain time on the afternoon of the flight. He said Mrs. Truemper would know his plane because it’s shadow would fly right into her lap. Truemper’s calculations were right on the mark. Nelson carefully flew the detour his navigator called for. The shadow of the plane moved quickly through the leafless trees, up the long back lawn, and in through the framed glass. Nelson circled around, and the shadow found the navigator’s mother again. It filled Mrs. Truemper’s heart with joy to have her son so close, and to see how well he did his job. At the same time, she felt a great sadness.

*“Her boy was going to war.”**

* From: *Valor at Polebrook, The Last Flight of Ten Horsepower*, by Rick School and Jeff Rogers

Lieutenant Nelson and his nine crewmen arrived in Ireland on December 16, 1943, where they had a brief layover before their scheduled flight to Scotland. While there a strong winter storm damaged their bomber and the crew was separated from the B-17 that had brought them to Europe. The Flying Fortress that they had proudly christened “Mizpah” was left behind for repairs when the crew was sent by boat to Glasgow, Scotland. After repairs, the airship would be placed in the Air Force inventory and the ten men would not see it again.

Nelson’s crew was assigned to the Eighth Air Force Replacement Depot Casual Pool, and the officers, Radio Man, and Flight Engineer were sent to various in-country training programs for additional indoctrination in their specialized fields as well as in Eighth Air Force operations. The remaining four enlisted men spent the following weeks in gunnery training.

On January 19, 1944, Nelson’s crew was assigned to the 510th Bombardment Squadron, 351st Bomb Group (H) at Polebrook, England. Within the week all ten men were reunited to prepare for their first combat missions. The team didn’t as yet have an aircraft assigned to them, so Lieutenant Nelson found an artist who could paint “Mizpah” on each of the men’s flight jackets. It at least provided a small sense of unity and belonging, and reminded all of them that when they did begin to face dangers in the

sky, they could find comfort in the Biblical promise: "God be with you until we meet again."

Nelson's crew arrived in time to experience the frustration felt throughout the Eighth Air Force as a result of continuing bad winter weather that precluded most combat missions. Lieutenant Martin did fly one combat mission when he substituted for a bombardier on another 351st Bomb Group crew, and Staff Sergeant Mathies similarly flew his own first combat mission by filling a vacant spot on the roster of another B-17. At last, on February 6, the rest of the crew was able to do what they had come to England to do.

Lieutenant Nelson's first combat mission was not as a pilot, however, but as co-pilot of a bomber named "April Girl II." Eighth Air Force policy was for new crews to make their first (and often their first two or three) flights with a combat-experienced pilot. On the February 6 mission across the Channel to bomb enemy airfields and Crossbow (rocket facilities), Nelson flew in the right-hand seat with Lieutenant Harold Peters, while Flight Officer Bartley had to sit it out one more time. The weather remained too poor for long-distance flights, so this was a short mission into France and still, the weather was so bad as to force more than 400 of the 600-bomber flights to abort the mission. Tom Sowell later said, "Our first mission was a milk-run. There wasn't nothin' to it. I came back to the barracks and said, 'Shoot, you people ain't got no sweat. You got one damn war over here, and all you need is one Texan to win it. The rest of you all can go home.'"

The weather remained a problem with only four B-17 missions from February 8 until February 13 when extreme cloud cover shut down all missions for nearly a week. When the order came down for the February 20 opening mission of Argument it was to be the first mission by all ten men of Nelson's crew, the first combat mission for Flight Officer Bartley, the third mission for Lieutenant Martin and Staff Sergeant Mathies, and the second mission for the remainder of the crew—Lieutenant Nelson's first as a pilot. Their assigned bomber was named...Ten Horsepower.

Despite not getting off the runway until 9:40, half-an-hour behind the rest of his squadron, by 11 o'clock Lieutenant Nelson had breached the distance to take his place in formation as the low-box in the formation headed to Leipzig. At 11:25 when the formation was five-minutes from the coast of Holland the first enemy fighter found and made a head-on attack at one of the lead bombers of the 508th squadron. The Flying Fort's gunners drove off the Me109 as the formation left the sea behind and entered enemy territory. They were met by the light and inaccurate anti-aircraft fire and continued on.

By noon the formation had shaken off two more single-fighter attacks and crossed into

the air space over Germany. Enemy fighters began to appear in increasing number and the bomber just ahead of Ten Horsepower shot down one attacking Me109 while the Fortress to the right claimed an FW 190. One hour and several more single-fighter attacks later the formation was approaching their Initial Point at 20,000 feet, twenty miles northeast of Leipzig, when about 30 enemy fighters swooped on the formation.

American P-47s dove in to defend the Fortresses amid an increasing hail of anti-aircraft fire from the ground. The bombers held their course while the single and twin-engine fighters of both sides crisscrossed the sky in an aerial dogfight. Lieutenant Martin saw German Messerschmitts diving at Ten Horsepower from high above and to the right. He shouted a warning into the intercom and opened fire with his machine gun when he felt the bomber shudder under the impact of incoming cannon fire.

As the enemy fighters swooped past in their lethal dive, Martin scrambled aft from his station in the nose to check out the cockpit. He was met by a grisly sight; the cockpit was awash with blood and human tissue and the sub-zero wind whipped through the shattered windshield to tear at the still forms of the pilot and co-pilot. Little remained above Flight Officer Bartley's shoulders; he had been nearly decapitated by the 20-millimeter round that had struck through the window. Lieutenant Nelson, the man so beloved by all his crew, was slumped forward, his head and uniform bathed in blood and the weight of his still body against the controls sending the plane into an ever-increasing diving-spiral toward the ground.

Lieutenant Martin struggled to contain both his fear and his horror and crab-walked back to his station to shout into the intercom for any members of the crew who might still be alive to bail out. With a clear presence of mind, he opened the bomb bay doors and released the bomb load, leaving a clear exit for his comrades to jump from the doomed Fortress. As the velocity of Ten Horsepower's dive increased Lieutenant Martin struggled to open the escape hatch in the belly and bailed out.

Floating earthward in his parachute, in a desperate effort to survive, Lieutenant Martin could only look back at the falling B-17.

No other parachutes could be seen.

Cabin in the Sky

"I thought I'd died and gone to heaven," Ralph Braswell recalled of his own flight to Leipzig on that Sunday morning, the tenth combat mission for Lieutenant Bill Lawley's crew in the Can Do 305th Bomb Group. "At last we had our own plane—brand new—never before flown. We hadn't even had a chance yet to paint the name on her. But what excited me was that it was one of the new bombers. I was out of the cold wind; it had sealed windows at the waist gun positions."

Lieutenant Bill Lawley held his place in formation despite the increasing anti-aircraft fire and the savagery of attack by enemy fighters that threw a hail of jagged metal to mar the new paint of his factory-fresh bomber. At 28,000 feet he reached the IP and turned into his bomb run over Leipzig. Fifteen minutes later, as a fresh wave of enemy fighters dove in to turn back the airplanes now over the target, he prepared to release his payload.

Nothing happened!

The bombs remained frozen in the racks, refusing to free themselves from the Fortress. Minutes earlier the pilot had found comfort in the realization that his heavily-laden bomber would soon lighten and give him more flexibility to evade the fanatical enemy in a race for home. Now, moving past the target and under attack, he struggled to turn his still-pregnant Fortress towards home.

Glancing ahead he noted a new wave of enemy fighters streaming directly into his windshield, the flashes of their machine guns and cannon sparkling like a deadly hailstorm. Suddenly Cabin in the Sky reverberated from a head-on impact with enemy cannon fire, one shell ripping through the window on the right. The concussion slammed Lawley backward against his seat as he felt the splatter of blood and tissue that exploded from his co-pilot's body. Then he felt the flow of his own blood from scores of small shrapnel wounds as the bomber went into a near-vertical dive.

While plummeting from 28,000 to 12,000 feet, smoke and flames streaming from one engine, Lieutenant Lawley struggled against the roar of the wind through his windshield and the pain of his own multiple wounds to assess the situation. Lieutenant Murphy, his co-pilot, was obviously dead from the round that had entered through the right windshield and destroyed the cockpit. Most of the controls were shot away and the control panel was covered in blood. Lawley had to act quickly before fire from the burning engine reached a fuel tank and his doomed bomber exploded in the air. Struggling against the inertia of the fall he did his best to pull the dead weight of Lieutenant Murphy away from the controls and try to minimize the fall of his Fortress as he rang the bail-out bell to tell his crew to jump for their lives.

Only one parachute emerged from the stricken bomber as Staff Sergeant Rowley struggled from his position in the Top Turret behind the shattered cockpit to leap to safety—and more than a year of confinement in a Prisoner of War camp.



Before taking to his own parachute Staff Sergeant

Rowley glanced from the radio room to the waist position to ensure that the gunners behind him had heard the bail-out bell. Noting the prostrate body of Sergeant Braswell on the catwalk, Rowley knew instantly that there was a problem.

“I was firing as the fighters came in—all around us,” Mr. Braswell recently recalled. “They were coming in all directions. Two 20-millimeter rounds hit my position one right after another, one of them wounding me in the leg. I fell down and almost immediately a third round came through the window, right where I had been standing a moment earlier.”

In the tail another round had pierced Cabin in the Sky, wounding Sergeant Malone. One of the gunners went aft and dragged his body to the waist where both he and Braswell’s wounds could be treated. Sergeant Rowley headed for the cockpit to advise Lieutenant Lawley that that two members of the crew were too badly wounded to bail out.

Lawley knew he couldn’t leave his plane with two wounded men unable to escape and decided to fight it out and try to make England. After a quick conference with the remaining eight men of his crew, they unanimously elected to stay with the stricken Fortress and put their confidence in Bill Lawley to get them safely home.



Enemy fighters, as was their custom, continued to attack the

battered bomber that was now so vulnerable as to be almost defenseless. With skillful airmanship, Lawley managed to extinguish the burning engine, but before he could slip into the low-lying clouds to try and escape, they hit and set yet another engine on fire.

With great presence of mind, Lieutenant Lawley managed to maneuver his aircraft into the clouds and extinguish the second engine fire. Wracked with pain, he fought against controls that were nearly gone to level out and head for home on only three engines. Ralph Braswell recalls looking out the window at the waist to see that the flaps were completely shot away from the left wing. He knew that, despite the confidence he and his comrades had shown in their decision to stick with the airship, it would take a miracle to reach England.

Lieutenant Mason, the bombardier, moved up into the cockpit to help as best he could. He couldn't move the lifeless body of Lieutenant Murphy out of the right-hand seat so he used a parka to strap the corpse against the back of the seat, away from the controls. Then he took a station, standing between the seriously wounded pilot and his dead co-pilot, in order to help Lawley as best he could.

With blood continuing to flow from his wounds Lieutenant Lawley refused first aid as well as morphine for the pain he was forced to endure. Flying only with his left hand, he exerted a super-human effort to keep Cabin in the Sky airborne against controls that wouldn't easily move and against the extreme weight of the still-unreleased bomb load. Frigid wind streaked through the broken windshield to numb his limbs, but Lawley refused to succumb to the elements. For nearly five hours he skillfully maneuvered through the clouds over enemy-controlled territory. More than once the intrepid pilot, overcome by shock and loss of blood, lapsed into unconsciousness. Each time Lieutenant Mason managed to keep the plane under control until Lawley revived.

Flying low, the sound of anti-aircraft fire indicated that at last he was nearing the French coastline. Mason was finally able to release the bombs in a farewell to the

enemy as the Flying Fortress headed out over the English Channel. Then, while over the frigid waters of the Channel and struggling homeward, one of the three remaining engines ran out of fuel and died. With less than fifty miles to go, Lawley knew he would have to somehow find enough power in two engines to get them all home.

When at last the coastline of England appeared ahead Lawley began looking for any expanse of pasture in which to make a wheel-up crash landing. Suddenly one of the previously damaged engines caught on fire, leaving him with only one engine to stay airborne, and to maneuver his ship to touch down. Spotting a small fighter strip while still south of London, he headed in for a straight-up landing. "It was the Canadian strip at Redhill and Bill flashed the emergency signal" Ralph Braswell recalled. "They cleared us real quick and we went right in while we all held our breath."



Lieutenant Lawley and Sergeants Malone and Braswell

were rushed to a field hospital for treatment. The following day the remaining members of the crew, save for Staff Sergeant Rowley who had bailed out and been captured, returned to their airfield at Chelveston. All of them knew that they had witnessed an amazing act of courage and determination. Every airman went into battle with confidence in his pilot to get him home safely when the mission was accomplished. Seldom had any pilot been more challenged to fulfill that confidence, or endured so much to achieve it, as had Lieutenant William Lawley.

Unfortunately for the crew of Ten Horsepower, there was no pilot to pull their stricken bomber out of its fatal dive and perform a miracle to get them all home safely.



Sergeant Carl Moore was standing at his guns in the Top

Turret, directly behind the cockpit, when the two German ME 109s made their lethal attack on Ten Horsepower. In a matter of seconds, the enemy fighters flashed past in their dive while the American Fortress shook with the impact of cannon-fire that wreaked havoc in the cockpit. Almost immediately Moore felt the bomber peel away from the formation, the force of the move and the bomber's sudden descent flattening him to the floor. At first, he thought that Lieutenant Nelson was simply making an evasive move to get out of the attacking enemy's line of sight. As Ten Horsepower continued to fall in an ever-tightening spin, he suddenly realized something was seriously wrong. Then came the sound of the bail-out alarm, three ringing bells throughout the aircraft, that had been sounded by Lieutenant Martin. Sergeant Moore struggled against the centrifugal force of the falling bomber to push his way towards the cockpit.

Frigid wind whipped through the broken windshield as Sergeant Moore pushed determinedly forward and tried to focus his eyes on a horror that a young man's mind could never thereafter forget. Approaching the pilot and co-pilot from the rear, it was obvious that despite the ringing alarm, the two officers were still in their seats. Pushing his way to the opening between the two seats it became even more obvious that the bomber was in serious trouble. Lieutenant Nelson was slumped forward, blood streaming from his face and apparently dead. Even more gruesome was the scene to the right where Flight Officer Bartley was slumped forward over the controls, his still body covered in blood below the shoulders. Above the shoulders there was nothing left. The enemy round that had entered the windshield on the right had effectively decapitated the smiling young officer whose sense of humor had always cheered the crew.

Sergeant Moore had no way of knowing if there was anyone else left alive in the bomber; the bail-out alarms continued to sound amid the roar of the in-rushing wind and he had no way of communicating over the interphone. Perhaps the other seven men were even now floating to earth in parachutes, leaving Carl Moore to plunge earthward

with the corpses of the two men in the cockpit. But with an uncommon clearness of mind Sergeant Moore realized that if anyone was still alive in the bomber, they would all be doomed within minutes unless he could pull Ten Horsepower out of its violent, spinning dive.

In fact, only Lieutenant Martin had managed to escape certain death. The other seven men were scattered at their stations from nose to tail and were pinned helplessly to the floor, walls, or ceiling of their airship. In the radio room Joe Rex heard the bail-out bell and prepared to make his way to the escape hatch when the centrifugal force of their descent pinned him helplessly against the floor. In the waist Tom Sowell heard the bail-out alarm shortly after the explosions shook Ten Horsepower. He glanced quickly around for the parachute he had neglected to put on, only to watch the package thrown back against the radio room beyond his grasp. Then he was pinned helplessly against the side of the bomber along with Russell Robinson. Both men knew they had only minutes before impact, and neither had the strength to free themselves and struggle to an opening through which to jump to safety.

Alone in the tail, Mac Hagbo was also helpless to reach the escape hatch. In the bomber's belly, Sergeant Mathies was still sealed inside the tight confines of the Ball Turret that took great effort to exit under the best of circumstances. In the clear Plexiglas nose, Lieutenant Truemper had a panoramic view of the ground rushing out to claim his life as Ten Horsepower plunged nearly three miles at more than 150 miles per hour.

Sergeant Moore steeled himself against the cold wind and the grisly gore in the cockpit, forcing his body between the pilot and co-pilot's seats. The space between them provided the crawl-space to the nose, leaving him with no secure footing. Somehow, he found the strength and agility to straddle the opening and reach forward to pull back the control wheels. With the bodies of the two officers slumped forward there was a heavyweight against his desperate efforts. Moore forced his elbows against the pilots' chests, pushing the dead-weight of their bodies back as he summoned every ounce of strength his adrenaline-charged fear could exert against near-impossible conditions. As Ten Horsepower neared the mist of the low-lying clouds, he felt the big bomber begin to respond, slowly leveling out.

The alarm bells continued to hammer in Moore's ear's and with the immediate threat of a direct dive into the ground lessened, he began to look around and take stock of his situation. Looking down between his legs, which quivered not only against the strain of his awkward position but also the frigid air that whipped against them, he could see that the forward escape hatch was opened. Looking behind, he could also see the empty bomb racks and the open bomb bay. Feeling very much alone and still unaware if anyone remained alive in the Flying Fortress, he began to consider his options.

In the nose, Lieutenant Truemper felt the slow release of the G-force that had rendered him helpless to move when Ten Horsepower fell and pushed himself to his feet. He was struggling to reach the cockpit when the bomber suddenly started to fall again, pushing him backward. Sergeant Moore had attempted to reach over to turn off the alarm bells that pounded in his head, the momentary release of his arms on the control wheels sending the bomber into another dive. Quickly he elbowed the corpses of the pilots backward, pulling the controls towards himself, and leveled out again. It was a super-human effort; many of the control cables had been shot away. Moore was still calling upon his body to accomplish the unthinkable when Lieutenant Truemper, at last, entered the cockpit behind him. With help, at last, the two men did their best to bring some normalcy to Ten Horsepower's erratic flight.

In the Radio Room Sergeant, Joe Rex felt the weight that had pinned him helplessly to the floor gradually lessen and struggled to his knees, and then to his feet. Ten Horsepower was porpoising—rising and falling as Truemper and Sergeant Moore fought to stay airborne. Joe struggled to the door to fight his way to the escape hatch just as Sergeant Mathies emerged from the Ball Turret to head for the cockpit. Archie reached out and grabbed Joe by the shoulder, halting the radioman's race to the open bomb bay, and pointed to a corner of the Radio Room. Joe glanced quickly to where Mathies was pointing and saw his parachute. Joe hadn't been wearing it while at his duty station and had nearly jumped without it.

Sergeant Mathies headed for the cockpit where he found Lieutenant Truemper relieving Sergeant Moore from the precarious position between the pilots' seats. He was still trying to keep the ship airborne and in reasonably level flight, his elbows leveraging back two corpses while Sergeant Moore went below and set to the task of closing the bomb bay doors. Archie advised Truemper that the gunners were still aboard and at their stations, then moved in to provide Ten Horsepower's last surviving officer a brief respite.

Even when the bomb bay doors had been closed the icy wind continued to stream through the cockpit from the broken window above the co-pilot's seat. The three men, Truemper, Mathies, and Moore, could not remain in place for very long before their limbs began to quiver and shake against the strain as well as the icy blast. Joe Rex came forward and helped to move Flight Officer Bartley's body below. Mathies settled into the co-pilot's seat and over the following hours did his best to get them all home. When his body could take the exertion and cold no more, Moore or Truemper spelled him off.

Joe Rex returned to his radio room to try and establish communications. He was covered in blood from the grim task of moving Flight Officer Bartley's body and at first, the two waist gunners thought he had been wounded. Joe waved them off and

passed on orders from Lieutenant Truemper—stay at their guns and keep them moving. If enemy fighters saw stationary guns, they would assume the Fortress to be defenseless and strike immediately.

Lieutenant Truemper took stock of the situation, discussing the options with Mathies and Moore. All four engines were turning, the plane was remaining airborne and in reasonably level flight, and her nose was pointed towards England—only a few hours away. The three men agreed that their best option was to remain with the plane and try and reach Polebrook. It was a decision that had serious implications for all seven survivors, and Truemper gave the gunners the option to parachute to safety. The decision to remain in Ten Horsepower and trust in teamwork to get them safely home was unanimous.

Joe Rex went to work tracking down and repairing combat-damaged wires in an effort to restore communications throughout the airship. At the waist Tom Sowell and Russell Robinson kept their guns moving. Robinson was alarmed to see two FW 190s off the right-wing and loosed a volley of fire to chase them back. The enemy fighters paced the bomber, just beyond the range of Robinson's .50-caliber machine guns. After an agonizing eternity that was actually only minutes, the fighters struck. "One shell hit back toward the tail, around the strut of the tail wheel," Robinson recalled. "Tom and I talked about it being awful close to Hagbo, but we couldn't go back to check on him. One shell went right between me and Tom. A hole opened up just over my head. We never could find where it went out." Other shells raked across the right-wing, damaging the aileron of a bomber that was already nearly impossible to fly.

As these two fighters dove past another came in from above. Joe Rex scrambled for his gun, the only one with a position from which to defend Ten Horsepower from such an attack. He opened fire, his accurate aim sending a stream of .50 caliber rounds into the enemy Focke-Wulf. The enemy fighter exploded into flames and careened earthward but not before his own 20-mm cannon tore through Rex's Plexiglas bubble. As Lieutenant Truemper directed Ten Horsepower into the clouds to escape, Carl Moore and Tom Sowell raced to the radio room where they found Joe lying on the floor amid even more blood. This time it was his own.

Carl and Tom bandaged Joe's wounds and administered morphine. When the pain subsided, Rex went back to work, struggling with one good hand to repair the critical radio equipment that had been damaged in the attack. From nose to tail, the saving of Ten Horsepower was a team effort by seven men, each of whom continued to demonstrate the highest degrees of courage and determination. In less than half-an-hour of sheer terror, they had maintained their composure and trusted in their training and in each other, to survive two devastating attacks and begin the long journey home.

With Archie Mathies in the co-pilot's seat holding Ten Horsepower level, Lieutenant Truemper went below to his navigator's table to plot their course. Carl Moore watched his friend determinedly trying to ignore the freezing wind that whipped through the window on the right to numb his aching limbs. Moore determined to try and move Lieutenant Nelson's body to free-up the left-hand seat. When Russell Robinson came forward to check the cockpit the two men bent to the task of moving Nelson. Nelson was larger and heavier than Bartlett, requiring much greater effort to extricate him in the close confines. As the two NCOs jockeyed about to move their beloved commander, they were surprised to find him breathing. Despite his grievous wounds, Lieutenant Nelson was still alive. The two men, believing that further efforts to move Lieutenant Nelson might have fatal consequences, abandoned the idea. For Archie Mathies the news that his friend and commander was still breathing gave increased urgency to his efforts to get his badly-battered bomber safely back to England.

Ten Horsepower cruised northwest at about 5,000 feet, staying just above clouds that could provide quick cover if enemy fighters appeared. Fortunately, none did and for a brief time it seemed that the worst was over.

Shortly after Lieutenant Truemper returned to the cockpit to relieve Archie Mathies, sporadic breaks in the clouds began to expose the low-flying Fortress to enemy gunners on the ground. Shells began to buffet the bomber, bursting ever closer as the gunners probed for the airship's range. Lieutenant Truemper quickly ducked into the clouds to try and hide from view as he droned on.

Flying in the clouds was fraught with dangers of its own, both real and imagined. It was like trying to drive a car moving at more than 150 miles per hour while blindfolded. It was dangerous for an experienced pilot who trained in instrument navigation and who was keenly aware of the problems with angle and depth perception such flight could create. More than one experienced pilot had become disoriented in the clouds and dove into the ground without ever realizing that danger loomed. For Lieutenant Truemper the nerve-wracking duty was compounded by an instrument panel that had sustained combat damage and might be totally unreliable.

Truemper's skills as a navigator at last indicated that he was nearing the coast of Holland. It was time to descend below the clouds and he pulled back on the throttles to begin a cautious descent. Beside him Archie Mathies watched the altimeter and called out the readings in increments of 500 feet, reading backwards from their altitude at 5,000 feet above sea level. It was a long, agonizing process as Walter Truemper was forced to strain every muscle of his body against the controls that had fought every mile of airspeed since the plane had been shot up. Despite incredible fatigue and the freezing wind that froze the exposed areas of flesh on his face and threatened to cramp the muscles in his arms and legs, Truemper summoned both the

courage and determination to do what had to be done. At 4,000 feet there was nothing but mist and haze. Truemper found the descent a fearful experience in which it was easy to become disoriented, but swallowed the bile that rose in his throat to press on. Behind him Sergeant Moore could no longer ignore the airsickness that had always been a problem. He became violently ill, doubling over to throw up into the bomb bay before succumbing to the painful cramps the malady always brought.

Sergeant Mathies called out 3,000 feet in altitude while watching Truemper with admiration. Archie knew from his own periods behind controls that the airship's condition was demanding on the man in the co-pilot's seat. There was constant backward pressure from the column as the Fortress struggled to climb, a dangerous movement that might cause her to stall and plummet to the ground. Archie had spent his own eternities in the previous hours, forcing aching arms to hold the column forward to keep Ten Horsepower level.

For Truemper it was like an endless tunnel, his eyes straining against the fog for a glimmer of light ahead. "Two-thousand feet," Mathies called out, and still there was nothing but gray-white mist before the windshield. Ten Horsepower had dropped dangerously close to either land or the North Sea—either one of which might unexpectedly reach out to suck the plane and its crew into eternity.

"Fifteen-hundred feet," Mathies shouted above the roar of the wind. And then, even as if it seemed that the mist would follow him all the way to whatever lay below, the clouds gave way to wisps of fog through which he could make out the white-capped swells of the sea below. With arms and legs shaking from the exertion and tense descent from the clouds, Truemper breathed a sigh of relief amid the confident smile and warm congratulations of Sergeant Mathies. With cautious, deliberate movements, Truemper began sliding out of the right-hand seat as Mathies slipped in to take the controls. On shaking knees Wally stumbled down to the navigator's table below where he collapsed in his seat, elbows on the table surface and his aching head propped up in unsteady hands. Then, allowing himself only the briefest respite after all he had been through, he went to work to plot the course for home. As the coast line drew nearer, with Mathies at the controls, Truemper went to the radio room to personally handle communications for the wounded Sergeant Rex, who had somehow managed to get the control radio working before pain again overcame him.

Polebrook Air Field

3:33 P.M.

It was quiet in the control tower; the morning formation having taken off hours before and not expected back from either of the 351st Bomb Group's two targets for another hour or two. The only activity had been the return of My Princess, the B-17 that had been launched as a spare for the Leipzig formation. Lieutenant McLawhorn and

the crew of the bomber with a big yellow "Q" on the tail had returned to Polebrook while over the channel and arrived home before noon.

Alone in the tower Sergeant Harold Flint was only slightly surprised to hear static over the radio, followed by a broken voice asking for a heading to Polebrook. It was not unusual for a bomber to be forced, either by combat damage sustained en route or by mechanical problems, to abort and return to base ahead of the rest of the formation.

Minutes passed before the roar of the Fortress' engines became audible in the control tower. Flint prepared to walk the returning bomber through a routine that happened multiple times nearly every day at airfields across England. Battle-damaged bombers, bombers with engines out or landing gear frozen—such emergencies were to be expected, and almost always were dealt with in a calm, professional manner. It was what pilots and control tower personnel trained for, perhaps even expected.

High above and in the distance Lieutenant Walter Truemper keyed the microphone to speak the words Sergeant Flint never expected to hear...words that he would never forget...

"Newflick, this is A-Able calling Newflick."

"The co-pilot is dead. The pilot we think is dead."

"The bombardier has jumped."

"I am the navigator, the only commissioned officer on board."

"What should we do?"

Minutes after that startling radio communication Major Elzia Ledoux, commander of the 509th Squadron, was in the tower and personally communicating with his men as they circled high above Polebrook. He was joined by Colonel Eugene Romig, who had assumed command of the 351st Bomb Group six weeks earlier.

Romig was a veteran, having been one of the first pilots to arrive in England with the 303d Bombardment Group. In his more than a year of combat action with the 303d before his transfer to Polebrook, Romig had been pilot of the bomber in which [Jack Mathis](#) had flown his first mission as a bombardier on November 17, 1942. Four weeks later Romig had earned the Distinguished Flying Cross as co-pilot in a Fortress named 8-Ball, bringing back the badly shot up Fortress after ordering the crew to bail out to safety. Major Romig had again flown with Lieutenant Mathis on March 8, 1943—ten days before Mathis' was killed in the nose of The Duchess, becoming the first airman

in the air war over Europe to earn the Medal of Honor. Over a period of nearly 18-months of combat action, Romig had witnessed almost every emergency imaginable and had seen repeated acts of determination and valor. What began to unfold before him on that Sunday afternoon at Polebrook was unlike anything he had seen before.

While Ten Horsepower circled high above, Romig and Ledoux received reports and assessed the situation. They learned what Lieutenant Truemper had radioed to Sergeant Flint earlier: the copilot was dead, the pilot severely wounded and unconscious, the bombardier was either dead or captured on German soil, and there were other wounded men aboard. They also established through radio communications with A-Able, the call-sign for Ten Horsepower, that the bomber's enlisted Flight Engineer was at the controls and asking for permission to land.

Shortly after crossing the English coastline Truemper had spotted an R.A.F. airfield and requested clearance for an emergency landing. Upon learning that there was no rated pilot aboard the stricken bomber, the British refused. An inexperienced and untrained man in the cockpit attempting to land was a disaster-in-the-making, not only for the aircrew, but potentially for everyone on the ground as well. Ten Horsepower had continued on toward her home field at Polebrook. Via the radio Lieutenant Truemper advised Colonel Romig that he believed Mathies could make the landing. Romig granted permission, and moments later Ten Horsepower lined up on the northeast runway while the tower tried to talk him down. There was no direct radio communication with the cockpit, everything had to be relayed through Lieutenant Truemper.

Mathies lined the bomber up for his landing attempt while the rest of the crew gathered in the radio room, their backs to the wall. The intrepid young sergeant lowered the wheels, then struggled to keep pressure on the sluggish control wheel with one hand while holding the flap switch down with the other. As he came in 100 feet above the concrete runway, he glanced at his airspeed—160 miles per hour—Ten Horsepower was still flying too fast and descending too slowly to touch down. As the end of the runway loomed before him Archie pushed the throttles forward and climbed back into the overcast skies.

Colonel Romig watched A-Able overshoot the runway and climb for air. Perhaps he recalled his own mission, only slightly more than a year before when he was flying in the right-hand seat with Captain William Calhoun in 8-Ball. With the bomber badly-shot up and only two engines turning, with hydraulics out and the entire aircraft shaking violently, upon reaching the English coast Romig had ordered the crew to bail out to safety. Flying without a navigator, in fact with only Calhoun and Romig remaining in the bomber, 8-Ball continued on although neither the pilot or co-pilot knew exactly where they were. Somewhere near London a Spitfire had appeared, then

flown ahead of them to guide them safely to Bovington where they had settled down in a wheels-up landing.

Romig ordered Truemper to have the Flight Engineer climb higher and circle over Polebrook so that the crew could bail out to safety. Then he and Major Ledoux raced outside to get a jeep and drive to the parking stand where Q-Queenie (My Princess) was parked after it had turned back over the English Channel earlier that morning. Meanwhile high overhead, Sergeant Mathies shook off his personal frustration over the aborted landing and climbed to 1600 feet, just below the overcast. On his first pass above the airfield the gunners checked out Joe Rex's parachute, placed his hand in the D-ring and, at the appropriate moment pushed their comrade out the aft escape hatch. Russell Robinson jumped shortly behind Rex but by the time he had cleared the slip-stream, Ten Horsepower had zipped beyond the airfield. Mathies gingerly brought her around for another pass. On this next pass and before reaching the airfield Mac Hagbo jumped, hoping there would be sufficient time for the other two gunners to get also, thereby eliminating the need for a third high-altitude run. Tom Sowell tumbled out of the hatch next and Carl Moore, the last remaining gunner, prepared to make his own jump.

*"Before going aft to bail out, Moore shook hands with Archie Mathies and wondered if it would be the last time. Then he stepped past his top turret and climbed through the bomb bay and into the radio room. Walter Truemper looked up and smiled at his crew mate, and again Carl extended his hand. In that brief moment, each man silently asked God to protect the other, and the two friends parted. Moore moved aft through the now empty fuselage to the open crew door. He turned and looked forward again. Through the open bulkheads of the radio room and bomb bay, Carl saw that Archie had turned around in his seat at the same instant. Moore gave the thumbs up, and Mathies returned the sign, but quickly turned back to the controls. Carl Moore took a deep breath, and moved to jump."**



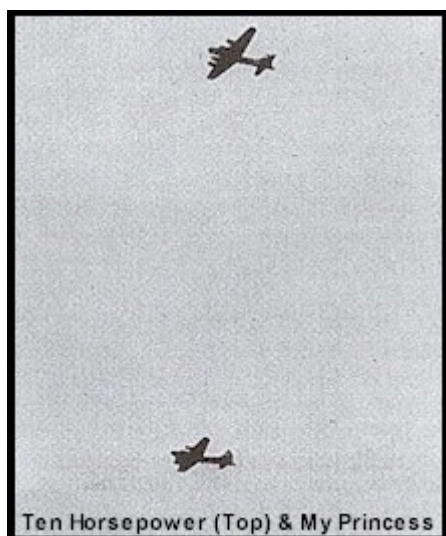
Archie and Walter Truemper were alone now, save for

the body of Flight Officer Bartley and the unconscious Lieutenant Nelson, to face whatever fate lay ahead of them as they tried to accomplish the impossible. And then they were no longer alone—while the gunners had been jumping from Ten Horsepower during the two high passes over the airfield, Major Ledoux had got My Princess airborne and climbed to try and help the two valiant young airmen down. Colonel Romig flew in the right-hand seat. While five parachutes floated slowly earthward, with an

obviously in-trouble Fortress flying erratically above, and with both the Group and Squadron commanders climbing for altitude, an audience of anxious ground-crewman gathered to hold their breath and peer anxiously at the ominous skies above. Few knew exactly what was happening, but all knew they were witnessing something highly unusual. They were silent witnesses to one of the most unforgettable dramas in Eighth Air Force history.

Physical exhaustion, the frigid wind streaming through the windshield, and the sheer terror that had nagged at his psyche for hours became quickly evident in Sergeant Mathies efforts to keep his plane airborne. As My Princess maneuvered ever closer above and off Ten Horsepower's right wing, Major Ledoux did his best to get close enough to inspect the damage to the other bomber, yet keep enough distance to avoid colliding with its erratic flight. From the distance he could see the ragged holes that moved from Ten Horsepower's tail to the waist gun positions, as well as the fist-size holes in the Plexiglas of Joe Rex's radio room turret. The right aileron was badly damaged and fluttering in the wind as if it were about to suddenly rip away from the wings.

Drawing closer, Ledoux and Romig at last were able to scan the cockpit, noting the damage that had been wrought. Archie Mathies looked through the jagged edges of the window and started to wave at them, Ten Horsepower jerking upwards fifty feet as he momentarily loosened his grip on the controls. Mathies quickly focused all of his attention back on flying the bomber as Ledoux jockeyed My Princess to put more air between the two of them in order to avoid a potential mid-air collision.



Colonel Romig attempted to contact A-Able via the radio, and

was unsuccessful in reaching Walter Truemper. The tower advised that though Truemper could communicate with the tower, ship-to-ship communications was apparently impossible. This further complicated an already desperate situation. In order to communicate with the brave young Flight Engineer in the cockpit of Ten Horsepower, Colonel Romig had to pass information to the tower, which in turn relayed the Group Commander's instructions to Lieutenant Truemper, who in turn passed it on to Mathies.

As both bombers neared the Polebrook runway Major Ledoux did his best to guide Ten Horsepower in for a landing. In a 1987 speech at Mathies NCO Academy dedication he recalled those fearful moments:

"We couldn't fly very close formation because a collision was more a probability than a possibility. We attempted to try and contact them again by radio but it was absolutely impossible, so we relayed the messages to them through the tower; a sort of a two-way relay of messages. We told them that we would fly alongside and that we would try to guide them in for a landing. We attempted to do this again, and the landing looked like it was going to be accomplished, and it could have been accomplished however, they still didn't seem to be able to slow down the aircraft enough to cause it to stall for an actual landing. So, they went around again."

By this time the returning aircraft of the morning's mission were beginning to return to England. In a matter of a few minutes the skies would be swarming with aircraft. Time was running out, daylight was fading, and Archie Mathies had already exceeded far beyond a reasonable level of endurance. Shaking off his frustration a second time, his wide turn as he climbed for air after missing the second landing took him wide over England and near the airfield at Molesworth, home of the 303d Bombardment Group. The air above Molesworth was not yet crowded with returning bombers and Major Ledoux suggested that the next landing attempt be made there. Gently guiding Ten Horsepower in, Major Ledoux and Colonel Romig held their breath as Mathies lowered the flaps. The airspeed slowed and for a moment it looked like the third time would be the charm. But, whether due to damage that rendered the bomber difficult to control, the inexperience of the man at the controls, extreme fatigue, or perhaps a combination of all of them, Ten Horsepower overshot the runway and climbed for air again.

It was now increasingly obvious to Colonel Romig that hope for a landing was fading. Relaying his message through the tower to Walter Truemper in the radio room of Ten Horsepower, Romig issued alternative instructions. He told Truemper to have Mathies point the bomber out towards the sea, put it on automatic pilot, and then the two survivors were to parachute to safety.

Both Mathies and Truemper fully understood the implications of that order. While they floated to earth, Ten Horsepower would fly out over the sea until it ran out of fuel and then crash, taking Lieutenant Nelson to a certain death. Despite their own extreme situation, neither man was willing to forfeit any chance Lieutenant Nelson might have of surviving in order to save their own life. Truemper advised Colonel Romig that the two men would jump only if ordered to do so, but that the two of them would only do so reluctantly. Truemper further advised Colonel Romig that the auto-

pilot was so damaged as to possibly fail, dooming all of them anyway. For Romig it was a difficult call and the responsibility of command weighed heavily on his shoulders. At last he radioed permission for Ten Horsepower to turn back to Polebrook and attempt once again to land there.

In his official report Colonel Romig later wrote:

“Instructions were relayed for A-Able to return to Polebrook for any landing attempts, as the Airdrome had been cleared of traffic and prepared for emergency landing. A-Able headed North as directed, but missed Polebrook and joined heavy traffic at Glatton. At this time, Q-Queenie was following about 75 to 100 yards behind at 180 to 190 mph. As A-Able apparently joined traffic at Glatton, he suddenly veered off to the left in a sweeping diving turn past the tower, which, believing him attempting to land, shot red flares. He headed for an open field a mile or so away. As the aircraft neared the ground, the throttles were cut back, as evidenced by the flare-back from the turbos, apparently in an attempt to make a normal crash landing, but the aircraft hit at an indicated speed of 200 mph at a slightly nose-down attitude at 1700 hours. It skidded along the ground for 50 yards or more, then hit a mound of dirt and cart wheeled and broke into pieces.”

Major Ledoux recalled:

“Romig and I were near enough that had the plane violently exploded, we probably would have been hit by some of the flying debris. It was a very sad and shocking sight for both of us. Neither of us said a word for an indefinite time after that.”

Only one man survived the crash of Ten Horsepower—when rescue crews arrived Lieutenant Clarence Nelson was still breathing. Though he died in the hospital later that evening, Archie Mathies and Walter Truemper succeeded in getting their beloved commander home alive.



Mac Hagbo was one of only two of the gunners not injured

when he bailed out of Ten Horsepower. After reaching the ground he joined the other anxious spectators glancing anxiously skyward at Polebrook. None of the airmen who watched, waited, prayed, and held their breath saw Ten Horsepower slam into the hillside a few miles distant and disintegrate. It was not until minutes after the crash that word reached Polebrook that Archie Mathies and Walter Truemper had died in their valiant attempt to get their pilot safely home. The photo of Mac Hagbo at right was taken moments after he received that sad news.

Fully one-half of the crew of Ten Horsepower died in that fateful Sunday mission on the opening day of Big Week. Beyond that tragic fact it must be remembered that, because of teamwork and faith in each other, half of the crew survived. That evening Hagbo and Carl Moore visited their companions in the hospital to share the sad news. The unfolding drama of Archie Mathies' and Wally Truemper's vain but valiant efforts to land Ten Horsepower and get their pilot safely home had been witnessed by hundreds, by fellow airmen as well as by nearby British citizens. The story was captivating and filled the Monday newspapers across England.

On Monday evening a young aircraft armorer with the 4th Fighter Group at nearby Bassingbourne Airfield finished his duties for the day and went to the Red Cross station. Sipping tea and reading the news, it was impossible to miss the story of Ten Horsepower and the inspiring but sad story of Archie Mathies and Walter Truemper. Tears welled up in the eyes of that twenty-one-year-old airmen as he read the account. Then he struggled to compose himself and sought out his commander to request emergency leave. The following morning David Mathies arrived at Polebrook to visit with the five survivors of that fateful mission, and to collect his older brother's personal effects.



Six weeks after the last flight of Ten Horsepower

Walter Truemper's mother was notified that her son would be awarded the Medal of Honor. Because she was too ill to travel to Washington, D.C. to receive the award from the President, Brigadier General R. E. O'Neal traveled to her home in Aurora. On July 4, 1944, the family gathered on the lawn outside the home and Mr. Fredericka Truemper was carried outside and placed in a rocking chair by sons Fred and Carl. After recounting the heroism and sacrifice of Lieutenant Walter Truemper General O'Neal bent forward and hung the Medal of Honor around her neck. There it sparkled in the sunshine, adding its reflection to that of the navigator's wings Mrs. Truemper had pinned to her blouse, as well as the reflection of the Independence Day sunshine on the tears that streamed down her face. Watching from a distance, with tears of their own, stood Mr. and Mrs. C. Richard Nelson.



Less than three weeks later, on July 23, a similar ceremony

was held in Finleyville, Pennsylvania. Mrs. Mary Mathies had made a special request of the Army Air Force that wished to recognize the valor of her son. Standing before the beautifully decorated altar of the First Presbyterian Church where Archibald Mathies had learned lessons in service and sacrifice as a boy, Major General Howard A. Craig hung the Medal of Honor around Mary Mathies' neck. It marked the only time in history that the Medal of Honor has been presented in a church.

Beyond the fact that the double presentation marked only the third time in history that two men from the same airplane earned Medals of Honor was the heroism of the

rest of the crew. For his own heroic actions to save Ten Horsepower, Sergeant Carl Moore was subsequently awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. For his heroic actions to defend his bomber against the diving German fighter, as well as his heroic actions to repair the radio despite his wounds, Sergeant Joe Rex was awarded the Silver Star.

Combined with eight Purple Hearts, this impressive array of awards made the ten men of Ten Horsepower the most decorated aircrew in Eighth Air Force History. The five survivors returned to the air, earning additional awards and medals in the months to come.

Bill Lawley



The incident at Polebrook on Sunday, February 20, 1944,

was a tragedy that would not soon be forgotten. Also not forgotten, nor overshadowed by the sacrifice of Archibald Mathies and Walter Truemper, was the extraordinary heroism and determination of young Lieutenant William Lawley. Bill Lawley and his crew returned to action, the young pilot logging a total of fourteen combat missions by June. On August 8 prior to returning home General Carl Spaatz presented Bill Lawley with the Medal of Honor. Incredibly his would be the first of two Medals of Honor earned in the air during World War II by a young man from the tiny town of Leeds, Alabama.

Bill Lawley remained in the Air Force after the war, retiring as a Colonel in 1959. In the post-war years he never forgot the crew that flew with him in that fateful mission and remained friends with them until his death on May 29, 1999. At the time of his death Ralph Braswell, who had been the waist gunner on Lawley's crew, summed up his feelings about Bill Lawley in an interview for his obituary. Said Mr. Braswell of a visit with Lawley a few years earlier, "He had arthritis, but after I shook his hands I said, 'They're beautiful. They saved my life.'"

Perhaps the best glimpse into the personal character that motivates men like Lieutenant Bill Lawley, Staff Sergeant Archie Mathies, and Lieutenant Walter Truemper to willingly commit their life and future to an unknown fate in behalf of others is

best understood in the words of one of these three young heroes.



In a Mother's Day letter penned in 1943 Wally Truemper wrote his

own beloved mother to note:

"I see my duty to see this war through to a most successful conclusion, so that in the days to come my life can be better for it.

"If it is my lot to be one of those who suffer the extreme sacrifice, I will be proud to do it if our way of life will continue. It is much better for a man to die for his country and for his God if it is to a successful conclusion so that both the kingdom of God and our country will survive."

With all my love, Mom

Your boy, Walter

Special Acknowledgments:

A very special "Thank You" to Mr. Rick School for providing much of the information on the crew of *Ten Horsepower* and their valiant mission of February 20, 1944. Based on more than a decade of research including a visit to the crash site in England, correspondence with family members of the men who died and interviews with the survivors, Mr. School collaborated with Jeff Rogers to author Valor at Polebrook, The Last Flight of Ten Horsepower. The book is available in soft cover and hardcover and is unique in terms of Medal of Honor stories. Mr. School provides not only a well-researched and highly detailed account of the heroism of Archie Mathies and Walter Truemper, but an emotional glimpse of the impact of that mission on all members of the crew. The book also includes the text of the many letters surviving crewmembers and the family of those lost exchanged in the years following the mission. Also available from Mr. School is a Limited-Edition art print of the Last Flight of Ten Horsepower, signed by artist David Poole as well as former crewman Joe Rex, Tom Sowell and Russell Robinson, as well as by Q-Queenie pilot during the ordeal, Elzia Ledoux. To order either or both, please click on the image of his excellent book to visit his website.

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