

## Forrest Lee Vosler

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Deadly Danger... Blind Determination!



In July 1941, six months before Pearl Harbor but

with war seemingly imminent, President Roosevelt proactively requested a War Plan from the Departments of both the Army and the Navy. Lieutenant Colonel Clayton Bissell, a World War I ace and member of the Army's WPD (War Plans Division) suggested that the newly reorganized AWP (Air War Plans Division) be tasked with writing the plan for the implementation of the air assets as an addendum to the Army's report. The resulting report, hammered out in nine days by three of AWP's planning officers, reflected the Army Air Force's prevailing doctrine of precision, daylight, strategic bombardment as the primary role of Army Air Force assets.

This concept, initially postulated by World War I aviation visionary Giulio Douhet of Italy, envisioned air assets as the primary national defense when employed offensively—The best defense is a strong offense. The primary role of these air assets was, in the opinion of Douhet, a bombardment of the enemy:

Bomb and destroy the enemy's own air assets on the ground so that they could not be employed against you, and destroy the enemy's capability to make war by bombing factories, industrial plants, and economic centers.

Ancillary to this practical advantage to strategic bombardment was the negative psychological impact on the enemy populace when they were subjected to regular bombardment. Ultimately, Douhet believed aerial attacks on the enemy's cities would quickly rob that enemy of the will to fight.

While military leaders in Douhet's native Italy, as well as in England and the United States, were slow to acknowledge military aviation as anything more than ancillary to traditional manners of waging war, Germany was quick to build a powerful air arm. It was the might of the Luftwaffe, built up during the 1930s, that concerned men like [Charles A. Lindbergh](#) and [Eddie Rickenbacker](#) into cautioning the United States from

entering Europe's War in the years preceding Pearl Harbor.

Quite frankly, neither Britain nor the U.S. was a match for the Luftwaffe in 1941, and it was only a result of sheer guts and determination that enabled the R.A.F. to turn back Germany's aerial blitz during the Battle of Britain. Winston Churchill aptly summarized the nature of that David and Goliath battle when he noted: "Never have so many, owed so much, to so few."

Following the attack at Pearl Harbor that shattered any American hopes for neutrality in the brewing war, and with subsequent declarations of war on Japan, Germany, and Italy, the defeat of Hitler's Third Reich became the primary focus of the Allied effort. In the Pacific, [General Douglas MacArthur's](#) forces were relegated to what was supposed to be a strictly defensive war of containment of the Japanese, while the Allies went on the offensive in Europe.

Even before the United States entered the war, Germany occupied virtually all of Europe save for neutral Switzerland, and pro-Axis but technically neutral Spain and Portugal. The entirety of the north shore of the European continent from France to Holland was occupied by Nazi forces, establishing a well-fortified wall between London and Berlin. Top military planners in the Allied Forces, therefore, were nearly single-minded in their strategy to defeat Hitler. The fall of the Reich was contingent upon a cross-channel invasion. It was not a novel concept.

### **Operation Sea Lion**

The English Channel is a narrow strip of the Atlantic Ocean that separates England from the European Continent. Stretching across the northern coast of France for 350 miles, at its widest point it is 150 miles across; only 21 miles at its narrowest point between Dover in England and Cape Gris-Nez in France. William Shakespeare saw the English Channel as a wall that protected his nation, writing in his play Richard II, that it existed "like a moat defensive to a house, Against the envy of less happy lands."

Following his conquest of France and the occupation of that nation by Nazi forces, Adolph Hitler turned his war machine loose upon his only remaining enemy at that time, the island nation of Great Britain. He dubbed his campaign Unternehmen Seelöwe, or Operation Sea Lion, ultimately destined to become a cross-channel invasion of England. To ensure the success of that invasion Hitler believed it first necessary to destroy the Royal Air Force's capabilities to turn back an amphibious assault, and unleashed the Luftwaffe in the historic Battle of Britain which began on July 10, 1941. It became the largest and most sustained bombing campaign ever mounted, and the first true test of emerging doctrines of strategic bombardment. Operation Sea Lion was abandoned at the end of October, not because Hitler's strategy of strategic

bombardment had been unsuccessful, but probably because Hitler did not realize how successful it had been. Most historians believe that had the Reich mounted a cross-channel invasion late in 1941, England would have succumbed to Hitler's powerful forces. But the valiant resistance of the RAF, and the indomitable spirit of the British people under the leadership of an unshakable Winston Churchill, belied the devastating toll the Battle of Britain had taken on their country. In 1941 it was not the English Channel that served as Britain's protective moat, but the will and determination of the British people that caused Hitler to re-think his planned invasion.

## **Operation Overlord**

The tables turned on Hitler when the United States entered the war. Just as Hitler's strategy after the fall of Paris had been a cross-channel invasion of England, now the Allied strategy turned towards a cross-channel invasion of occupied France, followed by a drive into the heart of Germany. The problem was that the same moat that had protected castle England for centuries also protected the shores of Nazi-occupied France.

At the first Allied council of war, the Arcadia Conference which was held in Washington, D.C., during the last week of 1941 and into the first two weeks of 1942, the primary topic of discussion was such an invasion. For Allied war planners from both Britain and the United States, there was a sense of urgency to mount this invasion. Both Winston Churchill and President Franklin Roosevelt, who met face-to-face during the conference, while supporting in principle the need for a cross-channel invasion, tempered the enthusiasm of their top military leaders with the need to properly prepare for that channel crossing. Ultimately it would become known as Operation Overlord, but not for more than two years. Much as Hitler used the Luftwaffe to soften England for his own planned invasion of that country, the D-Day invasion of France had to be first prefaced by aerial warfare to neutralize the impact of Germany's air force on any Allied invasion of the European continent.

To the military planners meeting at the Arcadia Conference, victory in Europe was still seen as coming only as a result of traditional warfare by ground units. Aircraft, still viewed as auxiliary to these forces, became the means to that end. The mission of the R.A.F. and the U.S. Army Air Force was two-fold and classic Douhet:

*Destroy the Luftwaffe, and  
Destroy Germany's ability to wage war by bombing strategic targets  
(airfields, submarine pens, industry, and economic centers of activity.)  
The means to that end was an impressive American creation...  
The B-17 Flying Fortress*

Bombing Fortress Europe into submission was no simple assignment. Bombers based in England had to deal first with the weather, then traverse the waters of the Atlantic or the North Sea where they were met by the combat-seasoned pilots of the Luftwaffe, determined to shoot them down before they could arrive over deadly, flak filled skies above the continent. Those bombers fortunate enough to reach their target and drop their payload then had to fight their way clear of the continuing flak, penetrate the screen of enemy fighters, and again traverse the lonely expanse of often heavy seas to return to the fog-shrouded airfields back home. It is little wonder that so few airmen survived long enough in the early days of the war to complete the 25 missions that would earn them a trip home.

Such daring dedication called for a special breed of fighting men; men undeterred by the odds stacked heavily against them. One airman, when asked why he chose to fight in the air, glibly quipped: "It's the only place in the military where you can retreat at 300 miles per hour."

The Royal Air Force had conducted night bombing raids against targets inside occupied Europe long before the United States entered the war. When General Ira Eaker arrived in England a few weeks after the Arcadia Conference to build the Eighth Air Force, he came with the American strategy for strategic bombing raids employing massive, high-altitude, daylight attacks. Veteran British pilots were certain the concept was doomed to failure. At least at night, bomber formations were shielded by darkness from enemy fighter attack.

General Eaker's strategy, rooted in the theories of airpower espoused by visionaries like Douhet and General William Billy Mitchell, was as yet untested in combat action. It was predicted upon the debates at the Air Corps Tactical School in the late 1920s and early 1930s when Kenneth Walker, one of the architects of the Air War Plan delivered to President Roosevelt in 1941, put forth what would become his mantra:

*"The well-organized, well-planned, and well-flown air force (bombing) attack will constitute an offensive that cannot be stopped."*

## **Every Man a Gunner**



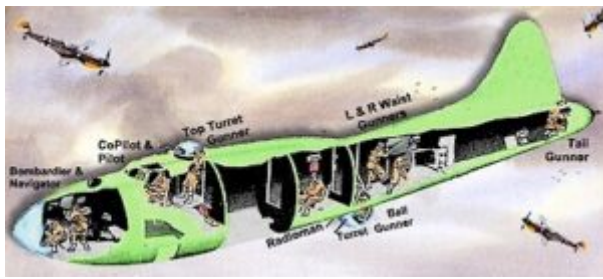
Key to that philosophy was the impressive American B-17

bomber. The 70-foot, four-engine heavy bomber was not only built to fly long distances at high altitudes (by 1941 developments gave it a 1,800-mile range with a ceiling of 35,000 feet) to drop a three-ton load of bombs, it was well-armed. When Boeing introduced the test model in 1935 the impressive battleship of the sky carried five 30-caliber and 50-caliber machineguns with which to defend itself against enemy fighters. That staunch array of firepower prompted early newspaper reporters to dub it a "Flying Fort." By the time the first Flying Fortresses began arriving in England in the summer of 1942 to begin their bombing campaign against Europe, they were sporting as many as a dozen or more 50-caliber machineguns. Each B-17 was crewed by a team—ten men—and each of them was a gunner.

On the ceiling of the Flying Fortress and directly behind the pilot in a rotating Plexiglas bubble were mounted the twin fifties of the Top Turret, usually manned by the senior enlisted crewman and aircraft engineer. Further back in the fuselage the radio man's training equipped him to handle all necessary communications during the mission. When the bomber was under attack, however, he was quick to man his own gun from the radio room hatch to ward off enemy fighters.

Behind the radio room and beneath the fuselage hung the clear Plexiglas sphere of the Ball Turret Gunner, a cramped and dangerous position critical to defending the belly of the Flying Fortress. Above the Ball Turret, the two waist gunners manned their own fifties, defending against an attack from the left or right. Further back in the tiny crawl space beneath the vertical stabilizer, the Tail Gunner crouched at his own twin-fifties to protect the rear. These six men comprised the enlisted component of the Flying Fortress crew, and could ably protect their airplane from attack from any direction left, right, above, below, or behind.





The bomber's navigator and bombardier shared space

in the vulnerable nose of the Flying Fortress, one of the Luftwaffe pilots' favorite points of attack. Each had specific duties in terms of plotting the route and accurately deploying the bomb load, but both were quick to defend their airplane with their own fifty-caliber machineguns. It was estimated that the typical navigator spent 5% of his time navigating, 95% of his time behind his guns. The same was true for the bombardier.

Only the pilot, in the left-hand seat of the cockpit, and the co-pilot on his right, did not have assigned and readily accessible machineguns to turn on attacking enemy fighters. (In fact, some pilots such as Major Jay Zeamer in the Pacific, went so far as to have forward-firing machineguns mounted in the nose of their Fortress that could be triggered from the cockpit.) Not infrequently did the demands of intense combat necessitate the co-pilot leaving his station to replace a killed or severely wounded comrade at one of the many guns spread throughout the Flying Fortress.

These ten men were more than just the "crew of an airplane"—they were a team. "One word explains how we got through the hell over Europe 25 times—and back home without a casualty," stated Bob Morgan who piloted the famed Memphis Belle. "teamwork!" For the most part, the squadrons of the Army Air Force maintained crew integrity. The men were assigned together, slept in the same billets (though officers and enlisted had separate tents or buildings), and flew together except for those occasions when one might be pulled to assist a separate crew when one of their members was ill or injured.

## First Blood



Twenty-four B-17s from the 97th Bombardment Group flew the

first American bombing raid in Europe on August 17, 1942. The attack against the railroad marshaling yards at Touen-Sotteville, France, was inauspicious but did mark the entrance of the U.S. Army Air Force's campaign to bomb Germany into surrender. Five additional missions followed before the end of the month, but like a swimmer dipping his toes into a pool, they were more a testing of the waters than a strategic offensive against a formidable enemy.

General Eaker's Eighth Air Force built rapidly as new aircraft and crews arrived in England. The 306th Bombardment Group flew its first mission on October 9. This was the fourteenth mission of the Eighth Air Force and would have been the first air mission flown by more than 100 bombers, had not 33 of the combined force of 84 Flying Fortresses, and 24 B-24 Liberators been forced to abort. It was a sad turn of events, for the American Air Force strategy for accomplishing their mission to destroy the Luftwaffe and German war machine was predicated upon fielding large bomber formation. There was safety in numbers, and continuing small formation missions that were subject to interdiction by 100 or more enemy fighters were becoming exceedingly dangerous.

By November 1 Allied war planners were gearing up for Operation Torch, the amphibious landings in North Africa that had been deemed immediately preferable to, and as a prelude for, the much-anticipated cross-channel invasion of Northern France which was now postponed until 1944. To support these landings in the Mediterranean, Ira Eaker's Mighty Eighth (Air Force) was stripped of four bombardments and four fighter groups including more than 25,000 trained and combat-experienced airmen. The transfer of these vital assets to the Twelfth Air Force in North Africa made it impossible for the Eighth to field more than 50 – 75 bombers for any mission for nearly six months thereafter.

Rebuilding the Eighth was slow, despite the arrival of the 303d Bombardment Group, which flew its first mission on November 17. With limited air assets including protective fighter cover, nearly all Eighth Air Force missions through the end of 1942 were conducted against targets on the northern and western coast of France or nearby Holland. With the exception of a December 20 mission to Romiley, near Paris, the flight path was brief and mostly over water. To venture too far inland would put the bombers beyond the range of their fighter escorts, and place them too long over territory controlled by the Axis, protected by enemy fighters, and peppered by deadly flak batteries on the ground.

## **Hitting Home**



Following the swift success of the North Africa campaign,

President Roosevelt and Winston Churchill met in French Morocco for the Casablanca Conference (January 14-24) to plan their next course of action. Though the resulting strategy was to continue the Mediterranean campaign with invasions of Sicily and then Italy to strike Germany from beneath, never far from the minds of those developing the war plan was the ultimate goal of the cross-channel invasion. Critical to the success of that invasion was the neutralization of the Luftwaffe, which might otherwise destroy the amphibious assault from the air, long before landing craft reached the beaches of Northern France.

Ira Eaker's Eighth Air force had experienced only limited success in its first thirty missions, most of which were along the French coast, and had suffered devastating losses as a result of enemy flak and fighters. During the conference at Casablanca, there was tremendous pressure from British air commanders to force Eaker to abandon his daylight bombing and join the RAF in attacking German targets under cover of darkness. Eaker successfully argued that his limited success and high casualty rate were due more to the limited range of his fighter cover and the smallness of his fielded formations, the latter because of diversion of his assets to the North African campaign, than to the dangers of daylight missions. He met personally with Winston Churchill, and with great diplomatic tack but determined zeal, convinced the Prime Minister that a campaign of "around the clock bombing" would be versatile to the Allied effort, damning to the enemy. Further, he promised that his forces would strike Germany itself before the close of the month.

General Eaker's men fulfilled that promise on January 27, flying northeast out of England for the first time to cross the North Sea and strike inside Germany, another first. Ninety-one heavy bombers, Flying Fortresses, and B-24 Liberators took off on that historic morning to attack Wilhelmshaven (near Bremen) in Northern Germany. Though only 53 bombers from that force reached their target, it marked the moment when the first American bombs exploded across the terrain of Germany itself.

Despite one of the bitterest winters in decades, the Eighth Air Force mounted thirty missions over the first four months of 1942, including a strike at Vegesack, Germany



(near Bremen) on March 18 that was historic for two noticeable reasons:

- It was the first mission flown and completed by a formation of American heavy bombers numbering more than 100, and
- It was on this mission that First Lieutenant Jack Mathis of the 303d Bombardment Group's 359th Bomb Squadron became the first airman of the European war to earn the Medal of Honor. The valiant and determined bombardier sacrificed his life to ensure the completion of his mission.

Despite continuing heavy losses, the arrival of new bombers and air-crews enabled Ira Eaker to mount larger and larger bombing formations. Soon flights were nearly equal in number to the number of enemy fighters that rose to challenge them. Among the new arrivals was a young gunner named [Maynard H. Smith](#), whom everyone called Snuffy. On May 1 Snuffy Smith became the second airman of the war in Europe to earn the Medal of Honor, and the first enlisted airman in history to wear that high honor.

Five new bombardment groups were assigned to combat status in the Eighth Air Force in May, giving Ira Eaker a total of fifteen bomb groups. On July 17, Ira Eaker was able to field his largest bombing mission to date and the first to exceed 300 total bombers. It was only a beginning.

Author Harold Mansfield noted that prior to the Casablanca Conference when his forces had been depleted by transfers to the 12th Air Force "Ira Eaker was wearying of small hits at nearby targets along the Channel. 'If we can get the equipment, we can knock Germany out of the war from the air,' he said. "By destroying Hitler's factories, we can put an end to his air force. By destroying his munitions plants and communications we can stop his armies.'"

By July 1943, despite the temporary transfer of three Eighth Air Force B-24 Liberator Groups to the 9th Air Force in Libya for a top-secret mission (a long-range, low-level bombing mission to Ploesti, Romania), General Eaker, at last, had sufficient men and aircraft to mount his offensive against Germany. When a week of frustratingly poor weather lifted in the last week of July, he wasted little time in at last mounting the kind of strategic bombing missions he had espoused for nearly a year.

### **Little Blitz Week**



Eighth Air Force Mission #75 was a stunning blow to the Axis

war machine. In the first bombing raid into Norway, 167 heavy bombers made the 1,900-mile round-trip to attack the nitrate works at Heroya. It was the longest bombing mission of the war to date, one totally unexpected by German tacticians, and effectively put the important war plant out of operation for nearly four months. Meanwhile, other bombers of the 309-total force, attacked enemy naval installations at Trondheim, as well as other targets at Bergen. Of the more than 300 bombers launched at the opening of what would become known as Little Blitz Week, only one was lost. Her crew nursed their flak-damaged B-17 to Sweden where they landed without casualties, and were interned.

While the Axis reeled from the unprecedented strike that was later described as: "The most successful and shrewdly planned and executed mission of the entire war," General Eaker pressed his advantage. The morning following the attack into Norway he sent 323 heavy bombers across the North Sea to strike inside Germany, attacking the shipyard at Hamburg and submarine base at nearby Kiel. This time German fighter pilots were prepared however, and nineteen American bombers were lost.

The trifecta was completed the very next day when 303 heavy bombers were unleashed on the Reich, again attacking at Hamburg with 54 bombers while others penetrated deeper into enemy territory to strike other targets. Nearly 100 Flying Fortresses fought their way deep into the heart of Germany, the 92nd Bomb Group hitting the Continental Gummiwerke A.G. Wahrenwalderstrasse tire plant at Hanover, just 150 miles west of Berlin. It was a classic test of the as-yet-unproven aerial warfare doctrine: "The well-organized, well-planned, and well-flown air force (bombing) attack will constitute an offensive that cannot be stopped."

For nearly a year the Eighth Air Force had kept most of its missions near the coast where formations would have less exposure to flak and fighter opposition until minutes before they were over the target. Coastal targets were often also within range of friendly fighter escort in both directions. To bomb Hanover however, which

was well beyond the range of friendly fighters, after reaching the coast of Europe the bombers had to fly over 100 miles of Nazi-controlled land to reach their target—every mile filled with flak and enemy fighter opposition. And then, to further complicate the secondary mission of survival, the Flying Fortresses had to return home across that same 100-mile gauntlet, still without friendly fighters to keep the enemy from destroying them.

The well-organized, well-planned and well-flown air force that attacked Hanover on July 26 did indeed constitute an offensive that could not be stopped, despite repeated attacks over the two-hour inland flight to and from the target by more than 100 enemy fighters. The bombers got through not because they were impressively armed, however, so much as they survived because of the teamwork and determination of their crews. Enemy fighters had appeared almost as soon as the formation made landfall, and one 92d BG Fortress named Ruthie II was hit almost immediately, mortally wounding the pilot and sending him into a frenzy. Co-pilot [John C. Morgan](#) held the pain-crazed pilot at bay with one hand, while piloting Ruthie II onto a target to drop her bombs, and then return home. For his incredible valor and determination, Flight Officer Morgan became the third airman of the Mighty Eighth to earn the Medal of Honor.

Two dozen other Fortresses were not so fortunate, generating one of the deadliest days of the air war to date. Of the more than 250 casualties killed, wounded, or missing in action, sixty-five were later rescued from the North Sea by British air-sea rescue teams after fighting their way out of Germany only to drop from the sky in bombers too badly damaged to reach Britain.

Tuesday was a day of rest during Little Blitz Week but the following day the intrepid airmen were back in the sky, fielding 302 bombers to attack even deeper into Germany, striking the aircraft works at Kassel and the Focke-Wulf factory at Oschersleben. It was a day full of firsts—and surprises. Equipped with jettisonable belly tanks, for the first time American P-47 fighters escorted the flights into Germany ranging 30 miles further than on any previous escort mission. Even at that, the American fighters eventually had to depart, leaving the formation to slug its way alone on the deepest penetration yet made into Germany. Twenty-two Fortresses were lost when enemy fighters for the first time unleashed effective rocket fire on them, but the returning survivors were met by a second group of P-47 escorts while still deep inside Germany. These caught sixty pursuing enemy fighters unprepared and destroyed nine of them with the loss of only one American fighter.

On Wednesday, July 29, the losses of four major missions in five days had begun to take its toll, but General Eaker refused to relent. Nearly 250 heavy bombers returned to Northern Germany to strike the submarine pens at Kiel and the Heinkel aircraft factory at nearby Warnemunde. On Thursday nearly 200 bombers again attacked deep into

Germany, striking the aircraft works at Kassel, again escorted most of the way by P-47s with auxiliary fuel tanks that allowed them to surprise enemy fighters unaccustomed to seeing American fighters beyond the coastal fringe.

Little Blitz Week proved to be the greatest sustained air offensive of the war to date, with the combined bomber offensive taking a heavy toll on the infrastructure necessary to Hitler's war machine. There was no respite for the embattled enemy, for throughout that historic week the R.A.F. bombed at night, often in formations of more than 500 aircraft, while General Eaker's airmen hit them in the daylight hours, striking sixteen major industrial targets in six of the seven-day period.

On July 31, despite clear flying weather, the Eighth Air Force at last rested. Little Blitz Week had at last proven the validity of high-altitude, massive daylight bombardment, but at a heavy cost. Eighty-eight heavy bombers had been lost and more than 1,000 valiant airmen of the Mighty Eighth were dead, captured, or missing. With nearly twenty more bombers damaged beyond repair and others in need of substantial rebuilding, Eighth Air Force assets had dropped from 330 B-17s seven days earlier, to fewer than 200. Though General Eaker was eager to continue pounding the enemy, he knew it was time to heal the wounds and rebuild. Not for two weeks would Eighth Air Force bombers based out of England fly another major mission.

Meanwhile, however, on the following day (August 1) the three Eighth Air Force Liberator groups sent to Libya on loan to the Ninth Air Force made history when they crossed the Mediterranean to strike the important oil refineries at Ploesti, Romania.

## Hell's Angels



Little Blitz Week with its unprecedented success was possible only

because at last the Eighth Air Force had built up to the point that large bombing formations could be fielded. The arrival of the 94th, 95th, 96th, 351st, and 379th in May, augmented by the 100th in June, made possible the 300+ heavy bomber formations that wreaked havoc on Germany in the last week of July. As important as this infusion of new planes and crews were to the Eighth Air Force's missions, it was the veterans from bombardment groups that had arrived months before that provided the experience and savvy necessary to mission accomplishment. Among these was the veteran 303d Bombardment Group. When the Eighth Air Force flew its eightieth mission on July 30, the airmen of the 303d claimed credit for participation in 56 of them, including the first mission over Germany the previous January and five of the six Little Blitz Week

missions.

The 303d arrived in England in the fall of 1942 to begin combat operations out of Molesworth, north of London. They flew their first mission on November 17. Three more missions followed within the week, and on the return from one of them Captain Irl Baldwin, flying a B-17 with tail number 41-24577 but as yet unnamed, mused aloud over the interphone about calling his bomber "Hell's Angels." The mission had been a rough one for his rookie crew, one of whom quickly stated, "Why not. This is the closest to hell that angels will ever get!"



The Flying Fortress #41-24577 indeed was named "Hell's

Angels" and thereafter, many of the men of the 303d began to refer to their Bomb Group itself as "Hell's Angels," though the moniker was not formally adopted until early in 1944. The veteran status of the 303d was certainly verified on May 13, 1943, when "Hell's Angels" became the first Eighth Air Force bomber to complete twenty-five combat missions. The second Eighth Air Force bomber to reach this milestone six days later was one of the most well-known bombers of the war: "Memphis Belle."

Few heavy bombers, especially in the first year of the air war, were fortunate enough to complete the milestone twenty-fifth mission. By the time "Hell's Angels" became the FIRST to do so, thirty bombers of the 303d had been lost in 34 combat missions. When the 303d's pilots and crews flew the Group's fiftieth mission on July 14, ten days before Little Blitz Week, that tally had risen to 38 lost bombers, more than four hundred men dead or missing in action. In the summer of 1943 not only did the Eighth Air Force need new bomber groups, but her veteran Groups were also desperately in need of replacements.

### **Sergeant Buske**



Sergeant George W. Buske was one of the



replacements that arrived at Molesworth in the summer of 1943, where he was assigned as Tail Gunner to the crew of 2nd Lieutenant Arni Sumarlidason (back/right in the photo.) Sumarlidason was a veteran with sixteen missions in the right-hand seat from May 4 to July 17 when he was upgraded to pilot for his first mission in the left-hand seat. That first mission as a pilot was aborted and the crew returned to Molesworth where weather grounded them for a week. During that period, they posed for a crew photo (seen here) and prepared for the upcoming aerial offensive.

Lieutenant Sumarlidason's crew flew on the first and second missions of Little Blitz Week, their only missions until mid-August. The first eleven days of August were a re-building time for the Eighth Air Force, the opportunity to lick wounds, mourn lost comrades, and repair battle-damaged bombers after sustaining more than 25% losses as a result of the six missions in the last seven days of July. On August 12 however, the Eighth Air Force was back in business. Lieutenant Sumarlidason's crew joined 329 other heavy bombers on a mission into the heart of Germany to attack inside the Ruhr.

The target for Sumarlidason and the other 20 Fortresses from the 303d was a synthetic oil plant at Gelsenkirchen. Lieutenant Bill McSween recalled:

*"I was a mite uncertain about the outcome of this one. The target was in the center of a valley where there was no way around anything. We flew straight through up to the Ruhr defenses, where all hell broke loose. Talk about 'intense and accurate flak!' They made us know it. Flak rattled off the plane's nose like hail. The target area was obscured and our bombs went wild. Focke-Wulfs attacked outside the Ruhr defenses and hit the high and lead groups."*

The mission to Gelsenkirchen was a running battle all the way to target and then trying to fight out of the valley to return home. In the tail of Sumarlidason's B-17, twenty-two-year-old Sergeant George Buske hammered away at the attackers while his comrades at the waist, the top and lower turrets, and the two officers in the nose fought to defend their airplane. The 303d lost only one airplane and crew on the deadly mission, but other bombardment groups were not so fortunate. Of the 330 heavy bombers that made that first mission of the new offensive, 243 reached and bombed their targets. Twenty-five American bombers and 250 valiant airmen did not return.

The Mighty Eighth stood down for two days after the tragic losses and fierce fighting of August 12. General Eaker understood the value of continued bombardment of targets inside Germany, but it was also apparent that he could not continue in the face of such heavy casualties. Little Blitz Week had shaken the confidence of Hitler's air chiefs and scores of enemy fighter planes had been moved from the Eastern Front to airfields in France, Holland, and Belgium to interdict future bombing raids before

they could reach the homeland.

These airfields and their fighters became the new priority for the attack. On August 15 the Eighth Air Force dispatched more than 300 bombers to attack enemy fighters on the ground along the coast. The formations were escorted by Spitfires all the way, and though flack was heavy, losses were light and few enemy fighters were seen in the air. The following day more than 200 bombers attacked airfields near Paris, again escorted all the way to target and home by P-47s with drop tanks. In the tail of Lieutenant Sumarladason's Flying Fortress, Sergeant Buske experienced a largely uneventful fourth combat mission, as again few enemy fighters even got into the air.

The heavy losses of August 12 in comparison to the missions of August 15 and 16 vividly demonstrated the value of fighter escort if daylight bombing was to continue. In the latter two-day period, a total of 573 bombers had been dispatched, of which 527 reached and bombed their targets. Only six bombers had been lost. The problem was in finding a fighter with sufficient range to escort bombing missions into Germany—a challenge that was being confronted at home and that would be answered before the end of the year by the new P-51 Mustang.

### Double Punch



The mission of Wednesday, August 16, marked the

completion of the Eighth Air Force's first year of aerial combat in Europe, 365 days during which General Eaker's men had flown 83 missions. The price of their limited victories had been expensive, 411 bombers lost, more than 4,000 airmen killed, captured, or missing; and hundreds more recovering from serious wounds.

For Sergeant George Buske the Mighty Eighth's anniversary sortie of August 17 would mark his fifth combat mission, authorizing the award of the Air Medal. For the enemy, it meant an unprecedented two-prong assault at targets the high command considered untouchable. For the gunners of the Flying Fortresses, it would mean the most intense aerial combat of the war. For the crews of sixty bombers, it would mark the end of

their war.

In all a total of 376 bombers were fielded to attack the ball-bearing factories at Schweinfurt and the German Messerschmidt complex at Regensburg, the latter marking the deepest penetration into Germany to date. A record 724 tons of bombs fell from the 315 heavy bombers that fought their way through enemy fighters to reach their targets. At Regensburg, virtually every major building was hit and scores of newly-completed Me-109 fighters were destroyed on the ground. Then the Flying Fortresses did the unexpected. Rather than turning back to fight their way home to England, they turned south to cross the Mediterranean and land in North Africa. It was the first Eighth Air Force shuttle mission of the war, setting a precedent for future missions deep into the heart of Germany to eventually attack the Axis from two directions.

Martin Caiden in *Flying Forts* recalls the determination of the men who flew the deadly mission to reach and bomb Regensburg:

*"In the B-17 named X Virgin, a waist gunner was killed by German fighters. Internal systems were slashed and cut by enemy fire. In an unprecedented move, four men chose to bail out deliberately (over German-held territory) so that the remaining crew would have enough oxygen to take the ship over the target and return. Over the target, the bomb-release mechanism failed to work...*

*"But a wounded gunner felt he hadn't come all this way for nothing. He left his guns and worked his way to the bomb bay. With a screwdriver, he loosened the shackles and then jumped up and down on the bombs until they broke loose and fell free."*

Sergeant Buske's Fortress, along with 28 others from Hell's Angels, hit the ball bearing plants at Schweinfurt. The important industry there provided 40% of the critical bearings for the Axis war machine, and on this day though the damage was not as heavy as that inflicted on Regensburg, two major factories were damaged and production greatly hampered. It was little comfort for the heavy losses sustained. Lady Luscious tail gunner Sergeant Merlin Miller recalled the running fight home after his Fortress had dropped its bombs:

*“Half a dozen (enemy) fighters, maybe more, would get behind us and string out, and come in one right after the other at our group. It got so that we could just pick out the fighters to shoot at that looked like they were coming directly at us.*

*“There were parachutes too, many parachutes floating through the air, sometimes through the formation, white ones that the Americans had, dirty colored ones that the Germans had. You could see, oh, 40 to 60 parachutes in the air at once sometimes. And sometimes there’d be pieces of planes just floating through the formation from blown-up bombers, blown-up fighters, long columns of smoke from the ground, going down to the ground and coming up from the ground. You could see where we’d been, actually follow our track over the mission just by looking back and following the columns of smoke coming up from the ground. It was incredible!”*

None of the falling bombers witnessed by Sergeant Miller came from the 303d; all twenty B-17s sent to attack Schweinfurt returned home, many heavily damaged, but all still intact. Nevertheless, twenty-four bombers from other groups that attacked Schweinfurt, and thirty-six bombers from the Regensburg task force, were shot down in combat. Returning airmen reported shooting down a total of 288 enemy fighters. There is no estimating how many additional fighters might have been shot down by the 600 American airmen who never returned. Furthermore, while the number of enemy fighters destroyed may have been somewhat exaggerated or erroneous, it certainly gives evidence to the unusually high number of German fighters fielded unsuccessfully to thwart the double-punch Eighth Air Force anniversary mission. Mission #84 that fielded 376 bombers to attack targets deep into Germany demonstrated how far Ira Eaker’s determined airmen had come since that first mission 365 days earlier when twenty-five Fortresses flew fifty miles across the English Channel to drop bombs at the coastal city of Rouen, France.

### **Beware, the Easy Mission**

The heavy losses of the Schweinfurt-Regensburg mission forced Ira Eaker once again to concentrate on missions closer to home while new aircraft and crews streamed into England to replace the mounting tally of missing men and machines. From August 19 until September 6, the earliest date on which Eaker could again mount a massive strike into Germany, the Eighth Air Force concentrated on short strikes against coastal installations while constantly under escort by P-47 fighters. In all, during that three-week period of near-daily strikes, losses were under 4%—again validating the value of fighter cover to bomber operations. The light losses, however, are no indication that these quick hops across the English Channel were Milk Runs for bomber pilots or their crews.

Two days after the Schweinfurt mission Sergeant Buske crouched in the tail of his Flying Fortress as it crossed the channel to attack enemy airfields near the Holland coast at Gilze-Ruen. Twenty bombers from the 303d were the tail formation of a 93-bomber force that expected a quick run to target and a relatively easy return home—all under the protective care of dedicated fighter pilots.

Upon reaching the coast Buske found himself busy fighting off the ME-109s that rose to meet the incoming formation, but comforted himself in the knowledge that the bombers would only be over enemy territory for half-an-hour before turning back across the channel for home field. Then, it seemed, everything went wrong.

The lead bomber, which was to mark the target under the prevailing “bomb on the leader” technique that had been a staple of such missions since early in the year, failed to unleash his payload. The mission leader circled, leading the bombers around for a second pass and doubling the time that the formation would be under the sights of anti-aircraft gunners on the ground and enemy fighter pilots around them.



Crouching in the tail of his B-17 on this, his sixth combat

mission, Sergeant Buske unloaded on the attacking enemy fighters with grim determination. As he tracked on yet another incoming enemy, he suddenly felt the tail shudder under the impact of a 20mm shell that ripped holes in thin metal and tore through the flesh of his hip. Blood streamed from the open wound, but with danger still everywhere around him, Sergeant Buske gritted his teeth against the pain and continued to fire. He shot down one enemy fighter and warded off several more. Not until the last fighters had disappeared while the Hell's Angels formation headed out over the channel to return to Molesworth, did he give in to his serious injuries and cease defending his airship.

For his heroic actions and determination on that day when two Hell's Angels bombers failed to return home, Sergeant Buske was awarded his first Purple Heart, an Oak Leaf Cluster to his Air Medal, and the Silver Star. For the next forty-five days, he was



confined to the hospital for treatment of the wound in his hip.

By September Ira Eaker's three Liberator Groups had returned from their secret mission in Libya and the continued flow of new airmen and aircraft from the United States had nearly brought his B-17 strength up to seventeen full Groups. On September 6 he dispatched 407 bombers, his largest force yet, to bomb targets at Stuttgart, Germany. Little more than half of the force reached their target and forty-five bombers were lost in aerial combat including two Hell's Angels bombers and crews. The mission served notice to the enemy that the Eighth, despite continuing heavy casualties, was prone to strike inside the homeland at any time, though following the September 6 mission the Mighty Eighth resumed primarily anti-aircraft missions into occupied territory.

Meanwhile, Sergeant Buske was released from the hospital early in October to return Molesworth, while rookie replacements continued to arrive in England to keep the Eighth Air Force at fighting strength. Among the new arrivals was the young radio man from Sergeant Buske's home state of New York who became one of Hell's Angels on October 8.



Forrest Lee Vosler

Forrest Lee Woody Vosler was born July 29, 1923, in the small Lake Ontario town of Lyndonville, New York, just fifty miles west of Sergeant Buske's hometown of Rochester. At age 8 with his parents William and Lottie Vosler, two sisters and brother, the family moved to Avon and then later to Livonia, where Woody attended high school. At 6'3" he was somewhat accomplished as a basketball player.

Woody developed a sense of duty and honor as a Boy Scout, earning his Star Scout award but falling short in his efforts to become an Eagle Scout. Those early

experiences shaped much of his personality. Following graduation from Livonia's Central High School in 1941, Woody continued with scouting as an Assistant Scoutmaster for his troop.

When the war was declared in December 1941, Woody was eighteen years old and working as a drill press operator for the Rochester Products Division of General Motors. Over the following months, he watched with interest as several of his older friends were drafted into service, and following his 19th birthday decided he wanted to voluntarily follow in their footsteps. At the time, however, only young men over age 21 were being drafted, and Woody had to obtain his father's signature before visiting the Army Air Force recruiter to enlist for pilot training. This he did, joining the Army in Rochester on October 8, 1942.

Woody found his dreams of piloting an Army bomber overly optimistic—his scores on the initial pilot qualification tests were substandard. The recruiter who accepted the eager young man into the military broke the bad news to him with the announcement that, though he could not serve as a pilot, Woody was going to be assigned other military duties. Disappointed, Woody returned home and called his father to announce, "You've got to get me out of this damned thing you signed for."

*"What's the matter," he later recalled his father responding. "Are you afraid to go in (the army)?"*

To demonstrate otherwise, Woody accepted his fate, becoming a private in the Army Air Force.

After aptitude testing, during which Woody scored high for radio training, and after basic training in Atlantic City, NJ, Woody Vosler was assigned to the Radio Operators and Mechanics School at Scott AFB in Illinois for eighteen weeks of intense instruction. There, in addition to training in radio procedures, equipment, and Morse Code, he probably heard something akin to the official spiel later published in the U.S. Army Air Force pamphlet titled: Combat Crew:

### **The Radio Operator**

*"A day will come in combat when the job of getting home is up to the radio operator. Maybe you'll be heading into a British airport in radio silence—and have to flash a blinker signal or else the guns below will start popping ack-ack. Maybe you'll be floating in the South Pacific on a life raft—and your ability to handle the emergency equipment will decide how long you'll play with the sharks.*

*"Maybe you'll get in a jam like me—somewhere north of Kiska. We were on the run home—and the fog rolled up like it was made of jello—frozen jello. The only hope we had was the radio compass and it turns out the navigator had never been introduced to the gadget. These were the early days of the war. Officially, I knew nothing about it—but one night when I was too busted to get in the poker game, I got out the tech orders on the compass and ran over them—just to kill a couple hours.*

*"I didn't know much—but what I knew got us back—through a fog so thick that we were not sure we had hit the home field till we started bouncing. The navigator knew his compass the next trip. People learn quick in combat—if they live.*

*"The idea is to learn before you get in combat. Most of you, here from radio school, will make the discovery that there is a lot of difference between code speed on the ground—and in the air. I hate to see a man go into combat who can't handle 20 words a minute under the worst possible conditions. That is more than regulations require—but the extra speed builds up confidence. Know your equipment—and how to keep it in shape. Brush up on the blinker codes—communications signals, you are going to use in action.*

*"Summing up, speed up your code taking, understand the basic principles of radio, be able to use the radio compass and other navigational aids, play with your frequency modifier until its operation becomes second nature—and master your gun. You won't be the weak link in the crew."*

*Published in 1944 by the 2d Air Force and Training Aids Division  
U.S. Army Air Forces*

Woody did very well at the radio training, was promoted to Private First Class on March 4, 1943, and then to Sergeant on March 24 while still undergoing classes. He met all requirements but one in order to become a radioman on an Army Air Force bomber. Every man of a bomber crew was a gunner, following specialty training with Flexible Gunnery School. Woody's future appeared to keep him on the ground, perhaps sheltered in an aircraft control tower. He later recalled:

*"Because of my height, six feet three inches, I couldn't get into flying status. The limit at the time was 72 inches, so when I went back to take the physical to get into flying, I didn't really have much hope of making it in because of the height limitation.*

*"I happened to arrive there at the noon hour, and I was waiting; everybody went to lunch. All the officers and doctors were at lunch and I had to sit there in my shorts waiting for them to come back. I noticed that the height and weight man had brought a box lunch and he was eating it instead of going out with the rest of them. I walked over to him and said, 'You measure the height and weight?'*

*He said, 'Yes, I do.'*

*I said, 'I've got a five dollar bill here if you put down 72 inches on my form.'*

*He said, 'You're on.'*

*I handed him the five dollars and I'm on my way to Harlingen, Texas.*

*"I got down to Harlingen, Texas, and I was going to get another physical: they gave you a physical every time you moved. I bumped my head going in to get the physical. There was a captain standing there. He said, 'Just a minute sergeant. Come over here. How the heck did you get down here? I've seen hundreds of people go through this door and they don't bump their head if they are under six feet.'*

*"I told him the story. He made me get up on the scales and got the height down. They finally recorded it as six feet one and one-half inches. He sat down and said, 'I don't know.'*

*"I said, 'I'll tell you, sir, what I'm not going to do. I'm not going to bribe you. I know better than that.'*

*"He laughed and said, 'You really want it, don't you?'*

*I said, 'I certainly do.'*

*He said, 'I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to give you a crack at it. The only reason we limit (the height) is because we think you can't get in the turrets, and you must be able to do all the positions on the ship. If you can do them somehow, more power to you. If you can't, you're going to wash out anyway, but you're welcome to try.'*

## **Black Week**

When Staff Sergeant Woody Vosler arrived at Molesworth, on flight status and fully capable of manning any of the positions on a Flying Fortress on Friday, October 8, twenty-two Hell's Angels were on a mission to Bremen, Germany. It was the opening day of a new week of blitzes inside Germany, but this week would be remembered with a far more ominous title than its predecessor of July. It would come to be called, with

good reason, Black Week.

Vosler was assigned his billets, a low, drab building where several enlisted crewmen slept on three-piece RAF 'biscuit' mattresses. In later interviews, he recalled meeting three of his roommates, though he couldn't recall their names. Since individual aircrews normally bunked together, these were probably the men with whom he was intended to serve in the coming months, most probably the enlisted men of the B-17 Shades of Strychnine.

The mood at Molesworth was somber that evening, for although all 22 Hell's Angels returned safely from the day's raid over Bremen, it had been a tough mission. Heavy flak damaged sixty percent of the 3d Bombardment Division's participating bombers, and 75% of the 1st Division's aircraft. Thirty of the 357 bombers launched that morning were lost, and twenty-six more were damaged almost beyond repair.

Staff Sergeant Vosler awakened to an empty hut the following morning. New replacements were not immediately committed to battle, but first received days, or even weeks, of training and preparations before the first combat mission. The crew of Shades of Stricnine however, had found their number on the roster for the day's mission to Anklam, Germany...their fourth since arriving at Molesworth the previous month.

By nightfall, the barracks were still quite empty. Lieutenant B. J. Clifford's Shades of Stricnine has last seen gliding into the clouds near the Danish coast with its wheels down, one of the left wings smoking, and enemy fighters continuing their attack. The entire crew was killed in action, a vivid lesson to Forrest Vosler on his second day at Molesworth as to the danger of being an American airman at war in Europe. Twenty-seven other Eighth Air Force bombers went down that same day.

Sunday was no day of rest for the Eighth Air Force as 275 bombers, including 21 Hell's Angels, were launched to attack targets inside Germany for the third straight day. Though all Hell's Angels again returned safely home, the Eighth Air Force lost 30 bombers bringing the three-day sum of losses to 87, with an equal number severely damaged.

Nowhere were the tragic losses of October 10 felt more severely than at nearby Thorpe Abbots, home of the 100th Bombardment Group that had fielded twenty bombers that morning to attack the railroad yards at Munster, Germany. Seven were forced to abort, but an unlucky thirteen continued towards their target deep in the Ruhr. The limited-range P-47 escort was forced to turn back when the thirteen 100th BG Fortresses, which were the lead for this mission, were nine minutes from the target. Almost immediately more than 200 enemy fighters pounced on the B-17s, in minutes shooting



down twelve and leaving only Lieutenant Joe Rosenthal's Rosie's Riveters to continue. Despite the odds against him from continuing attacks that put a rocket through the right-wing, knocked out the #3 engine, and destroyed the oxygen system, Lieutenant Rosenthal continued to target.

Loren Darling and John Shaffer, the two waist gunners, were shot up badly. The tail gunner was hit in the butt and the top turret gunner collected a nick between the eyes while he was busy destroying two enemy fighters, which were seen to burst in flames. A third was destroyed by the radio operator. After the assaults had ceased, all moveable equipment was thrown overboard and Rosie brought his bomber home – alone. Rosie's Riveters was all that remained of the 100th Bomb Group formation after a day's air battle, and thereafter the Group was called the Bloody One Hundredth.

### **Black Thursday**

In Forrest Vossler's first three days at Molesworth, he had witnessed the departure of bombers each day to attack deep into enemy territory. No doubt he struggled with his own fears, for the moment must surely come soon when he would be assigned to one of those departing Flying Fortresses. No doubt he also remembered well the words of the instructors at Radio school: "A day will come in combat when the job of getting home is up to the radio operator," and prayed that he would be equal to the challenge. Before that moment came, however, he remained a spectator to the war, grounded at Molesworth to witness one of the most tragic days in Air Force history.

During World War II some forty missions were launched against the important bearing factories at Schweinfurt, beginning with the deadly Eight Air Force anniversary mission of August 17 that had cost two dozen American bombers. The second mission to Schweinfurt on October 14 was even costlier. Of 257 Flying Fortresses that flew into the heart of Germany, twenty-eight went down to flak or enemy fighters before reaching their targets. Fighting their way home another thirty-one bombers went down, with one badly damaged Fortress forced to ditch in the English Channel. Five bombers that reached England were unable to land. The crews of three parachuted to safety, two others crash-landed. Added to the sixty-five lost bombers were seventeen more that were so badly shot up they would never fly again. With eighty-two B-17s stricken from the Eighth Air Force inventory in a single day and nearly 1,000 casualties, the pressure was on to get new aircrews built from the recent arrivals. Staff Sergeant Vossler's moment was at last upon him.

### **Jersey Bounce, Jr.**

*They call it that Jersey bounce,  
A rhythm that really counts;  
The temperature always mounts,  
Wherever they play,  
the funny rhythm they play.*

One of the original B-17s assigned to the 303d Bombardment Squadron had been named Jersey Bounce from the title of a popular song penned by Buddy Feyne. The stout Flying Fortress flew 14 combat missions with the 303d before being transferred to the 384 Bomb Group. Jersey Bounce, Jr. soon followed when B-17F #42-29664 was assigned to the 303d on March 21, 1943. The name was a foregone conclusion for, though over the bomber's nearly one-year of combat it was flown on 32 missions by 9 different pilots, no man flew her more times (7 missions) than Captain Robert Nolan who as a Lieutenant, had christened the first Jersey Bounce.



Among the distinguished list of men who had flown into harm's way

aboard Jersey Bounce, Jr. was Captain Merle Hungerford, who had served with the 303d in various capacities for nearly a year. In an air force that practiced crew integrity, Captain Hungerford had been a floater that filled in where needed. The versatile air officer flew his first mission as a co-pilot on January 13 and followed up with four additional combat missions in the right-hand seat of a Flying Fortress in the months that followed. During Little Blitz Week he participated in one mission, flying as co-pilot on the July 29 mission over Heligoland Island off the North coast of Germany. In all, he logged eight missions in the right-hand seat with five different pilots. On the October 10 mission into Germany Jersey Bounce, Jr. had led the formation with Major Mark Mitchell as a pilot, Captain Merle Hungerford as co-pilot.

On October 26 Captain Hungerford was upgraded to pilot, but before flying his first mission in the left-hand seat of the cockpit, he flew one more mission in Jersey Bounce, Jr. with Major Mitchell. Prior to departing Molesworth for that November 5 mission to Gelsenkirchen, Germany, Hungerford and Mitchell posed in front of their trusty bomber with the crew, among them Jersey Bounce's replacement Tail Gunner,

Sergeant George Buske (lower left in photo above.) Having recovered from his wounds ten weeks earlier, the scrappy kid from Rochester, New York was back in action.

Six days later Captain Hungerford posed for another crew photo, this time in front of the B-17 named Sky Wolf. The bomber's assigned pilot was a newly arrived replacement, Second Lieutenant John Henderson. Though new to the Hell's Angels, Henderson was a savvy veteran in the air. He had been flying since age 16 and with his brother had owned an airport in California. Before the United States entered the war, Henderson had flown with Canada's RCAF, becoming a flight officer. When the U.S. Army Air Force entered the war, Henderson was given the rank of Staff Sergeant and had to go through USAAF flight training again to earn his commission and right to pilot a B-17 bomber. Sky Wolf's assigned co-pilot was 2d Lieutenant Walter Ames who had washed out of fighter pilot training. He was to miss the crew's first five missions, so Captain Hungerford was assigned fill in as an instructor pilot for the new crew's first missions. Sky Wolf's radioman was a tall, 20-year old recently arrived replacement, Staff Sergeant Forrest Woody Vosler.

### **Sky Wolf – Lieutenant John Henderson Crew**

BACK: Capt. Merle Hungerford (IP), 2Lt Walter Ames (CP), 2Lt John Henderson (P), 2Lt Woodrow Monkres (B), 2Lt Warren Wiggins (N)

FRONT: S/Sgt William Simpkins (E), Sgt. George Buske (TG), Sgt Stanley Moody (WG), S/Sgt Forrest Vosler (R), Sgt Ralph Burkart (WG), Sgt. Edward Ruppel (BT) – Photo taken 11/11/1943

Ball Turret Gunner Sergeant Ed Ruppel recalled that original crew and the preparations they were given for their first taste of combat action:

*"We were supposed to be replacements for the Schweinfurt raids, but we didn't put any combat missions in right away. They took us by truck to gunnery training at a place called 'The Wash' on the coast of England.*

*"When we got there, they took us into this big room, and the man said: 'Everything you've ever learned in the States, forget about it. You don't know nothing! We're going to teach you to know what it's all about.*

*"This guy says, 'First of all, we're going to give you how long you're going to live.' And he went through each gun position, and he told us how long that guy would live. I forget how long he said the man in the ball would live, but it was very short. The two most vulnerable spots were the tail and the waist guns. A waist gunner had something like two to three minutes in combat. They said that combat could be three seconds, one pass and it was all over for you. It was all very hard-core.*

*"At the end, they explained the reason they were telling us this. The man said, 'All of you that don't want to go into combat, step over on the side. Nobody's going to holler at you, nobody's going to knock you down or anything, I just want to know now.'*

*"So, somebody raised his hand and said, 'Why the hell are you so interested in that?'*

*"The man said, 'I want to know now that you're going to quit. I don't want you to quit when you're upstairs and mess nine other people up. Understand?'*

*"Then they started to teach us what it was all about. We were out there for days, going through various stages. In the last stage, we fired .50-calibers at various silhouettes that were set up."*

*Then we went back to Molesworth to fly practice missions with instructors to show us what we were doing wrong. When we finished, they figured we were ready for combat.*

At age 19 Staff Sergeant William Simkins was the youngest member of the crew. He was also the bomber's Engineer, one of the most critical positions. He recalled the crew's first loss:

*“Our tail gunner quit after our first mission. He just up and said he didn’t want to fly anymore. We got George Buske as a replacement. He was an experienced gunner who had flown before, and he hung around with Ralph Burkart, our right waist gunner. Burkart was from Columbus, Ohio.*

*“Our left waist gunner was a guy named Stan Moody, from Maine. He was a real gun expert, a gunsmith, or something. He hunted in the woods a lot and used to fool with guns all the time. Our bombardier was Woodrow Monkres from Oklahoma—small but tough. And our navigator was Warren Wiggins, from Long Island. He could really get you around.”*

*From Half a Wing, Three Engines and a Prayer  
By Brian D. O’Neill*



The Battle of Bremen

### **November 26, 1943**

Thirty-five Hell’s Angel’s bombers lifted off from the airfield at Molesworth on the morning of November 26, the largest 303d Flying Fortress formation in more than a year of aerial combat. The sizable combat group was possible because of all the new crews that had arrived and been trained, including Lieutenant John Henderson and his men who on this day flew into combat in the legendary bomber named Hell’s Angels. On this first mission for the new crew, Captain Merle Hungerford flew in the right-hand seat as Instructor/co-pilot.

Nine wings of Eight Air Force airplanes, 505 heavy bombers in all, were destined to deliver a decisive blow against enemy installations at Bremen, Germany. Simultaneously, another 128 bombers were to assault industrial targets near Paris. With 633 heavy bombers in the air it was the largest, single-day American air mission yet mounted. Flying escort was 353 P-47s and 28 P-38s, the aerial armada numbering nearly 1,000 total aircraft.

Due to high clouds, the formation had to climb to 27,500 feet where the cold winter air was at least -50 degrees. Beyond the dangers of ice building up on windows to obscure visibility were the far more dangerous heavy white contrails that steamed



behind each bomber in-formation. Such contrails provided a virtual smoke screen that might allow enemy fighters to slip up on the tails of the formation without being seen, to render deadly fire.

Indeed, more than 50 enemy fighters hit the lead formations, Fortresses from the 303d, as soon as it passed the coast. The running battle lasted more than an hour as enemy FW-190s, Me-109s, and rocket-firing Me-110s attacked in packs. In Hell's Angels, Lieutenant Henderson's crew experienced combat for the first time, save for the veteran tail gunner. In the Ball Turret, Sergeant Ruppel kept up a steady stream of fire. "They (enemy fighters) tried to hide in the vapor trails left by the Forts and sneak up without being seen," he later recalled. "I saw three or four of them try this, but it didn't seem to work too well. The gunners drove them off as soon as they came out in the open."

Busily attending his radio, Sergeant Vosler suddenly noticed that the waist guns had fallen silent. Looking in that direction he saw Sergeants Moody and Burkart lying silently on the floor. Hell's Angels' oxygen system had failed, rendering the gunner's unconscious even as enemy fighters continued their attack. Without hesitation, Woody grabbed portable oxygen bottles and rushed to the waist to revive his comrades. The action subsequently earned him the Air Medal.

The Bremen bombers and fighters slugged it out with the enemy to claim a total of 70 enemy planes shot down, but at the cost of 22 Flying Fortresses, 3 Liberators, and 4 P-47s. It was the opening of a campaign dubbed the Battle of Bremen. Eighth Air Force bombers returned to Bremen again three days later, and then three more times in December. Of the eight missions' major missions flown by the Eighth Air Force from November 26 until December 16, four were strikes at Bremen. Along the way Lieutenant Henderson's crew added two more missions to their growing tally.

The Battle for Bremen, and the last mission flown against the enemy installations there until June of the following year, culminated with the mission mounted on December 20.

### **December 20, 1943**

Cold, winter storms blanketed England in rain and fog for much of December. In the first nineteen days of the month, only five major missions had been possible for the men of the Mighty Eighth, two of them return trips to Bremen. The formations had been massive; on December 13 nearly 650 heavy bombers hit Bremen. Three days later 535 dropped bombs on the enemy installation that was now a virtual moonscape.

Enemy fighter activity had been unexpectedly light and, for the first time, the heavy bombers were escorted all the way to target and home by newly arrived, long-range

P-51 fighters. Casualties had also been light, only five bombers lost in combat on December 13, twelve three days later. Of sixty bombers fielded by the 303d Bomb Group for both missions, all had returned safely home. The missions were in fact, as was every mission, filled with the potential for disaster and sudden death. But on the two previous trips to Bremen, the scariest moments had come not over Germany, but on the return to England where the runways had been socked in by fog while the bombers were away.

Clearing skies on the evening of the 19th gave hope for flying the following day and VIII Bomber Command was alerted for a maximum effort. Nearly 500 heavy bombers were scheduled to return to Bremen, twenty-one of them from the 303d including Lieutenant Henderson and his crew in Jersey Bounce, Jr. Based on light resistance encountered in the previous two missions the men didn't expect the surprising resistance that rose to turn them back. The Group Pro Report for the day, filed after the mission had been completed, took note of this fact:

*"Bremen again was subject to demolishing by the US AAF heavy bombers (today.) This important large port in Northern Germany is becoming hamburgered by large formations of Flying Fortresses dropping their destruction to carry on the elimination of the German war machine. Unlike the last few times, our big bombers went to Bremen, today's mission proved to be one of the roughest our crews had been on. Flak has generally been very intensive over Bremen, but today the combination of flak and German fighters did their best to prevent our formation from bombing.*

*"They were not successful."*

Shortly after dawn the bombers at Molesworth and other airfields across England began taking off into the crisp morning skies. Lieutenant Henderson took his team aloft in Jersey Bounce, Jr., shortly before 8:30 am and climbed for altitude. Captain Merle Hungerford rode in the right-hand seat as Instructor Pilot/Co-pilot. The crew, now flying their fourth mission, was the same group of men that had posed together in front of Sky Wolf more than a month earlier (save for assigned co-pilot Lieutenant Ames who had yet to join the team.)

For nearly two hours the bombers climbed for altitude, circling over England as more bombers took off to create the massive aerial formation. By 10:40 nearly 500 Flying Fortresses and B-24 Liberators headed northeast and left behind the coastal boundaries of Great Britain for the half-hour trek over the North Sea.

The leading squadrons crossed the coastline of Holland at 11:06 am, and the first enemy fighters attacked twelve minutes later. Pilots of the leading squadron of the

303d reported more than 100 enemy aircraft that moved in to turn back the raid. It was a running battle that lasted for 58 minutes.

The 303d mission summary noted: "Attacks were made by rocket-firing ME-210s and JU-88s from six o'clock level at 1000 yards. Me-210s dropped bombs about the size of a dynamite stick from 500 feet above. They were dropped when the plane dipped its nose. All sticks exploded at once. Attacks were made in squadron formation from two o'clock high on one aircraft. These enemies pressed the attack to within 100 yards. Two attacks were reported as coming from three o'clock level. T/E fighters continued their attacks into the target area. One aircraft reported enemy aircraft flying in formation about 100 yards out and then pressing the attack and breaking down under our aircraft to the other side and continuing the same tactics. The attacks from the side were made in pairs and sometimes in groups of three or four."

The 303d Group leader was Captain Don Gamble in Sky Wolf who recalled: "We were doing fine until we started our bomb run. The formation was perfect. As soon as we got over the target, they smashed the hell out of us. That flak was plenty accurate and there was lots of it. Our (fighter) escort tried to keep the (enemy) fighters out, but they sneaked through the contrails where we couldn't see them."

Diving enemy fighters and erupting clouds of flak began to break up the formation as the Fortresses prepared to drop their bombs. A Me-100 angled sharply to attack the bomber flown by 427th Squadron pilot Lieutenant Franklin Leve, moving within fifty feet before unleashing its ordnance. Two rockets struck between the ball turret and the tail forcing the bomber pilot to dive sharply. Only two of the crew survived the crash landing.

Almost simultaneously flak knocked out one engine of Second Lieutenant Alexander Alex's Santa Anna. All but two of the crew were on their first combat mission. For all of them, it was the last. Enemy fighters dove on the crippled bomber forcing the crew to bail out before the B-17 crashed near Bremen. The two wing gunners and tail gunners were wounded but survived to be interned as Prisoners of War for eighteen months.

Jersey Bounce, Jr. miraculously evaded the hail of flak from below and the onslaught of fighters all around to reach the target where Lieutenant Monkres announced: "Bombs Away." Almost immediately Lieutenant Henderson turned his bomber in a 180-degree turn to head north, away from the inferno and over the North Sea. While making that adjustment to retreat at 300-miles-per-hour the sturdy bomber that had survived 28 combat missions shuddered and began to lose power.

In the ball turret, Ed Ruppel looked away from his gun sights long enough to see

holes in the left-wing, and flames streaming from the No. 1 engine. "Pilot, No. 1 is on fire," he shouted into the interphone as he swiveled the turret to examine the rest of the bomber from below. "Everything else appears to be okay," he announced a moment later, "but No. 1 is still on fire."

Lieutenant Henderson rolled over on his flaming left-wing, opened the cowling flaps on the flaming No. 1 engine, and moments later the fire was extinguished leaving little more than a trail of smoke behind the wing. There was no time for a sigh of relief, for Jersey Bounce was now outside the protection of the larger formation. She continued her sluggish dive when power dropped on the right-wing. The No. 3 engine began spewing smoke and, though the blades were turning, it wasn't putting out any power.

Jersey Bounce continued to dive and Ed Ruppel recalled those terrifying moments. "As I glanced off to my right, I could see four or five B-17s being attacked by fighters. There was one B-17 that was pretty close to us. They cut one of his wings off and he went into a tight roll. Then they went after the others. They just kept pecking away until they got them all. They chopped up one ship, and another, they hit a third one, and then they went to work on a plane over to our left, and cut him up...I knew that when the fighters were finished with them, we were next."

When Jersey Bounce was down to 15,000 feet Ruppel recalled, "It seemed like the entire German Luftwaffe was down there with us."

Suddenly, there was a sound as if the bomber were flying through a hail storm. From the tail, the crew could hear George Buske announce over the interphone: "I'm hit." A 20-mm shell from a diving enemy fighter had exploded and filled the tail with deadly shrapnel that moved forward. Forrest Vosler remembered:

*"There was a lot of shrapnel coming through the aircraft. I don't know where it came from, but to the best of my belief, it was pieces of our aircraft...I was hit in both legs.*

*"I stood there for a few moments, terribly scared...I could also feel the blood flowing down my legs.*

*"Several things went through my mind. One of them was that there was no question about my getting the Purple Heart. My next thought was that 'This is a very serious business I'm in, and I've got to do something to protect myself or I'm not going to make it.' Survival is paramount to anybody in combat, so I immediately sat down in my chair (at the radio desk) to try to avoid being hit again. I figured I'd got an armor-plated chair and it curled up around my back.*

*"As I sat there contemplating my next move, I thought how silly my actions were, because I didn't know where the next bullets were going to come from. I had to have the chair facing the right direction, or this wasn't going to work. It wasn't going to stop any bullets. So, I figured:*

*"If this is the way it's going to be, at least I'm going to die standing up. I'll do the job. I might as well just get up because I'm not going to protect myself with this chair. This is stupid!"*

Opening the radio hatch, Sergeant Vosler found his most difficult task in choosing which enemy fighter to engage first. It seemed, indeed, that the entire Luftwaffe had

painted a bull's eye on



Jersey Bounce, Jr.

Ed Ruppel tracked the lone fighter that made a pass from below but the attacker rolled and dove before he could trigger his guns. The situation above was much worse, where they dove in groups of eight or nine from the ten o'clock position. Forrest Vosler added his fire to the steady stream that flowed from the top turret, where Bill Simpkins had his hands full.

During a very brief lull, Simpkins was sent to the tail to provide first aid for Sergeant Buske, and Ralph Burkart moved from his waist gun to man the turret. As Simpkins made his way to the back of the Fortress a ME-100 came up parallel to the

stricken bomber at the nine o'clock position, 800 yards out. Burkart unleashed his twin-fifties in the top turret and sent the enemy tumbling to the ground, black smoke trailing all the way. Five minutes later he scored on a Me-109. When a parachute was seen emerging from the falling fighter the determined gunner was credited with a confirmed kill. (Burkart's first victory was listed only as 'probable' as no one witnessed a crash. A kill was confirmed only if a crash was witnessed, or if the enemy pilot parachuted from his stricken fighter.)

Meanwhile, in the shattered bomber's tail, Simpkins found Buske slumped over his guns, unconscious and bleeding badly. The veteran tail gunner had been hit in the stomach and his flight suit was torn open to reveal a sucking wound in his right chest which exposed the lung and continued downward through his diaphragm to the gaping wound in his abdomen. Simpkins dragged his comrade forward near the waist guns which were still firing at incoming fighters. Burkart, who had left the bottom turret after the solo enemy assault from below, left his waist gun long enough to hand Simpkins a syrette of morphine. It was frozen from the high altitude and crisp winter air that measured -45 degrees, and Simpkins quickly thawed it by placing it in his mouth; then administered a double shot to Buske. The compress bandages he applied with Burkart's help did little to stem the flow of blood from multiple wounds, but at least they hid the jagged openings in Buske's chest and abdomen.

Meanwhile, the running fight went on as Lieutenant Henderson tried to extricate his battered bomber from the nightmarish skies over Bremen. Firing from the right waist gun position Burkart nailed a Me-210, shearing off the right-wing. "You got him," Ed Ruppel shouted. Bill Simpkins, having done all he could for the dying tail gunner, manned the left waist gun to flame an FW-190 that attacked from above at ten o'clock. Though Jersey Bounce was in deep trouble, the ten-man team that manned her was refusing to surrender to the inevitable. In minutes they had scored three problems, one confirmed, and undoubtedly addition kills that had happened so quickly in the heat of battle that no one had witnessed them.

At the moment the most vulnerable part of Jersey Bounce was the empty tail where Sergeant Buske has fought valiantly until struck down. After flaming the FW, Sergeant Simpkins crawled back to the shattered tail. The guns were unserviceable—could offer no defense, but Simpkins remained in that position to warn the pilot over the interphone of any attack from the rear so evasive action could be taken in the cockpit.

Indeed, a twin-engine fighter swooped down on the silent tail of the Fortress, defended now only by Forrest Vosler's single fifty protruding from the radio compartment hatch. The radioman pressed the trigger, striking two aircraft at once...

*“My first burst knocked pieces on the left side of his wing off. I was actually after the engine or the pilot. I moved the gun rapidly over to try to get him. I was firing as I turned, and I went right across the stabilizer (of Jersey Bounce) and put a hole in it because this gun had no stops. Our plane seemed to be flying all right, so I didn’t bother Henderson with a little thing like hitting the stabilizer.”*

As the stricken enemy fighter dove earthward ahead of a trailing plume of smoke, Vosler pulled his goggles over his eyes and scanned the heavens for more targets. Almost immediately the goggles fogged up, forcing him to push them back upon his forehead. It was a fateful action, for at that very moment an incoming 20-mm shell slid the opposite direction down the side of his flex-held fifty to strike the breach and explode. Vosler fell backward, blood streaming from scores of openings in his shredded flight suit.

“They’re not playing the game right, hitting a guy in the eyes,” Vosler recalled as being his first thought in that horrible moment. “I couldn’t see well, but when I moved my hand down to my chest where I’d been hit—I was trying to open my jacket to find out how badly—I noticed that my hand was shaking. I couldn’t control it. Then I reached up and dragged my hand across my face to see if there was blood, and when I looked at it my whole hand was covered with blood.



*"The shell fragments had damaged the retina of my right eye, and I was seeing blood streaming down the retina inside my eye, thinking it was on the outside. So, my natural feeling was that I had lost the whole side of my face...I thought I only had half a face.*

*"I became extremely concerned, I was out of control, really. Obviously, I wasn't going to have a chance to get out of this thing now. I knew I was going to die. I knew my life was coming to an end. The fear was so intense, it's indescribable, the terror you feel when you realize you're going to die and there's nothing you can do about it. So, I started to lose control, and I knew then that I was either going to go completely berserk and be lost, or something else would happen.*

*"And a strange thing did happen. I lived every day of my life. I relived my whole life, day by day, for 20 years. It put everything into perspective. For the first time, I realized what a wonderful, wonderful life I had had. There were only a few days in my whole life that were bad, and I asked God to forgive me for those bad days and thanked Him for all the many wonderful days he had given me. I said, 'I'm not going to ask you for any more days. It's been too nice.' I even reached out my hand and said, 'Take me, God, I'm ready.'*

*I became very content, very calm, very collected. I no longer feared death, which is a terrible thing to fear. And I slowly realized that if God didn't want to take me at that particular point, then I had to go on and do the best things I could do."*

Forrest Vosler was indeed hit bad. Besides major wounds in his chest and hand, smaller shrapnel wounds were evident everywhere else. Ed Ruppel recalled: "He was shrapnel from his forehead to his knees, everywhere. There was blood all over him, coming from all those little shrapnel cuts. There was no place where you could put your hand and stop the blood. I knew he was hit bad in the eyes, too, because I could see the white stuff running down below one eye and onto his cheek."

It was the wounds to the eyes that bothered Forrest Vosler the most, not only for the sheer horror of being in the battle of his life and unable to see clearly, but because he still believed he had lost half his face and was permanently disfigured. Having confronted the prospect of death and making peace with it, and then realizing that perhaps he was going to live, after all, he set himself to the task of preparing his radio. Training took over as he undoubtedly recalled the admonition from Radio School: A day will come in combat when the job of getting home is up to the radio operator.

In the cockpit the bomber's instrument panel had been knocked out after two direct hits. "We couldn't tell whether we were flying sideways, upside down, backward, or what," Remembered Ed Ruppel. "So, we hit the deck, and started to come home that

way." Lieutenant Henderson was flying so low that his bomber was now subjected to small-arms fire from the ground, but it was largely ineffective. It was obvious that the battered bomber, struggling along on only two engines and shredded from nose to tail, would never make it back to England. Priority now became staying airborne long enough to cross the hostile coastline and reach the North Sea. The pilot ordered all unnecessary equipment jettisoned to lighten the load and increase that prospect.

Struggling against his pain and unable to see his radio clearly, Vosler got on the interphone to advise the cockpit that he would transmit an SOS as soon as Jersey Bounce reached the water, beyond enemy territory. Lieutenant Henderson replied: "I think you better send it now!"

Thinking with unusual clarity, despite all he had been through, Forrest responded, "Sir, let me know when we're going down, and I'll send the SOS. When you can't keep the aircraft airborne, let me know. In the meantime, if you keep it up, let's not break radio silence."

Meanwhile, the rest of the crew continued to throw out anything not critical to their survival. The worthless tail guns went out the back, the waist guns followed. Cans of unexpended ammunition, tools, anything that added extra weight to the pilot's impossible task of remaining airborne long enough to reach the sea went out the hatches.

As Bill Simpkins scoured Jersey Bounce for unnecessary weight, he passed the radio room where Forrest stood ready to do his job. "He had his back turned to me, and was standing up working at the radio," he recalled of the moment that was one of the flight's most poignant. "I looked him right in the face, and I saw there was stuff dribbling down his right cheek from his eye. He was in a daze, groggy, visibly shook up. He wasn't normal.

"As we were throwing things out, he said, 'You're throwing everything else overboard. Well, why don't you throw me overboard? I'm just so much extra pounds. Throw me out, too.' And he really meant it, because he asked me more than once to throw him out. I didn't say anything, really, I just sloughed it off. I didn't make him real seriously, even though I knew he was getting serious about it."

At no moment during the desperate race to the sea did anyone other than Sergeant Vosler consider the wounded radioman "extra pounds," though they did remove and jettison his shoes—"Which I resented. I figured if we landed on land, how was I going to walk? I'm barefoot."

Near the coastline the low-flying bomber picked up more flak, but all of it exploded at a safe distance. Minutes later Lieutenant Henderson looked down to see nothing but

white-capped waves beneath him. Jersey Bounce had somehow reached the North Sea.



A single, unexpected enemy fighter stood between the now-

unarmed bomber and the last race for shelter. Fortunately, the Me-109 chose to attack the nose, where Lieutenant Monkres had not yet jettisoned his flex gun at the bombardier's station. It was the only weapon remaining on the bomber but it was in the right place at the right moment. Monkres fired a burst that sent the fighter scattering, then disassembled his gun and dropped it into the turbulent waters below.

Minutes earlier, when the crew had been hurriedly tossing all extra weight from their struggling bomber, Forrest Vosler had carefully guarded the radio. Though unable to see clearly and wracked with pain, he clearly instructed the others in finding and inserting the right frequency modules he would need in order to contact Search and Rescue once over the ocean. This done, the remaining modules were thrown out the window. Now, flying low over the North Sea, he prepared to send out the SOS.

At first there was no transmission, but keeping his mind clear and remembering his training, Vosler quickly located the problem—a loose connection on the transmitter key. He couldn't see clearly enough himself to make the repairs but calmly gave instructions to the men who now huddled around him in the radio room. "I sent the SOS out at different speeds," he recalled, "and I got an immediate response from England. They receipted my message and asked me to give a holding signal for 20 or 30 seconds while they shot a true bearing on me. I responded and gave them the signal, and they came back, and gave a receipt on that one. They said they had my course, and asked me to transmit every 10 or 15 minutes so that later they could correct their bearing."

Vosler maintained his composure, sending out two or three more signals at the appointed intervals until almost half-an-hour had passed and Jersey Bounce was only sixty miles from the coast of England. They were met in the air by four British Search and Rescue planes prepared to either escort the floundering B-17 to land or to pick up her crew in the sea. The land was indeed now in sight and it was difficult

for Lieutenant Henderson to decide which of the two was the safer option. With his instruments out he ultimately concluded the best was to ditch his bomber at sea.

## The Goldfish Club



Following World War I, in the dangerous early years of aviation,

airmen who were forced to parachute to safety from disabled aircraft became members of an exclusive organization, the Caterpillar Club. The record-holder in this exclusive, informal organization that continued through World War II and exists to the present, was Charles Lindbergh with four emergency jumps.

World War II bombing missions out of England sent pilots and crews out from home fields on an island, forcing them to cross water both going to and returning from target. On November 23, 1942, Lady Fairweather piloted by Lieutenant Arthur Reddig ditched in the Bay of Biscay. All ten crewmen were lost, the first casualties in the 303d Bomb Group. On December 20, 1942, while returning from a mission to Romiley, France, Lieutenant Orville Witt's bomber was shot up so badly it was unable to complete its return home, ditching in the English Channel. Again, every man was lost.

Ditching at sea was proving fatal, but not always. On January 3, 1942, Lieutenant Frank Sanders and three of his crew were pulled from the Bay of Biscay by the enemy after their B-17 went down. They were the first Hell's Angels to survive a water landing, and as such became the 303d's charter members of the Goldfish Club.

Established in November 1942, by Mr. C. A. Robertson who was Chief Draughtsman for one of the world's largest manufacturers of Air-Sea Rescue equipment, the Goldfish Club became the counterpart to the Caterpillar Club. Airmen who bailed out of stricken airplanes over land were accorded membership in the latter. Any person who survived a landing on water (sea, lake, river, or canal) and was saved by their floatation equipment or life raft, became members of the former. By the end of the war, membership numbered more than 9,000 Goldfish, including men from every branch of service.

By December 20, 1943, eighteen Hell's Angels bombers had been forced to ditch in water. Sixty-nine airmen survived, many as POWs, to receive the water-tight membership card and distinctive patch of a Goldfish. Lieutenant John Henderson and

his crew were about to become the newest members of the Goldfish Club if they survived.

Ditching was a dangerous procedure, quickly evidenced by the fact that of 180 pilots and crew of the 303d alone, only 69 had survived. Crews were trained in, and practiced the procedure. Thus, as Lieutenant Henderson and Captain Hungerford struggled with the controls in the cockpit of Jersey Bounce, all eight other crewmen gathered in the radio room, facing forward. The body of the still unconscious tail gunner was laid carefully on the floor, cushioned by life preservers.

Lieutenant Henderson dropped to wave-top level, watching the rise and fall of the swells to time the moment of impact. Landing in a trough could be fatal, swamping the bomber before all hands could scramble to safety. In the radio room Forrest Vosler remained at his station, punching out codes to maintain communications with the nearby Search and Rescue aircraft. He paused only long enough to share reassuring words with his worried comrades, sharing the peace he had learned in the calm that followed his earlier face-to-face with death. "Don't worry," he repeated, "you're going to be alright. Relax!"

On instructions passed through Forrest Vosler, still at work in the radio room, Henderson set a course that would put him down just ahead of a nearby Norwegian trawler. With airspeed down to 90 miles per hour he then caught the crest of a wave and dropped his tail wheel. Jersey Bounce rode the whitecap like a surfer, then shuddered to a sudden stop that threw everyone in the radio room violently forward. Saltwater bubbled up from the bottom turret, and without taking time to express relief, the crew went into action—repeating the process they had practiced before on dry land.

As Jersey Bounce filled with water the crew exited through the radio room hatch and moved in different directions, half of them to the starboard (right) wing and half to port. Bill Simpkins was one of the first to exit to the starboard in order to help lift Buske's body through the hatch and lay him quickly but gently on the wing. He then returned to break out the life raft while Vosler stood on the fuselage. "Somebody was going to help me out, but I said I thought I could boost myself out all right," Woody remembered. "I got on top of the fuselage, looked down, and Buske was slipping (off the wing) into the water.

*"I yelled to the pilot, but I could see he wasn't going to respond fast enough. They had pulled the life raft out and it was floating on top of the wing, and Henderson was busy trying to cut the cord on the life raft so it wouldn't go down with the airplane. I knew Buske would be in the water in a fraction of a second.*

*"I jumped and held out my hand at the same time. I grabbed the antenna wire that runs from the top of the tail to just forward of the starboard radio compartment window. I prayed that it would hold, and I was able to grab Buske around his waist just as he was going into the water, sliding off the trailing edge of the wing."*

It was a valiant, unbelievable accomplishment for the young radio man whose own body had reached, and already surpassed the limits of human endurance. Vosler strained against the antenna wire holding his wounded comrade until the others raced to secure both men. Quickly they all loaded in the life rafts and pushed away from the sinking bomber so they would not be sucked below by a vacuum when the sea claimed Jersey Bounce. When but a short distance away they looked back sadly as the nose dipped, lifting the tail momentarily high in the air, and Jersey Bounce dove for the final time.



The nearby trawler moved in towards Bill Ruppel's

raft, but he waved it towards the other containing Vosler and Buske. Once the wounded were safely aboard, the Norwegian ship returned to rescue the remaining men.

A doctor aboard the trawler treated Buske, shaking his head in concern. Prospects for the young tail gunner's survival were not good. A short time later the men were transferred to a British Search and Rescue PT boat for the long ride home. The whole crew spent the night in the hospital at Great Yarmouth, England, where Bill Simpkins was treated for wounds to his hand and back. The following morning eight members of Lieutenant Henderson's crew flew back to Molesworth. Forrest Vosler and George Buske remained behind to fight a different kind of war—a war for life.

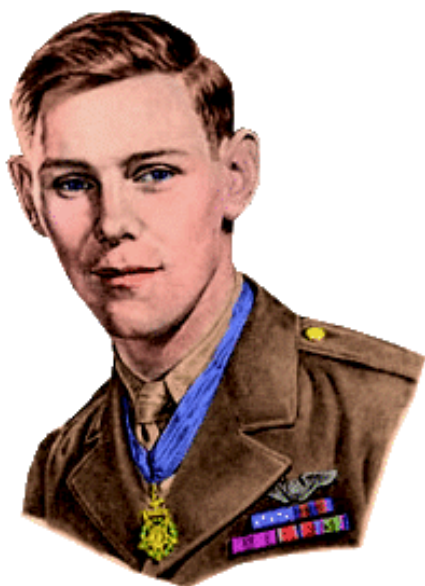
Captain Hungerford's war ended one month later on January 14 when he was shot down on a mission over LeMeillard, France. He survived but spent the rest of the war as a POW.

Lieutenant John Henderson's crew received replacements for their wounded comrades and flew nine more combat missions. On a February 24 mission to Schweinfurt, Germany, his No. 2 engine was destroyed by flak and the crew was forced to bail out. Henderson, Lieutenants Woodrow Monkres and Warren Wiggins, and Sergeants Stanley Moody and William Simpkins were all captured and interned as Prisoners of War.

After multiple blood transfusions and treatment for shock and hypothermia, George Buske underwent the first of many surgeries to close the wounds that exposed his lung, intestines, and several ribs. Beset by infection and able to take nourishment only intravenously, his weight dropped to 88 pounds. In May he underwent further operations to seal still open wounds, and skin grafts for his right thigh. By mid-June was strong enough to be returned home for more treatment at the Army's Halloran General Hospital on Staten Island. In November 1944 he was at last able to take a three-week furlough home, after which he requested and was granted permission to return to active duty at Langley Field, Virginia. He was not discharged from the Air Force until September 3, 1945, two days after World War II was officially over.

Returning to Rochester, New York, George Buske worked as a yard foreman at a lumber company until retiring in 1978. During the period he also married and raised a family. After suffering heart problems in 1988 he again went under the knife for a successful coronary artery bypass surgery. While recovering from that operation his surgeon visited him to present an unexpected memento—an encrusted shell fragment found near his heart that had been there for forty-five years.

The indomitable George Buske died in Rochester in 2003.



Like George Buske, Forrest Vosler endured several surgeries

at Great Yarmouth before he was stabilized enough to return home. Meanwhile, the story of his heroism in the skies over Bremen was well-publicized in the American media making him a celebrity of sorts. In many ways, all of America followed his healing process and prayed for his recovery.



Forrest flew home on February 26 for treatment at Deshon Army Hospital in Butler, PA. He was also, at that time, promoted to Technical Sergeant. Meanwhile, his nomination for the Medal of Honor was approved, though the President himself delayed presentation pending additional surgery. In the months since the mission over Bremen, Forrest Vosler had become totally blind in both eyes.

While the media monitored Forrest's progress a 25-year old University of California student offered to have one of her own eyes removed and transplanted to restore the young airman's sight. Vosler was moved beyond measure, claiming such sacrifice greater than all he had done that fateful day six months earlier.

Before leaving Deshon for more treatment at Valley Forge General Hospital, surgeons removed Vosler's dead right eye and a cataract over his left. For the first time, Forrest saw light, though it was blurry and intermittent. He entered Valley Forge General on June 2.

On August 25 Forrest Vosler opened his one good eye and for the first time saw color—the multi-colored Red Cross afghan that covered his feet. “God was sure good to me,” he remarked.

Six days later Technical Sergeant Forrest Vosler was at the White House, receiving the Medal of Honor from President Franklin D. Roosevelt. He later explained the delay in presentation of the award after its approval, and why it happened so quickly when at last his sight returned:

*“The presentation was held up by President Roosevelt because of my blindness. I was totally blind, and he would not let general (Hap) Arnold present the medal. He said he wanted to do it. He absolutely refused to have General Arnold do it and said he wanted to do it himself.*

*“He called my doctors in the hospital (shortly after the award was approved) and asked the doctor if there was any chance that I would regain my vision. The doctor assured him that there was. He said, ‘When he does, let me know.’”*



As only the second enlisted airman in history to

receive the Medal of Honor important work remained for Forrest Vosler. He told newspaper reporters, "I guess I won't see any more fighting and I wish the war was ended, but I've got to help them out with their war bonds drives and so on. I don't like being touted around as a hero, but if it helps the war, I guess that's the only thing left that I can do."

When he was honorably discharged from the Air Force on October 12, 1944, Woody was quoted as saying: "I feel like a heel. I'm getting out but other guys are staying in."

Forrest Vosler spent a 30-year career as a counselor with the Veterans Administration, continuing his service to his comrades. When the Army Air Force became a separate branch of service, he was instrumental (along with [Jimmy Doolittle](#)) in the formation of the Air Force Association.

Forrest Vosler passed away in Titusville, Florida, on February 17, 1992, and was buried at Arlington National Cemetery. His widow, Virginia, donated all of his medals including his Medal of Honor to the U.S. Air Force Enlisted Heritage Institute where they remain on display to inspire a new generation of American airmen—and potential heroes.

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