From the Other Side

By Tim McCann
The following article first appeared in June 2011 edition of The Eagle Eye.

…A B-17 marked "JW-G" was met at 14,000 feet near Potsdam and escorted back to England.

So reads the last line of the 4FG report on mission FO 263, a target support show to bomb the Erkner ball bearing works south of Berlin. A small and seemingly insignificant footnote to what was one of the signature missions in the 4th's illustrious history.

On 8 March 1944, on one of the earliest trips to Berlin made by the 4th, the group charged headlong into a formation of Germans approaching the bombers from the south estimated at 60 strong. Upon breaking up this attack, combat with element and section sized groups continued, ranging from the south side of Berlin all the way to its eastern most suburbs. At the time, it represented the highest scoring day in group history with a final tally of sixteen enemy aircraft, tempered by the loss of Lt. Col. Sel Edner.

It is also the mission on which Don Gentile and John Godfrey showcased the skills and tactics which would make them the most celebrated fighter element in the Army Air Force. It was on this sortie that Godfrey became an ace and earned the Silver Star, while Gentile's 3.5 kills (out of the six for which the two combined) brought him even with 334's Duane Beeson (14) and signaled the start of their race to best Eddie Rickenbacker's score of 26.

In all, eleven pilots would be credited with victories on this mission, among them 334's Nick Megura, who like Godfrey became an ace. With after action reports filled with accounts of heavy flak, slashing attacks, violent evasive maneuvers and stricken bombers falling through chute-filled skies, how then did this succinct line about a single, lone Flying Fortress merit inclusion in the report? After all, how important could this one sentence be?

For the nine men aboard that Flying Fortress, it meant *everything*. But who were these men? Where was this B-17 based? And how did it come to be flying alone at 14,000 feet in the skies over Berlin? Though there were two

*6 March 1944: The crew of the B-17G **Sky Scrapper** pose for a photograph at their base in Podington. The men who flew the Erkner mission are (standing) Sgt Gurke, Sgt. Kent, Lt. Rose, togglier , Lt. Price, Sgt. Eilers, Sgt. Cline. In the front row are Sgt. Cornwall (left end) and Sgt. Gay (right end).*

US Air Force photograph

perspectives to the air war - fighter and bomber - in the A4FG we're used to reading about what it was like as seen from the cockpit of a fighter. Here is the view from the other side…

8 March 1944 did not begin well for Lt. Bill Rose of New Orleans, LA and his crew. Stationed at Podington, they were part of the 92nd Bomb Group's 326th Bomb Squadron. Their B-17G, named ***Sky Scrapper*** and coded JW-X, was suffering from mechanical issues and had been scratched from the mission. In its place, the men of ***Sky Scrapper*** would be flying another B-17G named ***Black Magic***, normally Lt. Henry Murdock's plane.

While the Flying Fortress normally carried a crew of ten, the crew on this mission consisted of nine men. As ***Black Magic*** was neither the lead nor deputy lead aircraft in their squadron, they were not carrying one of the top-secret Norden bombsights. Instead, the bombardier and navigator's duties were combined and carried out by a single man called the 'togglier,' who was not a regular member of Rose's crew.

On schedule, the 326th Bomb Squadron took off at 0800 loaded with 100-pound general purpose bombs and headed for the Erkner ball

bearing works.

Things were going well as the plane approached the IP (initial point) at 25,000 feet, the start of its bomb run about 15 miles west of Berlin. The flak came up but was deemed 'moderate and inaccurate." Suddenly, without warning, ***Black Magic*** lost manifold pressure on all four engines. The big bomber immediately slowed and began losing altitude, quickly falling out of formation.

Frank Cline of Latrobe, PA, the radio operator/top gunner of the crew was at his station when he noticed "the plane began falling at a fast rate."

What had happened? ***Black Magic*** was one of the newer B-17's in the 326th and as such was equipped with a new electronic turbo charger (which provides engine power at high altitudes) in place of the four manually operated gates in the older models. When working, the electronic version was easier for the pilot to control, which in turn according to Rose made it easier for them maintain tight formations at high altitudes. On ***Black Magic***, the wire sending the signals had shorted out, causing all four engines to lose power simultaneously.

Cline, scrambling down from his top gun position into the radio compartment in search of his chest chute, noticed the "two waist gunners were still at their posts. They knew more than I." His hasty departure delayed; he relaxed a little bit.

Prior to 15 March 1944, all Mustangs in the ETO carried the same paint scheme - olive drab with gray undersides, white spinners and white wing and tail stripes. 334's QP-H is shown above.

(Association of the 4th FG)

As the plane descended into the thicker air (where the super chargers were not needed), power came back to the engines. But with his squadron high above them and disappearing in the distance, any possibility of completing the mission was gone. Rose and company found themselves where everyone who ever flew in a bomber hated to be: low, slow and alone over Germany.

Rose weighed his options. Try to make Sweden? Too much headwind. They decided to try to get back to England. But how? Head for the deck? Not to his liking either.

"When you become a straggler, many B-17 pilots headed for the deck and flew home as close to the ground as possible to escape." Rose said. "My decision was to fly high through the clouds when possible and avoid flak areas. When attacked by enemy aircraft, I could do a lot of maneuvering and red line the airspeed by diving."

Rose ordered the togglier to dump their bombs (which not only lightened the plane but also made it more maneuverable) and turned the lumbering Flying Fortress for Podington. The crew prepared for a long, precarious ride home. As they settled on their new course their hopes suddenly soared.

"Just as we turned around, we flew through a formation of Lightnings headed for Berlin" Rose would tell his hometown paper, the New Orleans Times-Picayune.

"Just as they passed us, two ME-109's just out of range began maneuvering to attack us. Our Fortress was just a gleam in eyes of those two Jerry pilots when that Lightning outfit took out after them. Four of those twin-tailed P-38's chased those two Nazis right down to the deck and out of sight before they headed on towards Berlin to give our bombers cover over the target."

With the P-38's continuing on, their good fortune appeared short-lived. Once again, they found themselves alone at 14,000 feet. For fifteen excruciatingly long minutes they had the sky to themselves and were about 50 miles west

of Berlin when two single engine planes were spotted approaching slowly on their starboard side. As tensions mounted and the gunners took aim at the oncoming planes, the olive drab and gray aircraft with the white spinners were identified: Mustangs!

While the P-51 was still relatively new to the ETO (they had begun operations in December 1943) they had quickly gained a reputation as the best fighter in the skies - Allied or Axis. In the first half of March, all Mustangs operating in Europe still wore the same paint scheme and markings; this was done to prevent them from being confused with ME-109's. The only thing identifying them as being from specific units were the squadron codes surrounding the stars and bars.

The men on ***Black Magic*** were elated! The gunners began waving excitedly at their newly arrived escorts. As they closed on the B-17, one of the Mustangs eased over the top and took up station on the bomber's port side. Rose could see its pilot gesturing at him.

"One of them came in close and on our wing and motioned to his oxygen mask and then pointed down...I finally realized he was trying to tell me he was almost out of oxygen, so I went down to about 12,000 feet."

The three planes flew along for 500 miles in formation, a Mustang slowly weaving back and forth on either side of the Fortress. Said Rose,

"Those Mustangs stuck with us all the way across enemy territory and halfway out over the Channel"

If any Germans had spotted them, the boys in the B-17 and P-51's never knew it. No attacks were made. Even this early in 1944, the sight of two Mustangs was more than enough to discourage any potential Luftwaffe aggressors. And it was a good thing too, because one of the Mustangs was out of ammo while the other was down to tracers.

As they flew out over the Channel, a grateful Bill Rose radioed the two fighters "Nine men owe their lives to you fellows. Much obliged." One of them responded, "Don't mention it. That's our job, we're only too glad to help." And with a waggle of their wings, the two P-51's peeled off and opened up their throttles, headed for home.

Rose and crew made it back to Podington ahead of the rest of his squadron. Returning pilots, unaware of the fate of ***Black Magic*** and having assumed she went down, were surprised to find Bill Rose in the officer's club waiting for them. Rose and his crew would ultimately complete their tours, though not without a few more close calls.

"We completed many missions with one engine out and struggled when two went out. Thank goodness we had four. Once, I lost three but that is another story" he related. "Now you know why I laugh at my children and grandchildren when they say they had a stressful day."

As for the B-17 ***Black Magic,*** she only lasted another two weeks, going down on the 23 March mission to Munster.

The men of ***Black Magic*** never learned the identities of their guardian angels or the unit they were from. Little did they realize that it might have been impossible to handpick a better tandem had they been given the opportunity, for their 4th Fighter Group companions on that March day were none other than 336's Don Gentile and John Godfrey.

8 MAR 44: Gentile and Godfrey back from Berlin
(National Archives AC 51393)