



Inspiring a Nation:  
The Story of the Hell's Angels

## Inspiring a Nation: The Story of the Hell's Angels

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(based on interviews with Capt Irl E. Baldwin and M/Sgt Fabian S. Folmer)



The Boeing B-17F-25-BO which became known as the *Hell's Angels* was one of the most notable aircraft that participated in World War II. This aircraft started out as just an ordinary bomber, and it was no more special than other such B-17s at the time. However, the actions of the persons associated with *Hell's Angels* made the aircraft unique and its presence significant. *Hell's Angels* came to serve as a symbol of those persons, and that symbol inspired others to work harder and strive for the best. It inspired a nation to win a war.

The United States Army Air Corps activated the 303rd Bombardment Group, which the B-17 *Hell's Angels* would later become a part of, on 3 February 1942 at Gowen Field in Boise, Idaho. Shortly thereafter, the 303rd began its training for overseas combat duty. June 1942 found the group on the move, settling at Alamogordo Air Base in New Mexico. Then, four months later, the air echelon of the 303rd Bomb Group flew to Biggs Field in El Paso, Texas (1).

Boeing produced B-17 heavy bombers of the version B-17F-25-BO at this time. Boeing gave one of these the Boeing manufacturing number 3262, and the U.S. Army Air Corps gave that same aircraft number 41-24577. Boeing delivered this nameless B-17F, which would become known as *Hell's Angels*, on 13 August 1942 to Wright Field (2).



**Capt. Irl E. Baldwin and his crew**

G-105G-901A-7AB-10-13-42-4P-358 TH. SQUADRON

During September 1942, Captain Irl E. Baldwin and his crew in the 303rd Bombardment Group's 358th Bombardment Squadron traveled to Cheyenne, Wyoming. There, at the United Airlines modification center, they picked up a brand new B-17F, #41-24577 (3).

Flying in their B-17s, the air echelon of the 303rd Bombardment Group went to Kellogg Field in Battle Creek, Michigan, in late October 1942. There the 303rd assigned its four bombardment squadrons new B-17Fs. B-17F #41-24577 became a 358th Bombardment Squadron aircraft, and Captain Baldwin and his men became its crew. Master Sergeant Fabian Folmer received orders to serve as ground crew chief on Baldwin's aircraft.

The 303rd then gave its crews the opportunity to name their B-17s. However, at that time, the Baldwin crew could not decide on a name. Various crew members proposed different names for #41-24577, but none of them suited the entire crew. So, B-17F-25-BO #41-24577 remained nameless (4).

The 303rd air crews then flew to Dow Field in Bangor, Maine--their last stateside stop. There, the ground crew modified aircraft #41-24577 like no other B-17 had been modified before. They started installing a special gun mount in the aircraft's plexiglass nose cone. This enabled the aircraft to have some defense against frontal attacks by German fighters. However, they did not complete the modification by the time the crews of the 303rd left Dow Field and headed overseas. The mount was there and stable, but gaps remained around the mount in the nose cone, allowing air to enter the nose of the aircraft. This fact did not hurt the aircraft's maneuverability, but it would eventually be the source of at least one problem for a few members of the Baldwin crew.

The 303rd's flight to Europe included numerous stops for refueling and rest. First stopping at Gander Field in Newfoundland, the crews checked their aircraft for any deficiencies before making the remainder of the flight to the United Kingdom. Departing from Gander Field, the group next stopped momentarily at Iceland's capital city. They then flew on to Prestwick, Scotland. From there, the crews of the 303rd embarked on the final leg of their journey. Baldwin's crew and aircraft arrived at their new home, the Molesworth Airdrome in Cambridgeshire, England, on 24 October 1942 (5). Baldwin's crew were not seasoned veterans of the war by that time, so on the surface they were still no different than any other air crew in Europe at the time. Still, they possessed something a little different, but it would take the taste of battle to extract it from them.



**Capt. Irl E. Baldwin**

Baldwin's crew had a rough, disappointing start in the war. They participated in the 303rd's first combat mission on 17 November 1942; the target was the submarine depot at St. Nazaire, France. Due to inclement weather, the group could not locate the target, and the entire formation returned to base with bombs still aboard the aircraft. On their second mission on 22 November 1942 to Lorient, France, the Baldwin crew experienced yet another disappointment. The bomb racks on their B-17F malfunctioned over the target area (6). Despite these discouragements, the Baldwin crew pressed on.

Even though #41-24577 remained nameless at this time, that soon changed. During one early mission, Captain Baldwin spoke to his crew over the aircraft's intercom with regard to what they should name their Flying Fortress. Baldwin, who enjoyed the World War I flight-related movie *Hell's Angels*, asked, "How about *Hell's Angels*?" One crew member responded, "This is the closest to hell that angels will ever get!" The rest of the crew then checked in one by one, all agreeing on the name (7).

So was born the name *Hell's Angels*. Private First Class Bernard K. "Bernie" Kastenbaum designed and painted the original artwork on the right side of the *Hell's Angels'* fuselage late in 1942. The original artwork consisted of the words "Hell's Angels" painted beneath an angel on roller skates holding a bomb above its head. The 303rd Bomb Group then issued orders that the group would have to paint aircraft identification letters on the sides of each of its aircraft. Kastenbaum's artwork was in the way, and it had to be removed as a result. In Kastenbaum's absence (8), Staff Sergeant Harold Godwin, then the tail gunner on Baldwin's crew, painted the words "HELL'S ANGELS" on both sides of the aircraft's nose in the location that became familiar to everyone. Godwin omitted the artwork of the angel on roller-skates; that would be added much later, sometime around the *Hell's Angels'* completion of forty missions (9).

Having completed a few missions, certain *Hell's Angels* crew members noticed there was a problem associated with the holes that were left unfilled when the special gun mount was earlier installed in their B-17's nose. Frigid air entered the hose of the aircraft at cruising altitude through those gaps, first affecting the bombardier and navigator who were stationed in the nose. Then the frigid air worked its way back into the cockpit, annoying the pilot and copilot. Baldwin remembers that he wanted to shut the door between the cockpit and nose section, but he was under orders to leave that door open while in flight. Eventually, the holes in the nose were filled (10).

After completing a few missions, Captain Baldwin agreed with his crew that they would never turn back from any mission if it could be avoided. To achieve their goal, Baldwin and his crew knowingly did a variety of things that were against the rules. Knowing the Eighth Air Force's desperation for manpower at the time, they felt they had a responsibility to the other crews in the European Theater of Operations to be in the air whenever possible. Their intent was not to be heroes or to set records; they were just trying to do their jobs to the best of their abilities (11).



### **Hell's Angels' Right Waist Gunner S/Sgt Dennis Weiskopf**

One of the things the crew of the *Hell's Angels* broke the rules on involved their guns. It was a common problem with the .50-caliber machine guns to freeze up, rendering them inoperable, at altitude (around 20,000 feet above sea level) (12). As a result, the 303rd Bombardment Group ordered its crews to abort any mission in which three or more of its eleven guns were inoperative. However, according to Baldwin, he and the crew disobeyed this order often. Once, only three of their guns were operative, the other eight being frozen or jammed. Baldwin's crew justified their actions by believing that there were enough guns in the formation of Flying Fortresses to protect them, as well.

On other occasions, the *Hell's Angels* completed missions under the control of Captain Baldwin when it mechanically could have aborted. On one mission, Baldwin's flight engineer alerted him that he heard one engine running rough whenever Baldwin throttled it back. Baldwin experimented and discovered that the

flight engineer was correct. However, Baldwin was still capable of maintaining the *Hell's Angels'* position in the formation of B-17s, so he pressed on. After landing back at Molesworth, the *Hell's Angels'* ground crew discovered the problem--one of the spark plugs had either blown or fallen out of the engine in question (13).

On another mission, Captain Baldwin discovered that one of the engines on #41-24577 had a runaway turbo supercharger as the *Hell's Angels* climbed to altitude to join the formation of the 303rd's Flying Fortresses. With experimentation, Baldwin found that by setting the runaway control all the way down on the engine in question that it would run reasonably. The *Hell's Angels* completed this mission, as well (14).

Indicative of the dedication of the Baldwin crew to not aborting any mission unless fully necessary, Baldwin recalled the actions of two of his gunners on one mission. On that mission, the guns of both the tail gunner and one of the waist gunners on the *Hell's Angels* jammed. Both gunners took off their gloves to try to break their jams, and, in the process, both men froze their hands. Both men knew that if Baldwin found out that they had frozen their hands, he would abort the mission. Since neither man wanted to be the cause of the *Hell's Angels'* first abort, they waited to tell Baldwin about their hands until they landed back at Molesworth. Captain Baldwin, under orders, gave both gunners an oral reprimand for their actions. The gunners were in the hospital for two weeks due to freezing their hands; neither man's hands had permanent damage (15).

Captain Baldwin took particular pride in flying the *Hell's Angels*. In February 1943, Baldwin and the rest of the *Hell's Angels* crew were on leave in London. While its regular combat crew was on leave, the *Hell's Angels* completed two missions on two consecutive days, the 26th and 27th of February 1943. Baldwin's crew members heard this, and they terminated their leaves at once to return to base. Baldwin marched into headquarters and argued with the Operations Officer over someone else getting to fly his crew's aircraft; Baldwin lost the argument (16).

The *Hell's Angels* became the first B-17 in the European Theatre of Operations to complete twenty-five missions on 13 May 1943. The target was the Potes Aircraft Factory at Meaulte, France. Baldwin pointed out that by that time, the 303rd Bombardment Group and the *Hell's Angels* crew had only been in Europe eight months. In that time, the 303rd's losses included twenty-seven of its original thirty-five crews. Making it back to base even a few times was remarkable in itself in the

early days of the air war, and many crews considered completing a twenty-five mission combat tour-of-duty almost impossible. The *Hell's Angels'* completion of twenty-five missions gave hope to thousands of people, as a result (17).

The Army Air Force still did not select the *Hell's Angels* to return to the United States despite its accomplishments to date. Many members of the Baldwin crew remained in Europe, as well. However, the crew's reason was different. Individually, they still lacked a few missions each to complete their own tours-of-duty.

The next mission, of 14 May 1943, was a significant mission for the *Hell's Angels* and its crew. The target was the submarine pens at Kiel, Germany; this was the first 303rd Bombardment Group raid on Kiel. Additionally, *Hell's Angels* led the entire formation for its first time. First Lieut, Donald R. Bone served as bombardier aboard #41-24577, and the entire group dropped its bombs on his lead. Bone indicated that his bombs "absolutely split the target," and overall the entire group's raid devastated Kiel. Baldwin completed his combat tour on this mission, becoming one of the first pilots in the European Theater of Operations to accomplish that feat. Baldwin received the Distinguished Flying Cross as a result (18).

With its original air crew returning to the United States one-by-one, the *Hell's Angels* continued to have bombs painted on its nose as it completed more combat missions. No longer was one crew normally assigned to fly *Hell's Angels*; Headquarters randomly assigned crews to fly different aircraft for each mission. Still, one group claimed *Hell's Angels* as its own: the ground crew.

What the *Hell's Angels* and its air crew accomplished would not have been possible without the actions of the aircraft's ground crew. Master Sergeant Fabian S.



**M/Sgt. Fabian S. Folmer**

Folmer served as ground crew chief, managing the six-man ground crew. Early in the war, the Germans sunk many ships carrying aluminum plating and tools, which resulted in the ground crews having to work with insufficient tools and supplies. The holes that the *Hell's Angels* received in combat, whether from flak or enemy aircraft, were patched initially with flattened-out tin cans. Folmer's crew thought, at that time, that a good tool kit included only a peening hammer, a screwdriver, a couple of wrenches, and water-pump pliers. With those tools, the *Hell's Angels* ground crew repaired just about everything (19).

With time, supplies and better tools became readily available, but the ground crew still did not have it easy. They toiled in the mud, grease, fog, cold air, and the black of night. Once the crew worked twenty-seven hours without a break in order to



**The ground crew for *Hell's Angels***



have #41-24577 ready for the next mission. Furthermore, they set a record of completely changing out an engine in ten hours. Still, the ground crew of the *Hell's Angels* was not alone. Whenever there was any doubt that the aircraft might not be ready in time for the next mission, the air crew worked alongside the ground crew. The lives of the air crew depended on the ground crew, resulting in a strong bond between the two groups (20).

Just as the *Hell's Angels* air crew broke the rules to keep their B-17 in the air, so did its ground crew. Sergeant John R. Kosilla was the ground crew's "burglar." Whenever *Hell's Angels* needed replacement parts, Kosilla did a little "moonlight requisitioning," taking the needed parts off of other aircraft that were not airworthy at the time. Other ground crews did the same things, but Kosilla was more honest in his actions. When he took a part, he left a note; he later gave back the parts he took (21).

The combined efforts of the ground crew and the combat crews that flew in the *Hell's Angels* resulted in the aircraft setting yet another record. On 27 August 1943, it became the first B-17 to complete forty combat missions without an abortion due to mechanical failures or personnel problems. This inspired other ground crews to strive for the best and work harder. As a result, Folmer received the Legion of Merit, becoming the first crew chief to be given that honor (27).

The *Hell's Angels'* record of dependability was impressive, but the bomber would soon have to turn back due to mechanical failure. On the mission of 31 August 1943, one of the piston rings in #41-24577's number three engine cracked. This caused oil to leak from the engine and cover the right wing of the Flying Fortress, forcing Lieutenant Gamble to abort *Hell's Angels* for the first time (23). William McSween served as navigator on the Gamble crew that day, and he recalled not being welcome when their aircraft returned to base early. He commented that everyone in the 303rd had big plans for the *Hell's Angels* to be the first B-17 to complete fifty missions without aborting (24).

The *Hell's Angels* was still in the midst of a fierce competition at the Molesworth Airdrome. It was one of three 303rd Bombardment Group B-17s in a race to be the first to finish fifty combat missions. *Hell's Angels* lost this race, as the *Knockout Dropper* of the 359th Bombardment Squadron completed its fiftieth mission on 16 November 1943. At that time, #41-24577 claimed only forty-seven missions completed (25).

Americans by this time started to recognize the 303rd Bomb Group as one of the most famous bomb groups in the war due to the numerous accomplishments its men and aircraft achieved. Thus, the group decided it needed a name for publicity affairs and asked for suggestions. The 303rd then decided on 7 January 1944 that "Hell's Angels Bomb Group" was most appropriate. They took the name directly from B-17 #41-24577 simply because it was one of the group's original aircraft that had an impressive record of dependability and mechanical efficiency up to that point. The nose art of the *Hell's Angels*, including the angel on roller skates, thereafter represented the 303rd, too (26).



**20 Jan 1944 - Signing Names on Hell's Angels for her US Tour**

The U.S. Army Air Force selected *Hell's Angels* and its ground crew to return to the United States following the bomber's completion of forty-eight combat missions. Touring stateside war factories in order to boost worker morale was the new assignment for the *Hell's Angels* and its men. On 20 January 1944, the 303rd's group commanding officer allowed anyone who wanted to sign the *Hell's Angels* before it left Molesworth for the states. Hundreds of men then blanketed the battle-scarred bomber with signatures in white paint. Then, the group held a

*Hell's Angels* farewell ceremony. Present was Lieutenant Colonel Ben Lyons, a public relations officer on the staff of General Ira Eaker, commander of the Eighth Air Force. Also, Lyons had starred in the movie *Hell's Angels* from which the bomber--and eventually bomb group--took its name. The *Hell's Angels*, with its entire ground crew plus six combat crewmen aboard, took off from the Molesworth Airdrome under an archway of flares after the ceremony (27).

Back in the United States, the *Hell's Angels* first stopped at Tinker Field in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. A marching band, guard of honor, and five thousand other people greeted the veteran bomber when it landed there. The size of the crowd intimidated the ground crew members aboard *Hell's Angels*. After exiting the B-17, the ground crew ventured no further and stayed close together. Then, Captains Baldwin and Bone of the original air crew burst through the guard line, causing the fear to leave the ground crew. The ground crewmen smiled, saluted, and threw their arms around the Captains that had been like brothers to them. Baldwin joined the ground crew and participated in the remainder of the industrial morale tour (28).

What the men aboard the *Hell's Angels* experienced at Oklahoma City, they would experience often during their stateside tour. Thousands of enthused individuals greeted them everywhere they stopped, and they spoke to just as many exhausted workers in the U.S. war factories. The goal of the tour was to make those same workers toil harder. According to Charles A. Rawlings, a writer for the *Saturday Evening Post*, one man told Folmer and the rest of the crew that:

“We want to make these people feel as you did when you were working over there... We can't do it by criticizing them or crying 'Shame.' They are already working very hard, but we've got to ask them to work harder. That is what you boys did when the need was there. Tell them how hard it was at first because you did not have the things you needed. How important what they are doing is; how you and all the thousands like you need the things they are making desperately... Put 'em in the war. Go on. You can do it better than fifty generals” (29).

Those things they told the workers, but they didn't stop there. They told the workers that no man ever died or received a combat wound flying in the *Hell's Angels*, which many regarded as the most noteworthy claim one could make about the bomber. The men also pointed out the patches that blanketed the veteran B-17, covering the hundreds of bullet holes and numerous flak holes that *Hell's Angels* sustained in battle.

The *Hell's Angels'* industrial morale tour had just begun. Departing from Tinker Field, the bomber flew to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base where it received an overhaul before it embarked on the rest of the tour. Then, *Hell's Angels* stopped at an engine plant in Trenton, New Jersey, and at two Timken Roller Bearing plants in Ohio. In Indiana, the bomber made a stop at a Studebaker Corporation plant, and it visited ball bearing plants in Chicago, Illinois. *Hell's Angels* visited a sub depot in Cheyenne, Wyoming, too. In Washington state, the bomber stopped at Yakima and then the Boeing plant where it originated. The tour ended at Los Angeles, California (30).



**Humphrey Bogart Group - Hell's Angels Bond Tour - February 1944**

(Back L-R) S/Sgt Ernest H. Touhey, S/Sgt Edward A. West, Jr, Capt John R. Johnston,  
S/Sgt John R. Kosilla, Walter Brennan, S/Sgt Kasmer Wegrzyn

(Front L-R) Hoagie Carmichael, Capt Irl Baldwin, Humphrey Bogart,  
T/Sgt Fabian S. Folmer, Lauren Bacall, Sgt Wilson F. Fairfield

Following the successful industrial morale tour, the history of *Hell's Angels* becomes sketchy. Some people remembered being trained in the veteran bomber in either New Mexico or Colorado. Following the war, #41-24577 went to Stillwater, Oklahoma. After dismantling the aircraft, someone transported it to Oklahoma City. *Hell's Angels* met its fate there at a salvage yard on 39th Street (31).

The *Hell's Angels* no longer exists physically, but it lives on in the minds of those who remember it. In remembering *Hell's Angels*, one also recalls the air and ground crew members who helped the aircraft accomplish many things. The *Hell's Angels'* completion of twenty-five combat missions gave hope to thousands, making people realize that those who fought in the war could live through it. The *Hell's Angels'* completion of forty consecutive missions without aborting was also noteworthy, helping to enhance the public's awareness of the 303rd Bomb Group. That led the 303rd to name itself after the famous bomber. Finally, the *Hell's Angels* industrial morale tour prompted United States war factory workers to work harder. They then saw that the war was not just far away in Europe and the Pacific; they understood that they were fighting a part of the war in their factories, too. Those workers then realized that their actions helped determine the ultimate outcome of the war, and they intended to win.