

303rd BG (H) Combat Mission No. 128

26 March 1944

Target: "Crossbow" Wizernes, France (Pas de Calais area)

Crews Dispatched: 20

Crews Lost: Lt. Mars, 9 POWs, 1 EVD

Length of Mission: 4 hours, 5 minutes

Bomb Load: 5 X 1000 lb G.P. bombs

Bombing Altitude: 21,000 ft

Ammo Fired: 390 rounds

Twenty 303BG(H) aircraft took off to attack "Crossbow" special missile launching construction sites in the Pas de Calais area. There were no designated secondary or last resort targets. Each Squadron bombed the target individually. The Group was led by Maj. Edgar E. **Snyder**, CO 427BS. There were no abortive aircraft. There were no clouds over the target, but there was some haze. Flak was moderate, but very accurate. Twelve aircraft sustained flak battle damage.

Nineteen Fortresses dropped a total of 93 1,000-lb. ANM44 bombs. Crews reported good hits in the target area. One aircraft, piloted by Lt. **Hybert**, dropped two 1,000-lb. bombs after mechanical troubles prevented dropping them on the target. Bombs were dropped at an altitude of 21,000 feet.

No enemy aircraft were seen. The returning aircraft contained three wounded crewmen—one seriously wounded. Friendly fighters provided area support. A few crews reported that they didn't see any friendly fighters. Chaff had no noticeable effect on the anti-aircraft fire.

Major Edgar E. **Snyder**, leader of the Group, said, "I didn't see either friendly or enemy fighters, but the flak was terrific. It shook the ship practically all of the time that we were over the target and blew out one of our tires. I saw the bombing and it looked pretty good to me." 1Lt. James P. **Zwayer**, bombardier on *Old Glory*, got a good look at the bombing. "The bombs were right in the target area and in a tight pattern," **Zwayer** said. "I don't like to stick my neck out until I see the strike pictures, but I think it was pretty good as a whole." Sgt. John **Nemchick**, waist gunner on *Paper Dollie* said, "Some of these trips to France are worse than the ones to Germany. Over Berlin last week, we didn't get a scratch. Today we came back with holes in our ship."

Aircraft #42-31929 was missing. *Tennessee Hillbilly*, piloted by 1Lt. Charles W. **Mars**, received a direct hit from anti-aircraft fire between the IP and the target while on the bomb run. The B-17 was hit just a few seconds before "bombs away." It peeled off to the right, passing under the No. 4 aircraft and went into a shallow glide. About 30 seconds later, four parachutes appeared and opened as soon as they cleared the slipstream. About 30 seconds later, two more came out. One dropped about 10,000 to 15,000 feet before it opened and the other dropped to about 17,000 feet. A seventh 'chute appeared, but didn't open for a long time after it left the airplane. *Tennessee Hillbilly* nosed down in a half-spin

with the left wing on fire. The left wing tip fell off and the aircraft made a three-quarter turn before it exploded in mid-air. At this time another parachute came out and opened. Although aircraft parts were all around it, the parachute didn't appear to be hit. A total of eight parachutes were seen before the B-17 blew up. The aircraft crashed at Lederzelle, 10 kilometers northeast of St. Omer.

After parachuting from *Tennessee Hillbilly*, T/Sgt. Conrad J. **Kersch** was taken in by a farm family near St. Omer on the Belgian border, south of Dunkerque. They gave him a new name, Albert De Groote. After several months, he made contact with the French Underground and assisted them in successfully robbing a bank in Nieppe, France. The stolen money and food coupons were used to meet the needs of the Underground. He spent nearly a year evading capture and working for the Underground. [An excerpt of T/Sgt **Kersch**'s memoirs *The Albert De Groote Story*, begins on page 9 of this mission report.]

Lt. **Mars**, 2Lt. William J. **Dallas**, 2Lt. George L. **Arvanites**, S/Sgt. Raymond L. **Foster**, S/Sgt. Eddie **McGinnis**, S/Sgt. Charles W. **Dunlap, Jr.**, S/Sgt. Albert J. **Senechal**, S/Sgt. Delbert S. **Nivens** and S/Sgt. Vincent A. **Angione** were all captured by the enemy and taken prisoner.



CHARLES W. MARS CREW - 427th BS

(crew assigned 427BS: 21 Jan 1944)

(Back L-R) S/Sgt A. Pappas (E), Sgt C.H. Lunde (WG), Sgt Eddie McGinnis (R-POW),
Sgt Petrowski (Asst Armorer), Sgt Charles W. Dunlap, Jr. (BT-POW), Sgt Albert J. Senechal (LWG-POW)
(Front L-R) 1Lt Charles W. Mars (P-POW), 2Lt William J. Dallas (CP-POW),
2Lt James G. Clark, Jr. (N), 2Lt Charles W. Webster (B)

Substitute crewmen on this mission:

2Lt George L. Arvanites (N-POW), T/Sgt Conrad J. Kersch (B-Evd), S/Sgt Delbert S. Nivens (WG-POW),
S/Sgt Raymond L. Foster (E-POW), S/Sgt Vincent A. Angione (TG-POW)

From the Journal of Vern L. Moncur, 359th BS Pilot

MISSION #23

Date: March 26, 1944

Target: Wizernes, France

Altitude: 21,000 feet

Plane: U-050 "Thunderbird"

Position: No. 5, High Squadron

This mission looked like a real "milk run" - until we got to the enemy coast. We went into the target at 21,000 feet, and were only over enemy territory twenty-six minutes. But, we were shot at before we got over land and constantly thereafter until we were back over the English Channel again. It was about the "hottest" bomb run I have ever been on. We were bombing by squadrons, and our squadron was broken up by the accurate and intense anti-aircraft fire. It was then up to each of us to get out as best we could. One of the planes in our squadron received a direct hit and exploded. We had the old "Thunderbird" doing better than 220 miles per hour on our way out of enemy territory. Flak was bursting so close beside us and underneath us that it shook the whole plane, and at times actually made the controls jerk in my hands.

We picked up four large holes in the wings and tail, but luckily nothing vital was hit. We carried 5 one-thousand pound extra-high explosive bombs, and our squadron did the best bombing of the whole group. There was no injury to any member of the crew.

COMMENDATION

Received from Brigadier General Robert B. Williams
on 7 April, 1944

1. In comparing the bombing results achieved by the units of this command on the attack against No-Ball targets in occupied France, 26 March 1944, it has been established that the 359th Bombardment Squadron (H), accomplished its assigned task with a remarkable demonstration of precision bombing.

2. Analysis indicated that seventy-eight (78) percent, an exceptionally high percentage of the bombs dropped, struck within five hundred (500) feet of the H.P.P. and that one hundred (100) percent were placed within one thousand (1000) feet of the M.P.I. This is highly commendable and reflects good formation flying and proper release of bombs from every aircraft in the Squadron despite the intense and very accurate flak encountered. Your organization distinguished itself on this operation.

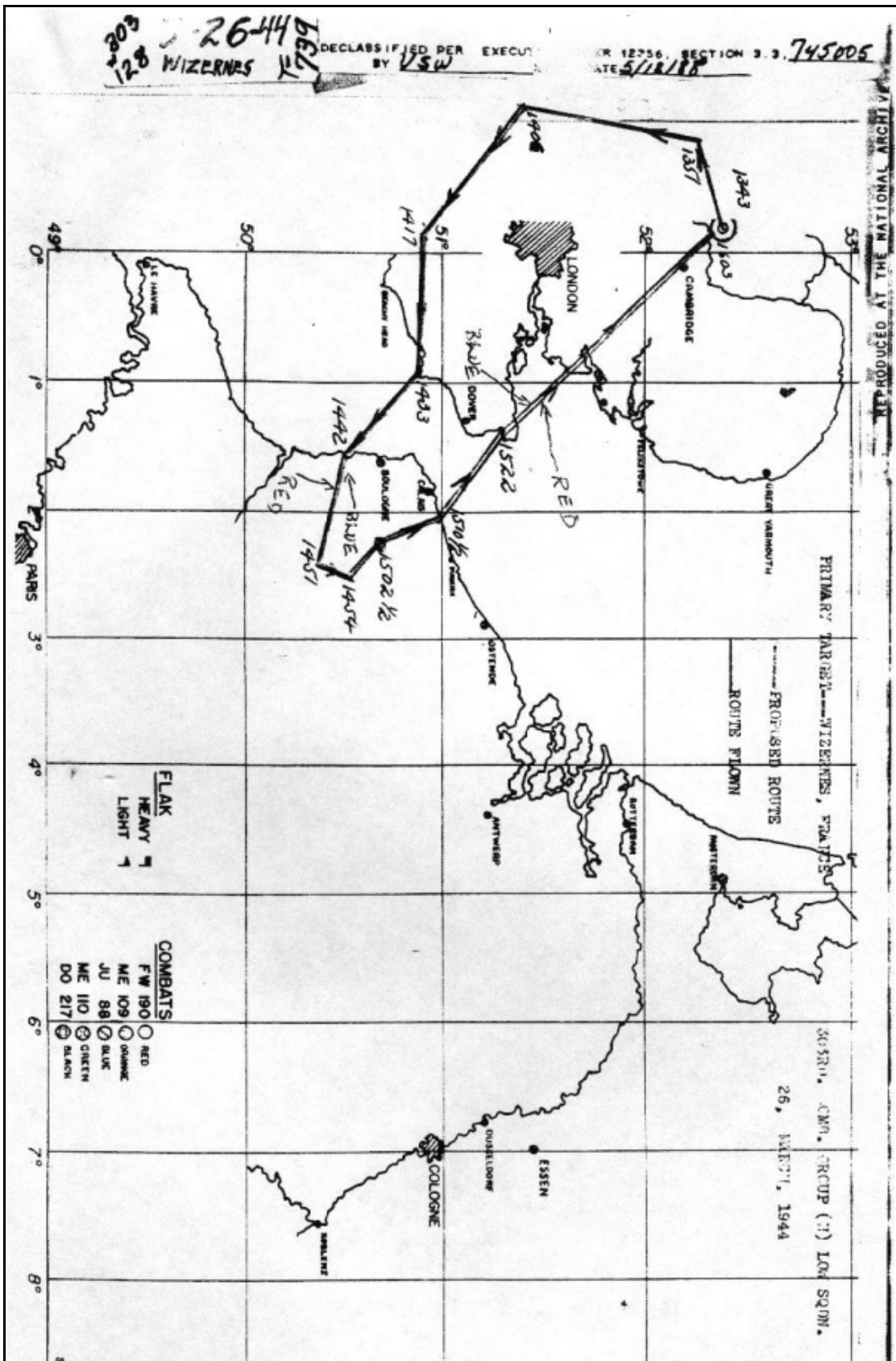
3. In particular I wish to commend the following personnel of the 359th Bombardment Squadron (H), whose outstanding teamwork, while flying in the lead position of the Squadron formation was in large measure responsible for the excellent results attained:

1Lt	Elmer W. Young	O-679162	Pilot
2Lt	Robert L. Cunningham	O-677673	Co-pilot
2Lt	George R. Schoner	O-738667	Navigator
2Lt	William L. Hoover	O-746720	Bombardier
T/Sgt	John G. Steele	18169371	Top Turret Gunner
T/Sgt	Steve Dulick	35586655	Radio Operator
S/Sgt	Richard H. Lobeck	17156474	Ball Turret Gunner
S/Sgt	Bill Stapleton	15067328	Tail Gunner
S/Sgt	John W. Withrow	36158693	Left Waist Gunner
S/Sgt	Andrew Rohaly, Jr.	12157070	Right Waist Gunner

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WIZERNES
BELI

DECLASSIFIED PER EXECUTIVE ORDER 12756, SECTION 3.3, DATE 5/12/88 BY VSW

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Route Map

Aircraft Formation at Assembly Point

<u>Snyder-Barnes</u> 9875					
	<u>Mars</u> 929		<u>Melton</u> 027		
		<u>Harrison</u> 616			
	<u>Jones</u> 7875		<u>Wood</u> 423		
	<u>Young</u> 168			<u>Long</u> 432	
<u>Hybert</u> 830		<u>Assenheimer</u> 183		<u>Lynch</u> 754	<u>Hicks</u> 552
	<u>Goolsby</u> 605			<u>Thomas</u> 048	
<u>Savage</u> 405		<u>Moncur</u> 050		<u>Stevens</u> 590	<u>Eisele</u> 204
	<u>Seddon</u> 622			<u>Ferguson</u> 617	

KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

CREW POSITIONS CMP - Command Pilot P - Pilot CP - Co-Pilot NAV - Navigator ANV - Ass't. Navigator MNV - Mickey Navigator ENG - Engineer BOM - Bombardier RO - Radio Operator	TOG - Toggler BT - Ball Turret Operator TT - Top Turret Operator TG - Tail Gunner NG - Nose Gunner RG - Radio Gunner WG - Waist Gunner LWG - Left Waist Gunner RWG - Right Waist Gunner GUN - Gunner	VI - Voice Interpreter OBS - Observer PAS - Passenger PHO - Photographer RESULTS OF MISSION KIA - Killed in action WIA - Wounded in action MIA - Missing in action POW - Prisoner of war	DOW - Died of wounds EVD - Evaded the enemy INT - Interned in neu cntry REP - Repatriated RES - Rescued ESC - Escaped BO - Bailed out DCH - Ditched CR-L - Crashed on land CR-S - Crashed at sea
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358th Bombardment Squadron Crew Lists

<u>B-17G #42-97622 Paper Dollie</u> P Seddon, John R., 2Lt CP Burks, Charles D., 2Lt NAV Fitzpatrick, George M., 2Lt BOM Meldrich, Walter A., 2Lt ENG Rogers, Edward E., S/Sgt LWG Nemchick, John, Sgt RO Hess, John C., S/Sgt RWG Holcomb, I.L., Sgt TG Mummery, William T., Sgt BT Maloney, Donald F., Sgt	<u>B-17G #42-97617 (No Name)</u> P Ferguson, Wendell Z., 2Lt CP Moody, James D., 2Lt NAV Brown, James F., 2Lt BOM Schmid, Ralph D., 2Lt ENG Matthews, David R., Sgt LWG Smithson, Clyde E., Sgt RO Phillips, Robert B., S/Sgt RWG Rogers, Thomas J., Sgt TG Brooks, Richard S., Sgt BT Rhodes, Kenneth G., Sgt
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359th Bombardment Squadron Crew Lists

B-17G #42-31830 *Marie*

P	Hybert, Arthur J., 1Lt
CP	Calwell, Lucien B., 2Lt
NAV	Carey, William D., 2Lt
BOM	Kelly, James H., Jr., 2Lt
ENG	Broderick, George V., S/Sgt
RO	Ratford, Edward V., S/Sgt
RWG	Gilcrease, Roland L., Sgt
BT	Jaehne, Charles R., S/Sgt
TG	Barmak, Paul J., S/Sgt
LWG	Neathery, Ralph P., S/Sgt

B-17G #42-31183 *Bad Penny*

P	Assenheimer, Edwin H., 2Lt
P	Sassone, Joseph C., 2Lt
NAV	Palmer, Gerald M., 1Lt
BOM	Livermore, William D., 2Lt
ENG	Mayhugh, John C., S/Sgt
RO	Mouser, Lloyd C., T/Sgt
RWG	Jones, Derrell S., S/Sgt
LWG	Hermann, Kurt J., II, T/Sgt
BT	Franceschini, James V., Sgt
TG	Robb, Charles W., S/Sgt

B-17G #42-38050 *Thunderbird*

P	Moncur, Vern L., 1Lt
CP	Cunningham, Billy A., 2Lt
NAV	Brooks, James, 2Lt
BOM	Chang, David K.S., 2Lt
ENG	Rosier, Robert L., S/Sgt
RO	Andrus, James S., S/Sgt
BT	Hein, Walter E., S/Sgt
RWG	Baer, Richard K., S/Sgt
LWG	Dickman, Thomas J., S/Sgt
TG	Wike, Leonard L., S/Sgt
PHO	Green, William H., T/Sgt

B-17G #42-38168 *Dear Mom*

P	Young, Elmer W., 1Lt
CP	Cunningham, Robert L., 2Lt
NAV	Schoner, George R., 2Lt
BOM	Hoover, William L., 2Lt
ENG	Steele, John C., T/Sgt
RO	Dulick, Steve, T/Sgt
BT	Lebeck, Richard H., S/Sgt
RWG	Rohaly, Andy, S/Sgt
LWG	Withrow, John W., S/Sgt
TG	Stapleton, Bill, S/Sgt

B-17G #42-31405 *Wallaroo MK II*

P	Savage, John N., 1Lt
CP	Marsh, Richard K., 2Lt
NAV	Walsh, Myles J., 2Lt
BOM	Joyce, John D., 2Lt
ENG	Davis, Eugene B., S/Sgt
RO	Minks, George A., S/Sgt
BT	Munson, James E., S/Sgt
TG	Moessner, Raymond J., S/Sgt
LWG	Rogers, Warren G., Sgt
RWG	Dean, Raymond N., Sgt

B-17F #41-24605 *Knock-Out Dropper*

P	Goolsby, Billy M., 1Lt
CP	Rice, Charles M., 2Lt
NAV	Klingensmith, Russell, 2Lt
BOM	Corbin, Frederick A., F/O
ENG	Bumgarner, Donald, T/Sgt
RO	Greenhalgh, Chester, T/Sgt
LWG	Rothrock, Harry J., S/Sgt
BT	Chraniuk, William, S/Sgt
RWG	Cueto, Frank Z., S/Sgt
TG	Strobel, Walter A., S/Sgt
PHO	Mahaffey, William D., S/Sgt

360th Bombardment Squadron Crew Lists

B-17G #42-31754 (No Name)

P	Lynch, Robert J., 2Lt
CP	Johnston, Donald N., 2Lt
NAV	Sbrolla, Emilio M., 2Lt
BOM	Merz, Dick W., 2Lt
ENG	Roszell, Thomas M., Sgt
RO	Schuler, Frank H., Sgt
BT	Chudej, Josef R., Sgt
TG	Krogh, Kenneth R., Sgt
LWG	Schoonmaker, Elwood, Jr., Sgt
RWG	Pleasanton, Kenneth H., Sgt

B-17G #42-97590 *Virgin Mary*

P	Stevens, Joseph E., 2Lt
CP	O'Beirne, Nelson B., 2Lt
NAV	Fleming, Samuel P., 2Lt
BOM	Finley, Robert A., 2Lt
ENG	Brewster, John L., T/Sgt
RO	Deerfield, Eddie, Sgt
BT	Schultz, Melvin E., S/Sgt
TG	Edwards, Marvin R., Sgt
RWG	Fitko, Marion F., S/Sgt
LWG	Cole, Edgar C., S/Sgt

B-17G #42-38204 (No Name)

P	Eisele, Roy, 2Lt
CP	Girard, Louis F., 2Lt
NAV	Schenker, Murray, 2Lt
BOM	Gladstone, Melvin, 2Lt
ENG	Cowley, Louis M., S/Sgt
RWG	Bell, Richard L., Sgt
RO	Millard, Ralph, S/Sgt
LWG	Butler, Raymond, S/Sgt
BT	Longoria, Efrain, Sgt
TG	Vallee, Edward J., S/Sgt
PHO	Lovett, William F., Sgt

B-17G #42-107048 (No Name)

P	Thomas, Earl N., 1Lt
CP	Miller, Edgar C., 2Lt
NAV	Walenta, Clarence V., 2Lt
BOM	Scott, Harold L., 2Lt
ENG	Mason, John W., T/Sgt
RWG	Flenniken, William, S/Sgt
RO	DeWitte, Victor W., S/Sgt
TG	Harvey, Roy D., S/Sgt
BT	Johnston, Harold A., Sgt
LWG	Books, Carl O., Sgt

B-17G #42-31432 *Old Glory*

P	Long, John A., 1Lt
CP	Ellsworth, Paul R., 2Lt
NAV	Munroe, Linton S., 1Lt
BOM	Zwayer, James P., 1Lt
ENG	Wilson, Clarence G., T/Sgt
LWG	Ledley, Albert J., S/Sgt
RO	Jennings, Ralph T., T/Sgt
RWG	Henson, Mace, S/Sgt
TG	Orlando, Anthony T., S/Sgt
BT	Logan, Frank C., S/Sgt

B-17G #42-97552 *The Road Back*

P	Hicks, David F., 2Lt
CP	Williams, John T., 2Lt
NAV	Fazio, Joseph J., 2Lt
BOM	Grunseth, Roald J., 2Lt
ENG	Schwenke, Howard A., S/Sgt
RO	Barber, Stewart, L., S/Sgt
BT	Whitten, Cleveland W., Sgt
TG	Ott, John E., Sgt
RWG	Northam, James W., Sgt
LWG	Mitchell, John B., Sgt
OBS	Coats, Neil, 2Lt

427th Bombardment Squadron Crew Lists

B-17G #42-31929 Tennessee Hillbilly CRS-L

P	Mars, Charles W., 2Lt	BO/POW
CP	Dallas, William J., 2Lt	BO/POW
NAV	Arvanites, George L., 2Lt	BO/POW
BOM	Kersch, Conrad J., T/Sgt	BO/EVD
ENG	Foster, Raymond L., S/Sgt	BO/POW
BT	Dunlap, Charles W., Jr., S/Sgt	BO/POW
RO	McGinnis, Eddie, S/Sgt	BO/POW
TG	Angione, Vincent A., S/Sgt	BO/POW
RWG	Senechal, Albert J., Sgt	BO/POW
LWG	Nivens, Delbert S., Sgt	BO/POW

B-17G #42-32027 Betty Jane

P	Melton, James H., 2Lt
CP	Belknap, Robert W., 2Lt
NAV	Frechter, Harry G., 2Lt
BOM	Clapp, Keith W., 2Lt
ENG	Rusinak, John C., S/Sgt
BT	Moore, John J., Jr., S/Sgt
RO	Stoberl, Donald L., S/Sgt
TG	Anderson, Ralph R., Sgt
LWG	LaPlante, Willard R., Sgt
RWG	Fontaine, Clifford F., S/Sgt

B-17G #42-37875 Empress of D Street

P	Jones, Wilbur H., 2Lt
CP	Wallace, Walstein W., 2Lt
NAV	Skarsten, Albert B., 2Lt
BOM	Kennedy, William J., 2Lt
TT	Weed, Lowrey, Jr., T/Sgt
BT	Calnon, Frederick N., S/Sgt
RO	Kosher, Albert J., Sgt
TG	Kenney, Horace S., Jr., Sgt
LWG	Thompson, Frederick A., Sgt
RWG	Dimowitz, Morris, Sgt

B-17G #42-31616 Spirit of Flak Wolf

P	Harrison, Emmittes S., Jr., 1Lt
CP	Basteau, Stephen B., 2Lt
NAV	Kurnik, Walter F., 2Lt
BOM	Biedanski, Edmund J., 2Lt
ENG	Rombach, Joseph H., T/Sgt
BT	Dye, James W., S/Sgt
RO	Volmer, Lawrence O., T/Sgt
TG	LaFrenier, James E., S/Sgt
LWG	Campbell, Kenneth H., S/Sgt
RWG	Hawk, Kenneth L., S/Sgt

B-17G #42-31423 Jigger Rooche

P	Wood, Vere A., 1Lt
CP	Sayers, Darwin D., 2Lt
NAV	Pinnette, William S., 2Lt
BOM	Brown, Thomas G., 2Lt
TT	Tevis, John E., S/Sgt
BT	Grant, Thomas V., S/Sgt
RO	Brooks, Winnie R., S/Sgt
RWG	Heathershaw, Charles L., S/Sgt
TG	Helton, Edward, S/Sgt
LWG	Hoff, Henry, S/Sgt

B-17G #42-39875 Buzz Blonde

P	Snyder, Edgar E., Jr., Maj
CP	Barnes, Deane L., 1Lt
NAV	Peacock, Lawrence A., 1Lt
BOM	Orvis, George T., Jr., 1Lt
ENG	Sparks, Willie T., T/Sgt
BT	Chancellor, John R., S/Sgt
RO	Benevento, Andrew G., S/Sgt
TG	Kendall, Dallas E., 2Lt
LWG	Winters, Craig W., S/Sgt
RWG	Price, John B., S/Sgt

The Albert De Grootte Story

by Conrad J. Kersch

(from the *Hell's Angels Newsletter*, Feb 1985, Wilbur "Bud" Klint Editor, re-edited)



T/Sgt Conrad J. Kersch

Conrad J. Kersch began his Army career as an Infantryman in 1935. After one hitch, he re-enlisted in the Army Air Corps, completed mechanic's school, and went to work on Curtiss Jennies. He quickly graduated to more modern aircraft and was associated with the Boeing line from the YB-17 through the B-17G. He went through gunnery school, became a turret specialist and flew 50 bombing missions in the South Pacific before winding up in the Osborne Provisional Group and heading for the ETO (European Theatre of Operations) in November, 1943. On arrival, he was assigned to Molesworth, 303rd Bomb Group, 427th Squadron, as a replacement flight engineer. At 28, he was one of the "old men" of the Group. After a few missions, he was checked out as a Bombardier. Shot down on his sixth mission, he successfully evaded for nearly a year, operating as a member of the French Underground.

Years later, Kersch recorded his experiences in hopes of having them published in a book entitled, "***The Albert De Grootte Story***." Here is an excerpt from the opening chapters of his rough manuscript. This portion begins near the close of the first chapter.

Only 12 bombers from our base were to hit this day's target, long range rocket emplacements located in a small forest near Wizernes, Nord, France. The day, 26 March 1944, was clear and the target would be easy to find having been pinpointed by resistance forces in the area. The bombing altitude was 22 to 24 thousand feet. Even though the sky was sunny, the outside temperature gauge registered minus 30 degrees. We crossed the English Channel quickly and were soon welcomed with scattered, inaccurate bursts of flak from coastal defenses. We had crossed the French coast in the vicinity of Dunkirk. Soon we passed our IP (initial point) and turned onto the bomb run. I opened the bomb-bay doors. As if on cue, flak bursts appeared in front of us at our exact altitude. It was obvious that we would fly through that spot in the sky. The flak was "walking" towards us in bursts of four, closely spaced. I called for a check of crew members, relaying it to the pilot and then concentrated on the lead bomber for the bomb release. Even though I had braced against the expected flak, I was shocked by its arrival.

It sounded as though someone had thrown a large handful of gravel at the plexiglass nose. I was seated in a bent-forward position and the burst, coming from below, through the chin turret, hit me in the stomach, chest and face. Fortunately, my flak vest took most of the impact, its fabric was shredded and my eyes and oxygen mask were clogged with debris. The flow had lifted me a couple of feet upward. Somehow I regained my seat. The wind was shrieking into the nose compartment through the many holes torn by the shrapnel.

The Navigator, 2Lt. George L. Arvanites, was pounding on my back for attention and blood seemed to be everywhere. I thought, "Surely, I'm dying!" As those old WWI veterans had told me, "If you're wounded and feel it, you're okay, but if you're hit and don't feel it, you've bought the farm." My chest hurt, but I didn't feel that the loss of blood would be that great. I looked at the navigator and saw that the blood was mostly his. He had taken some flak up into his mouth from under his jaw.

I looked to the right and then to the left. The number 2 engine was dead and the prop feathered; number 3 was burning fiercely. We were dropping out of formation, but we trailed along to finish our bomb run. The formation released their bombs. I delayed momentarily as we were trailing by perhaps a quarter of a mile. As soon as I called "Bombs away!" the pilot rang the alarm bell and hollered, "Bail Out!" over the intercom.

The nose was filled with smoke by now. I took a parachute to the navigator and helped him snap it onto his harness. After adjusting his harness, I shoved a first aid kit down inside his flight jacket and led him to the escape hatch. Putting his hand on the rip-cord handle and motioning him out, I rushed back to my position, discarding the remains of my flak vest. I removed my oxygen mask gingerly, for there were numerous flak splinters pinning it to my face. My chest hurt and the wound in my neck was bleeding freely, but I had no time to examine the extent of my wounds. I turned to the hatch as I slipped into my parachute harness and clipped the chestpack in place. Before I could adjust the harness straps, my Pilot, 2Lt. Charles W. Mars, appeared in the hatchway.

The plane was flying on auto-pilot and the fire appeared to have progressed through the wing into the fuselage. I had no time to retrieve my shoes, pistol or other personal items. I sat down with my feet hanging out of the hatch and stared at the distant landscape, still not believing our predicament. "My first bail out! After having flown since 1936, it has finally happened!" I thought. Suddenly, I was aware of the pilot's hands on my back, urging me to jump. Grasping the loops of my flight boots with my right hand and holding onto my chestpack with my left, I fell out with both eyes tightly closed.

The blast of air and violent tumbling action tried to undo my effort to stay in a balled-up position. My arms and legs were being pried apart. As soon as my forward speed subsided, the turbulence ceased and feeling of falling was gone. I opened my eyes a little at first and then discovered it was almost pleasant to look around. Parts of our disintegrated bomber fell past me and the air seemed filled aluminum flakes, evidently caused by the fire. Another B-17 was going down and I caught glimpses of airmen bailing out. There were parachutes above me, but I delayed opening mine as we had been told at briefings to wait as long as possible since that might aid in avoiding capture.

By now I was falling headfirst in a slow spin. My legs were extended with my toes curled to keep my boots on my feet. This freed my right hand to check my chute pack and harness. The harness was quite loose, but I thought it would be safe enough. Looking down it seemed it would take almost forever to reach the ground. The houses, roads, rivers and canals appeared so far away.

My mind wandered; "Would I be captured? What will happen if I do evade? Am I going to die of my wounds?" Then I was shocked to reality! The ground was rushing at me and objects were becoming more distinct. I jerked the release. To my horror, the only thing that happened was the harness straps came off my shoulders! I quickly pulled them back and, holding them with my left hand, pulled the pins of the chestpack one-by-one, with my right. Gratefully, I watched the chute and shroud lines snake upward between my legs. The canopy blossomed! The harness jerk was almost gentle and quickly, I found myself drifting below the tree tops in a nearby forest.

The landing was perfect for as I lit, I rolled forward toward the collapsed canopy. As I gathered the chute and stuffed it under a pile of brush, I looked about surveying my surroundings. A short distance away, perhaps 150 yards, a troop-laden German truck was pulling to a stop on a narrow road. They obviously had been watching the descending parachutes. I saw the soldiers jump out of the truck and start to run toward me. I almost panicked as they pointed their weapons toward me, but, without hesitation, I fled into the woods.

Being March, the trees, fields and hedges were bare, so I scurried from tree trunk to tree trunk, using them as shields. As I came out of the small forest, I saw some peasants standing near a cottage. I ran toward them, gesturing for a change of clothes. I couldn't hear as my speedy free-fall, combined with a head cold, caused the rupture of both eardrums. The peasants ran away, but I spotted another cottage not too far away. I entered it, but the occupants dashed out the other door in fright. I was almost in tears. We had been briefed to expect help from the local people.

Suddenly I realized I was like a hunted animal without hope of help, so I began to regain my calm.

First, I had to get beyond the field of vision of those pursuing Germans and find a good hiding place. Out the back door of the cottage I could detect 8 to 10 soldiers emerging from the barren forest. I ran out the front door, surveying possible escape routes as I went. It appeared that the hedges lining the fields would be best to use as the German soldiers were encumbered with equipment and weapons. I jumped over some, clawed my way over others while the Germans had to find openings or gates. Before long I couldn't see them any more so I began to look for a hiding place.

A shallow gully filled with dead leaves beside a hedge row was the best I could find. After burrowing into the leaves as deep as possible, I covered myself up and relaxed. A wave of exhaustion washed over me. Feeling that I was about to doze off, I stuffed my handkerchief into my mouth so snoring wouldn't give me away.

After what seemed a very short time, I was awakened by someone shaking me quite firmly. I froze in fear, anticipating the worst. As I opened my eyes, I was surprised to find that it was dark. The sun had been shining brightly when I buried myself in the gully. Looking up I could make out four silhouettes. Since I couldn't hear, we used gestures to communicate. They had some French farm clothes and, unmindful of the young lady in the group, I stripped off my flying suit and boots. Even though it was still winter and in the middle of the night, the situation was so exhilarating I actually felt a warm glow.

As soon as I had changed clothes we staggered across the plowed fields in complete silence, occasionally stopping while someone ran ahead to scout. Only hand signals were used for directions. Finally we halted at a low fence. Without too much delay we were waved into a farm cottage on the other side of the fence. Our eyes were accustomed to the darkness, so even the dim kerosene lamp light hurt our eyes at first. We stood in a tight circle for a time, scrutinizing each other. Suddenly the French peasants broke into laughter and chatter with much embracing. I gestured that I couldn't hear and explained my problem in German since I did not speak any French.

The lady of the house soon had a welcome plate of eggs, hash and bread before me, complemented by a large glass of wine. Through gestures and penciled sketches, I found that the German troops had captured all the parachutists except for me. Also, that they had done much shooting in my direction during the chase. This farm family had been in the area during the chase, all the way to my hiding place. They said the troops had searched all houses in the area until dark, offering a generous reward for my capture. While we sat around the table enjoying some more wine, the lady of the house examined and dressed my wounds. They were found to be minor. Only the throat wound required the removal of a large piece of flak shrapnel.

After a trip to St. Gomer, France and a couple more encounters with German soldiers, Conrad was transferred to another house by his underground friends. It was here that he received his papers that were to serve him well in the coming months. We pick up his tale:

One evening after twenty hundred hours, the underground chief entered the house after the usual coded knock on the door. Marie (the Flemish hausfrau) interpreted what he had to say. He handed me my I.D. card and occupation (work) card. My alias on the I.D. was "Albert De Groote" and my work card classified me as a farmer. I learned that farmer was the usual occupation given to most evadees. They explained that children of French farmers seldom attended school beyond the elementary level, so were considered to be of below average intelligence. This often came in handy when instructed to play dumb in encounters with Germans.

Conrad and his wife Doris returned to France after the war with their three sons, Keith, Kurt and Kris, and visited with the French people who had helped Conrad during his evasion. Conrad J. **Kersch** passed away on 16 May 2000.