

And The Angels Struck
The First 300 Missions of Hell's Angels
January 1945
edited by William A. Freeny

On November 17, 1942, the 303rd Bomb Group first went into action. Following a feverish night of activity during which all traffic to and from the base was halted, the few bombers on hand took off with a load of bombs for St. Nazaire. The excited crowds of ground men that lined the perimeter waited for breathless hours for the return of the formation, halfway expecting never to see them again. In the afternoon when the first hum of engines reached their ears, they raced out to the runway, eager for news of the mission. What they heard was not especially encouraging. Unable to find the target due to bad weather, the Forts had returned with their bombs without seeing any action. It was a terrific letdown for everybody.



William A. Freeny

The next morning when the planes again zoomed off the field, led by Colonel **James H. Wallace**, the group commander, pilots and crews were grim in their determination to make up for the previous day's abortive effort. The target was La Pallice, but again weather and inexperience played a hand, and when the planes returned they learned they had hit the submarine pens at St. Nazaire. This one hadn't been as easy as the day before. The Germans were tired of letting these newly arrived Yanks fly about their territory at will, and showed their resentment by sending up a fierce flak barrage over the target. Then about 30 of the Luftwaffe's best fighters – the Goering Yellow Nose outfit – piled into the formation. The 303rd had their first taste of combat – and they won the first round of the long battle to come. Gunners tallied one fighter destroyed, four probables and three damaged. All of our planes returned.

The 303rd was new to the business, but the men learned fast. Their classroom was the sky over Lorient, St. Nazaire, Brest and La Pallice, and their teachers were ace German pilots and the pick of German flak gunners. Fighter escort consisted of a pitifully small number of short-range R.A.F. Spitfires, designed for the defense of England, which buzzed out to the middle of the Channel to support the Forts as they fought their way back to England. More than one straggler, given up for lost, gained new strength and courage when the fast little Spits zipped in to drive off the murderous ME109s and FW190s.

Here, in the early days of the aerial war, was born the esprit de corps of the 303rd – the spirit among men without which no outfit can rise above the mediocre. This spirit was such that pilots and crews defied all rules, regulations, and faced the almost certainty of death, to leave the formation and add their fire power to that of a crippled, floundering bomber struggling to make the English coast while angry Nazi fighters queued up to try to shoot it down. Thus died, among others, Lt. **Larry Dunnica**, 358th pilot, who when last seen was matching his skill in a four-engine bomber with that of several German fighter pilots in a lop-sided dogfight. Here was the spirit that spread to the rest of the Eighth Air

Force - "No matter what is the opposition, no matter what are the odds, we shall never turn back until the target is bombed."

In the fall of 1942, it was a question of men, mud and machines. The group needed more men and machines — and less mud. No one was sweating out the end of the war because, for the 303rd and the Eighth Air Force, it was only beginning. Allied forces were still on the defensive, although R.A.F. heavies were in the process of stepping up their nightly attacks on the larger German industrial cities. Our men and machines were going to have to prove to the world that daylight, high-altitude, precision bombing would be what it takes to destroy the Nazis. The odds were definitely against a bright outlook. Both the Krauts and the English had tried it and had taken a beating. The Germans alone lost more than 2,000 aircraft over England in the Battle of Britain.

Things didn't look too good, especially when two Fortress groups were sent from England to Africa to activate a new air force. The remaining force of four Fortress and two Liberator groups were going to have a monumental task to perform. The fact that two necessary items — men and machines for reinforcement — were not forthcoming, made that task seem almost hopeless.

However discouraging the outlook, these pioneering young Americans went to work on the problem with an enthusiasm that embarrassed the most optimistic. The plight of the 303rd was aptly summed up by one ground crew. With a touch of subtle American humor they named their Fortress "AOG - Not in Stock" because it was "Always on the ground, parts not in stock." But somehow the ground crews made their planes airworthy, and in spite of the odds the 303rd and the other groups continued to pound the German naval bases in the West in a desperate effort to save Allied shipping from unbearable losses.

It was during this period that new combat formations were devised to protect the planes in the air from fighter attacks and to produce a more concentrated bomb pattern on the target. The new B-17G with its nose turret and other improvements was the direct result of the hard-won experience of the group's original flyers who found much room for improvement in the old planes and didn't hesitate to say so. Men of the 303rd were among the first to install two caliber .50 machine guns in the tip of the nose as a surprise to the Jerry fighters who thought they had found a soft spot in the Fortress armor.

This pioneering and experimental spirit that kept men busy was about all that kept the morale of the officers and men from taking a nose dive. The 303rd was paying a heavy price in the battles over France. At the base, combat men were trying to ignore the growing number of empty bunks in the Nissen huts. Airplanes were wearing tin-can patches over ragged holes and flying on parts that made crew chiefs prematurely gray. "Moonlight requisitioning" of parts from shot-up planes by ground crews was, naturally, frowned upon, but nevertheless it did happen frequently. Some Pilots would not allow their planes to be brought to the hangar for repairs because they were sure they would be stripped for parts. They had good grounds for argument, too. A badly shot-up Fort might sit in the hangar for weeks while less badly damaged planes flew on its parts. The 303rd was at low ebb.

Then in January, 1943, Lt. Colonel **Charles E. Marion**, the deputy group commander, flew General **Eaker** to the Casablanca conference where it was decided to increase the strength of the Eighth Air Force. Immediately there was a noticeable change. New combat men began to arrive to fill the empty bunks. New planes fresh from the factory in their drab camouflage landed in groups of seven and eight. The number of "not-in-stocks" at supply diminished. And oldtimers craned their necks in awe as the size of the formations over the field increased daily. In everybody's mind was the thought, "Now, by God, we've got an Air Force and we'll really give it to them !"

January 27, 1943, was a day of excitement on the base. In spite of close security, word leaked around that today's target was in Germany itself! For the first time the 303rd, with Colonel **Marion** leading, roared over Germany, bound for the shipbuilding yards at Wilhelmshaven. When the crews piled out of their planes that night they were jubilant. They had bombed the shipyards, shot down several German fighters and come home unscathed. In the first battle of the Reich they had the Germans hanging on the ropes.



*One Final Moment by H. E. Kalhoefer
Shows 1Lt Jack W. Mathis, 359th BS
Bombardier dying over his bombsight on the
18 March 1944 mission to Vegesack.*

All of the invasions of the Reich were not so bloodless. Rare indeed was the day when our formations could penetrate the German border and report no losses. The Luftwaffe bitterly contested the occupation of the sky over their homeland, and in these savage battles men of the 303rd proved that they were made of the stuff of heroes. Some returned to wear their medals – some didn't. Such a man was First Lieutenant **Jack Mathis**, 359th bombardier who flew in the squadron lead plane "The Duchess". As the formation neared Vegesack, Germany, on March 15, 1943, **Mathis** was bent over his bombsight, making the minute, careful corrections that meant success or failure for his squadron. Around and through the formation zipped vicious Nazi fighters, determined to break up the close formation before they could loose their deadly loads. **Mathis** paid no attention to these or to the ugly black puffs of flak that blasted the air around him. He saw only the cross hairs of his bombsight creeping slowly toward the shipyards. Seconds to go. And then there was a terrific blast. The plexiglass nose of the bomber splintered. **Mathis** flew to the rear of the compartment, dazed, bleeding, badly wounded. With superhuman effort he crawled back to his bombsight, made last minute corrections and released his bombs. Then **Jack Mathis** died. For the 303rd and the Eighth Air Force it meant the best bombing job so far in the war. For **Mathis** it meant the *Congressional Medal of Honor* – posthumously.

In the Spring of 1943 the 303rd, now under the command of Colonel **Charles E. Marion**, was growing fast. With the rest of the Eighth Air Force their bombers were defeating the German submarine menace by blasting the German shipyards and naval refitting bases. Antwerp, Bremen, Lorient, Kiel and Wilhelmshaven felt the full force of our bombs. At the same time, when weather permitted, the airmen of the "Hell's Angels" group were crippling the German factories at Paris, Rouen, Huls and even to Heroya in Norway.

Finally, in August, 1943, the Eighth was ready to branch out. The 303rd was under the leadership of Colonel **Kermit D. Stevens** now, and it was an outfit trained to the pink of condition. On the 17th of August, while one task force hit Regensburg and flew on to Africa, the 303rd struck at one of Germany's most important and vulnerable industries: the ball bearing plant at Schweinfurt. It was rough. More than 300 German fighters came up to contest the mission for more than two hours. Our gunners used up over 120,000 rounds of ammunition. Thirty German fighters went down. The group went on and bombed the target. All of our aircraft returned.

Now the lid was pried off the Reich. New long range fighters flew out with the bombers and the 303rd left mementoes in all the better German cities. Stuttgart, Emden, Frankfurt, Anklam, Munster – all these had their heaps of rubble where the "Hell's Angels" had passed. On the 14th of October they returned to Schweinfurt to tear down the plants that the Germans had been frantically rebuilding. Again there was a savage two-hour battle with the pick of the Luftwaffe. One bomber did not return, but the route was marked with the smoking remains of German fighters. Bombing results? "Simply smashing," said one bombardier.



T/Sgt Forrest T. Vosler
by J.G. Keck

In December the 303rd was to get its second *Congressional Medal of Honor*. For several days they had been dishing it out to Bremen, reducing the docks and business center to ruins. The Germans weren't taking it lying down. Over the target fighters flew into their own flak to attack the Forts. The 358th "Jersey Bounce Jr." was in trouble. Two engines were gone and the crippled bomber had fallen behind the formation. Fighters singled it out and queued up to take their turns in swift passes, machine guns and cannon spitting bullets. On the first pass the tail gunner collected a parcel of 50mm. shell fragments. In the radio room a tall, shy kid, T/Sgt **Forrest L. Vosler**, looked down the sights of his single machine gun. His turn came next. 20mm. shell exploded in the compartment, splattering his legs and hips with fragments. Unable to stand, but not ready to quit the fight, he propped himself on the edge of the table and kept his gun hot with a steady stream of fire at the ME109s streaking in at the tail. A second cannon shell exploded inches away and this time steel particles tore into his face and chest and embedded in his eyes. And still Vosler fought on. Unable to see more than a blur, he fired at the blurs until the Nazi pilots gave it up as a bad job and turned back. Things were bad. Gas was low and ditching was going to be necessary. Calmly, working by feel, Vosler repaired the damaged radio set. Then, between periods of unconsciousness, he tapped out SOSs that alerted Air-Sea Rescue. His job was done and, knowing it, Vosler prepared to make one more sacrifice that might save the bomber and crew. Turning to the engineer he asked him, feebly but earnestly, "Throw me out. Maybe with my weight gone you can make England."

Vosler lived to receive his medal from the President, but he doesn't see very clearly. One eye is gone.

In 1942 and 1943 the 303rd had suffered some rough times from the German air force. With the dawning of 1944 came the time of retribution. The Eighth Air Force was out to smash the Luftwaffe and the 303rd men were to play a brilliant part in the program.

The first blow fell at Oschersleben on January 11. Leading the First Division, the 303rd moved toward the target through bad weather. Many of the Eighth gave it up as a bad job and turned toward home. So did most of the fighter escort. In the lead plane of the 303rd, the old "Eight Ball", Brigadier General **Robert F. Travis** and Lt. Colonel **William R. Calhoun** of the 41st Combat Wing, saw the weather break near the target and decided to go on, determined to hit the vital aircraft assembly plant. The target was bombed and devastated. But the First Division and especially the 303rd paid a high price for their success. More than 300 German fighters swarmed over the formation, attacking in groups and attacking singly. It was the fiercest, bloodiest aerial battle ever fought in any war. Forty-two bombers from First Division did not return. Ten of them were from the 303rd. For this the Luftwaffe gave more than 300 fighters destroyed, probably destroyed and damaged. That day the men of the 303rd helped earn that blue ribbon, the Presidential Citation, that is worn on the right side of the chest.

In February, the Eighth broke the back of the Luftwaffe. For its share the 303rd went to Aschersleben, Leipzig, Augsburg, Bernburg and Wern. It was visual bombing at its best and when the smoke had cleared away, the Germans had but a secondary air force.

There remained but one new frontier in Germany - Berlin - which the Germans had sworn could never be attacked by daylight bombers. On March 6, with Lt. Colonel **Richard H. Cole**, 359th commander leading, the 303rd helped the Eighth Air Force shove that statement down the Nazi throats in one of the first of many successful assaults on the Nazi citadel. There were no more closed doors in the Reich. The 303rd sent their bombers farther and farther in search of new and better targets – to Posen, in Poland, and Marienburg, in East Prussia, where Captain **George T. Orvis**, 427th bombardier, did one of the most remarkable bombing jobs of the war.

Few men of the 303rd will ever forget the night of June 5, 1944. At dusk it was obvious that something big was in the air. Something so big that those who did not know the answer were almost afraid to guess and the few who knew were afraid to sleep. Armed guards appeared everywhere about the dispersal areas, perimeter tracks, bomb dumps and administrative buildings. Operations officers flew about in jeeps attending to small details usually entrusted to clerks. On the line mechanics and bomb loaders chatted in small groups, asking each other "what's up" and finding no answer.

It was still dark when sleepy combat men were awakened and handed special red briefing passes. The tenseness grew through breakfast and it was a quiet lot of gunners, navigators, bombardiers and pilots who filed into the briefing room past armed M.P.s. There were no loud "Hurrahs" when the briefing officer rose and said "This is it, boys. Today we are bombing in support of ground troops who are landing on the Normandy coast." There was a moment of excited chatter and a few low whistles. Then silence, as the full import of these words sunk in and the flyers realized that even while they were

sitting in that room other Americans were crouched in landing barges in the Channel and dropping through tracer-filled skies by parachute. In the first few moments came the stupendous realization that this was it. The next few hours would decide the success or failure of the war in Europe. The men who left the briefing room that morning left with grim determination in their hearts and a prayer on their lips for the success of the boys on the ground who were facing the hell of gunfire on the Atlantic Wall.

That day the 303rd flew three separate missions between dawn and dusk, blasting bridges and communications to take a load off the infantry. D-day was only the start. In June the "Hell's Angels" men flew 29 missions, a thousand sorties – and fired only 1,400 rounds of ammunition for the entire month, compared to Schweinfurt's 120,000 rounds. On the ground the infantry moved about without fear of attack from the air. The Luftwaffe was down for the count.

After D-day the 303rd divided its efforts between tactical and strategic targets. When the ground forces called for help they went to bomb bridges, ordnance depots, gun emplacements, forts, oil dumps and troop concentrations. They turned marshalling yards into twisted masses of wrecked locomotives, cars and rails. They bombed road junctions in the path of a fleeing German army so that light bombers and rocket-firing fighters could pound the stalled vehicles into the ground.

They went out to help defeat the new threat to Britain – the buzz-bomb that started its flight from thick, concrete bases that were cleverly camouflaged and hard to destroy. They went after the oil on which the Panzer units depended for freedom of movement. To Magdeburg, Harburg, Bottrop, Gelsenkirchen, to Brux in Czechoslovakia and into the horrible clouds of flak over Merseburg. And where they went, black, oily smoke towered five miles from the burning dumps and refineries. Word began to come back from the front that enemy tanks and trucks had been found abandoned – out of gas. The 303rd was doing its job well.

In August, 1944, the 303rd had completed a solid year in which it was always among those in the top position in the Eighth Air Force records of bombing efficiency. Ruined factories at Dresden, Munich, Cologne, Mannheim, Ludwigshafen, Kassel and Berlin were mute evidence of the skill of "Hell's Angels" bombardiers. Rare was the day when bombardiers had to report "Visual bombing, poor results" when they returned from a mission where they could see their target in the bombsight.

The record of efficiency still stands when bombardiers are able to line the target with the crosshairs of the sight. Now, newly improved instruments allow almost pin-point bombing through solid clouds, and though results are not so easily catalogued according to groups, the 303rd men have seen their work in reconnaissance pictures and know it is good.

In the fall of 1944 the Luftwaffe, which had been struck such a paralyzing blow in the spring, began to stir in its lair. They had sacrificed their cities and their troops during the long summer in order to build back their air strength, slowly, and at a terrific cost to the war factories and the morale of the German people and army. By August they were ready

to strike out a little – and by August, after more than three months of flying without being attacked, the gunners of the Forts were prime for a surprise attack. Most of them believed, in spite of the advice of intelligence officers, that the German Air Force was done for. On long missions they relaxed their former vigilance.

Then, on August 15, the Luftwaffe came to life. As the group formation roared out toward their German target, the fighter escort spotted a small formation of enemy fighters in the distance. They moved over to intercept the German fighters before they could reach the bombers. In a flash, 50 German fighters hit the Forts from the opposite direction in a lightning attack that lasted but minutes and caught gunners with their guns down. In those few minutes nine Fortresses tumbled out of the sky. It was a sober and enlightened bunch of airmen who returned to the base that day.

A little more than a month later practically the same thing happened, except that this time the Krauts didn't bother with any deceptive tactics. Out of the sun, just as the bombers were steadying for the bomb run, dove approximately 150 FW-190s. With unerring precision they found their targets with blazing guns and in the brief, savage attack, eleven Fortresses were shot out of the sky. The planes that did return were badly shot up.

These battles were fierce and casualties were high, but they were not the long, running fights of the old days. A weaker Luftwaffe was trying new tactics in desperation, but there was to be little salve for its wounded pride in these minor successes. Its primary purpose was to turn back the formation, and no amount of opposition has ever turned back a formation of "Hell's Angels" bombers. It succeeded only in alerting gunners as the 303rd kept piling up the missions, day after day.

At 300 missions "Hell's Angels" was leading its closest competitor by more than a score of missions. In combat and on the ground it was one of the top-flight groups of the Eighth Air Force. After nearly two-and-one-half years of combat it had grown from a pathetically green outfit to an experienced, smooth-running organization. Operations, intelligence, engineering, ordnance, down to the cooks and supply, all functioned perfectly to the last detail. In the constant turnover of combat men, the old-timers passed on to the newcomers the priceless "know how" that comes only with experience.

The 303rd, under the command of Colonel **William S. Raper**, is not resting on its laurels. Day after day the bombers roar up the runways, sometimes in fog, snow or rain, to make every German city a part of the front line, and to make the front lines a hell for German troops. With the help of every man, flyer or ground, they intend to continue the methodical destruction of the German ability to wage war until, perhaps, some day they will hear the magic words: "Return to base. Enemy has surrendered."