

The Raid on Antwerp 22 June 1943

Ten days after the fatal crash of 42-30036 and the *Kowalski* crew, the 384th was directed by teletype that the planned mission for a raid on the Ford and General Motors plants in Antwerp, Belgium was to commence. The crews were well aware that something was up as on the previous day the clubs along with any other entertainment venues had been closed.

The 384th crews that were to take part in the Group's first raid were awakened at 0330 as over 200 flyers were notified that they would be taking a trip across the channel. It wasn't as if any of the flyers had gotten much sleep that night because the ground crews had been running engines most of the night, not to mention the fuel wagons and armories were trucking all the ammo and bombs to each of the B-17s selected for the initial raid. A half hour after being roused awake, the flyers were greeted by a smiling "cookie" and his happy staff at the mess hall with fresh eggs on the "last supper" menu.

The two rookie Bomb Groups, the 381st and the 384th, were to perform a diversionary raid, while the main strike against Germany was the synthetic rubber plant at Huls. Most of the old hands that attacked the rubber plant in the Ruhr valley considered the Antwerp mission a "milk run".

This first raid for the newest two Bomb Groups was preplanned by the 8th Air Corp brass to acclimate the rookies to combat and confuse the Germans into directing their fighters toward the wrong Groups. With Squadrons of Typhoons and Thunderbolts (most of the flyers referred to them as "Jugs") escorting the bombers, it was hoped that German radar would assume there was a formidable attacking force.

The first mission of the 384th bomb Group was led by the commanding officer, Colonel Bud Peaslee. When Peaslee is leading the bomb Group it was a rare occurrence for any B-17s to abort their scheduled mission.

During the briefing, one of the pilots suddenly realized that his Grandmother was living in Antwerp. Fortunately, he did not know that she lived only a few blocks from the target; this information he kept to himself. There were twenty 384th Fortresses assigned to participate in this mission.

This left *Miss Deal* and the remaining crews, not selected as spares, sitting at Grafton Underwood. The following day the 384th was scheduled to attack the enemy fighter base at Bernay-St. Martin northwest of Paris, France. On this raid 42-30049 was selected to fly as a spare.

Unfortunately there were no aborts and upon reaching the channel *Miss Deal* returns to base to be followed by the rest of the B-17s as the mission is cancelled due to the heavy under-cast.

Each participating B-17 for the Antwerp mission was bombed up with five each one thousand pounders. The Group took off at 6:19, which was a little late from their scheduled departure time (per Peaslee's memories the "H" hour was 0700). Then they learned, upon reaching the rendezvous point, that the 381st was a half hour late or perhaps the 384th was early (this confusion reflects a major mistake by someone). So around and around the 384th went. Looking down on Ridgewell, England, the 381st home base, the officers could observe the first B-17 lift off followed by 20 more. The 381st finally climbed up to the join up altitude of 12,000 feet, led by their famous Commander Col. Joseph Nazzaro, a West Point graduate and member of their football club. When the 381st linked up with the 384th, the two Groups climbed up to their bombing altitude of 23,000 feet headed for the coast and on to the target.

The Germans are watching (by radar) and waiting with their fighters on alert, armed and tanked up.

Upon reaching the channel, crews that are selected as spares must return to base as none of the Fortresses aborted this mission. These crews return to their hardstand where their crew chief and his cadre of mechanics prepare their B-17s for another mission and the armorers disarm the big planes.

Meanwhile, Peaslee and his band of raiders along with the B-17s from the 381st had met enemy fighters about halfway to the target without any escorts, as there was no synchronized meeting. Fortunately, there were only approximately 60 Focke Wulf Fw 190s that greeted the bombers with head on attacks. These attacks were very similar to what Peaslee had witnessed when he flew as an observer on the Wilhelmshaven raid on 11 June 1943. On that mission he witnessed the head-on collision between the *Brinkman* ship and Hans-George Guthenke's Fw 190A-4.

When the two bomb Groups reached the flak fields near their target, the Germans had broken off their attacks. Although the weather was clear and the target was visible, it was estimated that only 5 per cent of the bombs actually hit the targets. This inaccuracy might have been contributed to the bombardier's position in the B-17's nose, with her clear plastic bubble, as they witnessed the Germans attacking them head-on at a combined speed of 500 miles per hour with their 20 mm cannons blazing. With the plants covering 500 acres, 5 per cent bomb coverage seems questionable.

It should be noted that the ship 42-3231 *The Inferno* was leading the 545th Squadron to the target when suddenly the bomb bay doors sprung open frosting up the nose of the Fortress along with the Bombardier's sight glass. This probably resulted in many misses from this Squadron.

After releasing their bombs, the two Groups turned back toward England and were again attacked by the fighters from II/ JG 26. These attacks were made by Staffels or Squadrons consisting of 9 to 12 fighters. The fighters would press their head-on attacks until the last seconds when they would quickly turn upside down pulling their fighters down and away. Just before the coast, most of the Fortresses guns were suddenly silent and the gunners could be overheard shouting on the intercoms describing the air battles as finally, the Typhoons and the Jugs showed up for the fight. And fight they did as they drove most of the enemy fighters away from their big brothers.

Two of the 384th B-17s were lost on their return trip. The *Oblinski* ship was viciously attacked as she lost the formation and was about 9,000 feet lower than her assigned box position. At the debriefing, it was reported that, although three of her engines were on fire, the Focke Wulf's kept up their attack on the wounded ship until she exploded, spun down and crashed near Wilhelminadorp, Holland. Six of the crew were taken prisoner and four were listed as killed in action. The B-17 42-5853 was lost by the 384th that day, was piloted by Fred Disney, who ditched her about halfway across the channel. There were only three survivors recovered by the Germans, and the remaining crewmembers were listed as KIA. No doubt some died as a result of exposure to the cold waters of the channel, since no life rafts were spotted.

There were two 384th ships that followed the *Oblinski* and the *Disney*

Fortresses down in an attempt assist in their defense. These two B-17s, realizing they could be of no help returned to the Group and back to base to face the ire of the Commander for breaking formation and the rule if a bomber lost the formation, she was on her own. These two gallant captains were threatened with court-martial in front of their peers, as Peaslee made his point to the officers. The 381st lost two ships to the II/JG26 Focke Wulfs while two others made their final crash landing at other English bases. Upon their return to Ridgewell, two crewmen that had been killed in their first air battle were removed from their severely shot up B-17s.

42-30016 *Iron Gut Gert* had received severe flak damage, and on her way home was jumped by fighters and crashed near Hoek, Holland. Charles Henry died in the crash and the Navigator, Lt. Griffith came down in the North Sea, drowned, and was never recovered. The rest of the crew was captured and spent the rest of the war in prison camp.

Soon after bombs away 42-30021 was struck by flak and quickly attacked. One Wing came off crashing in the Dutch inland sea, Oosterschelde. Two of the crew managed to get out of the falling Fortress only to become POWs, while 8 went down with their ship.

The Disney ship was escorted down below 9,000 feet by another 384th B-17, breaking 8th Air Corp rules after flak and fighter attacks. Realizing escorting Disney was proving fruitless, the Disney ship was abandoned. Unfortunately, the escort act may have actually encouraged some of the seven flyers to stay with the doomed ship as she crashed just off the enemy coast.

The Oblinski ship had similar problems as the Disney crew with another gallant B-17 escort. Unfortunately, both escorts paid dearly for their actions as they were also brutally attacked by fighters from II / JG26. Neither of the escorts made it to their home base, instead landing at the nearest British airfield as soon as crossing the channel.

MIA B-17s and their missing crews for the 22 June 1943 raid on Antwerp, Belgium can be found on page xix of the appendices.

For pilots load list of the Antwerp raid of 22 June 1943 see page xxiv of the Appendices

De Luchtaanval op Antwerpen op 22 juni 1943

Tien dagen na de fatale crash van de B-17F nr. 42-30036 en de Kowalski bemanning werd de 384^e bombardment groep per telex geïnstrueerd, dat de geplande missie voor een aanval op de Ford en General Motors fabrieken in Antwerpen most beginnen. De bemanningen begrepen heel goed dat er iets ging gebeuren, omdat op de vorige dag de clubs en andere ontspannings gelegenheden gesloten waren.

De bemanningen van de 384^e die mee zouden doen met de eerste raid van de Groep werden gewekt om 03.30 toen meer dan 200 vliegers bericht ontvingen dat zij een reisje gingen maken over Het Kanaal. Het was bepaald niet zo dat de vliegers veel nachtrust hadden gekregen die nacht, omdat de grondbemanningen motoren hadden gedraaid gedurende het grootste deel van de nacht, om nog maar niet te noemen het lawaai van de tankwagens en trucks die alle ammunitie en bommen brachten naar de, voor de eerste raid aangewezen B-17's. Een half uur na gepord te zijn werden de vliegers begroet in de mess door een glimlachende kokkie en zijn opgewekte mensen met verse eieren, die op het menu van het "laatste avondmaal" stonden.

De twee "groene" Bomber Groepen, de 381^e en de 384^e, moesten een afleidingsaanval uitvoeren, terwijl de hoofdaanval tegen Duitsland een aanval op de synthetische rubberfabriek bij Huls was. De meeste oude rotten die de rubberfabriek in de Ruhr vallei aanvielen vonden de Antwerpen missie een eitje.

De eerste raid voor de nieuwste twee bomgroepen was geplanned door de top van het 8^e Air Corps om de groentjes te laten wennen aan luchtgevecht-en om de Duitsers te verwarren zodat zij hun jagers naar de verkeerde groepen zouden dirigeren. Met squadrons Typhoons en Thunderbolts (die door de meeste vliegers "jugs" werden genoemd) die de bommenwerpers vergezelden, werd gehoopt dat de Duitse radarwaarnemers zouden denken, dat er een formidabele aanvalsmacht aankwam.

De eerste missie van de 384^e bomgroep werd geleid door de commandant, kolonel Bud Peaslee. Wanneer Peaslee de leiding had gebeurde het maar zelden, dat een van de deelnemende B-17's de missie afbrak.

Gedurende de briefing realiseerde een van de piloten zich, dat zijn grootmoeder in Antwerpen woonde. Gelukkig wist hij niet dat zij maar een

paar straten van het doel woonde; hij hield dit voor zich. Er werden twintig 384^e Vliegende Forten aan deze missie toegewezen.

Dit betekende dat *Miss Deal* en de overblijvende bemanningen, die niet als reserves waren aangewezen, op de basis Grafton Underwood [zuid Engeland] achterbleven.

De 384^e stond de volgende dag op het programma om de vijandelijke jagerbasis Bernay-St. Martin ten N/W van Parijs aan te vallen. Voor deze raid was 42-30049 aangewezen om als reserve mee te vliegen.

Ongelukkigerwijze waren er geen afgebroken vluchten en toen Het Kanaal bereikt was vloog *Miss Deal* terug naar de basis, om daarna door de rest van de B-17's gevolgd te worden omdat de missie geschrapt werd naar aanleiding van de laaghangende bewolking.

Iedere B-17 voor de missie naar Antwerpen was geladen met vijf bommen met een gewicht van duizend Engelse pond per stuk. De Groep vertrok om 06.19, een beetje te laat ten opzichte van het vertrekrooster. (Volgens Peaslee's memoires was het "H" uur 07.00). Toen kwamen zij erachter, bij het bereiken van het rendez-vous punt, dat de 381^e een half uur te laat was of misschien was de 384^e te vroeg (deze verwarring is het bewijs van een ernstige fout van iemand). Dus de 384^e ging rondjes vliegen. Terwijl zij naar beneden keken naar Ridgewell, Engeland, de thuisbasis van de 381^e, konden de officieren de start van de eerste B-17 gadeslaan, gevolgd door twintig meer. Uiteindelijk klom de 381^e naar de samenkomst hoogte van 12.000 voet onder leiding van hun beroemde commandant kolonel Joseph Nazarro, een afgestudeerde van West Point Military Academy en lid van hun football team. Toen de 381^e en de 384^e bij elkaar kwamen, klommen de twee groepen naar de bombardeerhoogte van 23.000 voet en vlogen richting kust en naar het doel.

De Duitsers volgden dit op de radar en wachtten met hun jagers in de startblokken, bewapend en volgetankt.

Bij het bereiken van Het Kanaal moeten de bemanningen, die als reserve zijn aangewezen, terug naar hun basis omdat geen van de Forten de missie hoeft af te breken. Deze bemanningen gaan terug naar hun vaste parkeerplaatsen waar hun crew chief [chef onderhoud] en zijn legertje mecaniciens de B-17's klaarmaken voor een andere missie en de wapenspecialisten de grote kisten ontwapenen.

Ondertussen had Peaslee met zijn knokploeg samen met de B-17's van de 381^e halverwege het doel vijandelijke jagers ontmoet, zonder enige begeleidende eigen jagers omdat dat niet afgesproken was. Gelukkig

waren er maar ongeveer 60 Focke Wulf Fw 190's die de bommenwerpers begroetten met frontale [head on] aanvallen. Deze aanvallen leken erg op die, waarvan Peaslee getuige was geweest toen hij als waarnemer vloog tijdens de aanval op Wilhelmshaven op 11 juni 1943. Op die missie was hij getuige van de frontale botsing tussen het *Brinkman* toestel en de FW 190A-4 van Hans-George Guthenke.