

COMBAT AIRCRAFT • 38



B-17 FLYING FORTRESS UNITS OF THE MTO



William N Hess

rum/Noire 102

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SERIES EDITOR: TONY HOLMES

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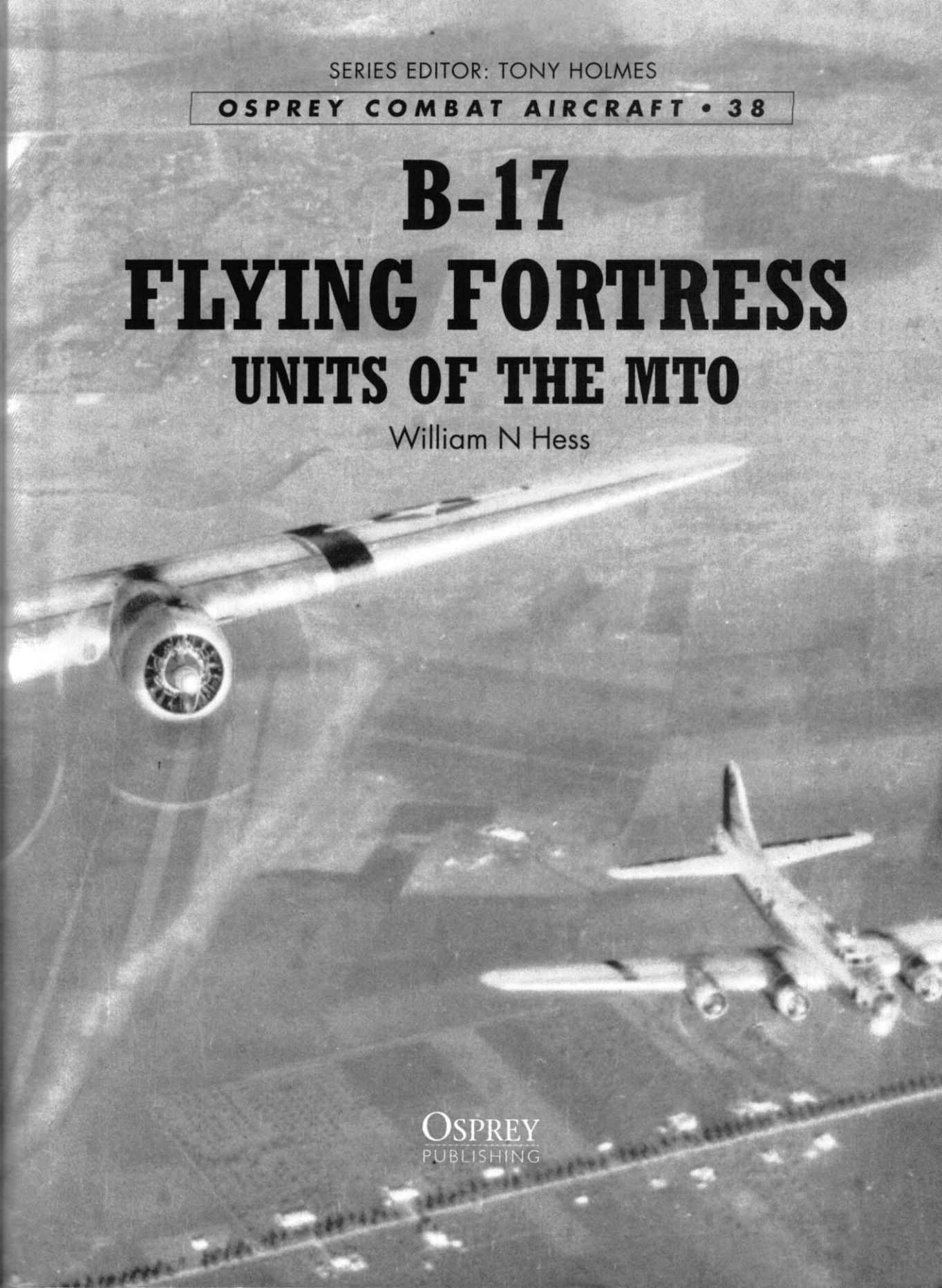
B-17

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UNITS OF THE MTO

William N Hess

OSPREY
PUBLISHING



Front cover

Built by Boeing at its Seattle plant in December 1943, B-17G 42-31884 was purchased for the US Army Air Force by American Legion Post 142 in Maywood City, New Jersey. It was therefore only fitting that when the bomber arrived at Amendola airfield, in Italy, following its combat assignment to the 340th Bomb Squadron (BS) of the 97th Bomb Group (BG) on 26 January 1944, it should be christened **MISS MAYWOOD**.

Over the coming months this aircraft would fly many missions to targets such as Vienna, Ploesti, Regensburg, Steyr and Blechhammer, where it was exposed to fighter attack and intense flak. By September 1944, when the author completed three missions in it, **MISS MAYWOOD** was beginning to show signs of fatigue – sheet metal patches covered numerous small flak holes and its Olive Drab camouflage was badly chipped and stained, not to mention an interior that reflected the bomber's status as an old warrior.

On 18 November 1944 **MISS MAYWOOD** was named as a spare for a mission to Vienna, and when a much newer B-17 was scrubbed at the last minute due to a technical fault, the old warhorse stepped into the breach once again. As this specially commissioned artwork graphically reveals, 42-31884 bravely endured a blanket of flak in the skies above Vienna, which was second only to Berlin in respect to the number of gun batteries that defended it. **MISS MAYWOOD's** luck held, and the bomber successfully completed the 97th BG's 10,000th sortie against the enemy. On 9 December 1944 42-31884 chalked up its 100th mission on a trip to Regensburg, which was another heavily defended target. Shortly after this sortie the veteran bomber was 'put out to pasture' as one of the outstanding Fortresses of the veteran 97th BG, **MISS MAYWOOD** eventually being salvaged on 30 November 1945
(Cover artwork by Iain Wyllie)

First published in Great Britain in 2003 by Osprey Publishing
Elms Court, Chapel Way, Botley, Oxford, OX2 9LP

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ISBN 1 84176 580 5

Edited by Tony Holmes

Page design by Tony Truscott

Cover Artwork by Iain Wyllie

Aircraft Profiles by Mark Styling

Colour plates commentaries by William Hess and Mark Styling

Scale Drawings by Mark Styling

Index by Alan Thatcher

Origination by Grasmere Digital Imaging, Leeds

Printed in China through Bookbuilders

03 04 05 06 07 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Profile artist Mark Styling would like to thank John Carlson, Carlos and Louis Gonzales, Swoosie Kurtz, James S Peters Sr, Dennis Pixler, Richard K Radtke, Boyd Thompson and John and Donald Wise who helped provide information crucial for the rendering of the artwork that appears in this volume.

EDITOR'S NOTE

To make this best-selling series as authoritative as possible, the Editor would be interested in hearing from any individual who may have relevant photographs, documentation or first-hand experiences relating to the world's elite pilots, and their aircraft, of the various theatres of war. Any material used will be credited to its original source. Please write to Tony Holmes at 10 Prospect Road, Sevenoaks, Kent, TN13 3UA, Great Britain, or by e-mail at:
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THE NUCLEUS

Before being sent to the Mediterranean, the founding units of what would eventually become the Fifteenth Air Force had kicked off the USAAF's strategic bombing campaign with the fledgling Eighth Air Force in the late summer of 1942.

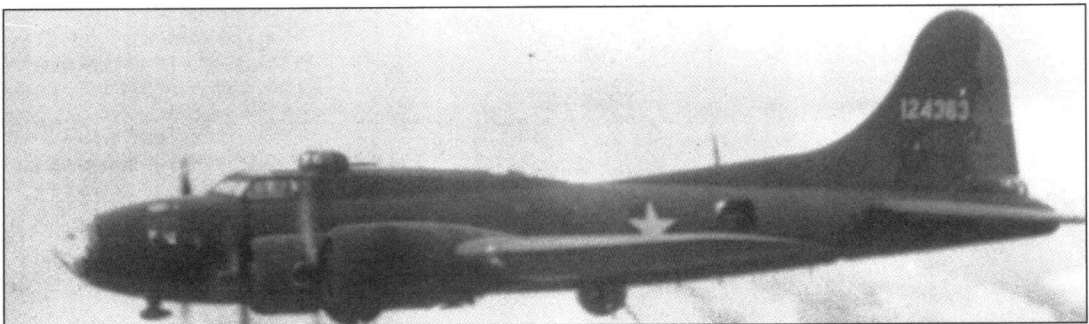
The pioneer bombardment group in the ETO was the 97th BG, which had trained in Florida and then made the first transatlantic flight of any heavy bomber unit en route to England. Despite numerous problems with the weather, crews from the group flew 18 Boeing B-17Es to Scotland via Labrador, Greenland and Iceland. Arriving at Prestwick on 1 July 1942, the 97th duly flew south to bases at Polebrook and Grafton Underwood, in Northamptonshire, where it was fully installed by the 27th of that month. Brig Gen Ira C Eaker, Commander of the Eighth Air Force, saw to it that the group immediately began training for combat, and within a few short weeks the Flying Fortress crews were familiar with the operational procedures followed by the Royal Air Force. Instilled with the necessary knowledge for them to embark on bombing missions into occupied Europe alongside British units, the Eighth Air Force now considered itself ready to launch its audacious daylight strategic bombing campaign.

Mission No 1 took place on 17 August 1942 when 12 B-17s laden with 600- and 1100-lb British bombs were sent to attack marshalling yards at Rouen-Sotteville, in France. Aboard the lead aircraft was Col Frank Armstrong, CO of the 97th BG. Flying as co-pilot in Maj Paul Tibbets' bomber (the lead machine in the second element) was Gen Ira Eaker himself, who later declared the mission to have been a success. There were no casualties. The men had experienced their first flak, and a solitary Focke-Wulf Fw 190 fighter had made a pass at the formation and a ball turret gunner had returned fire.

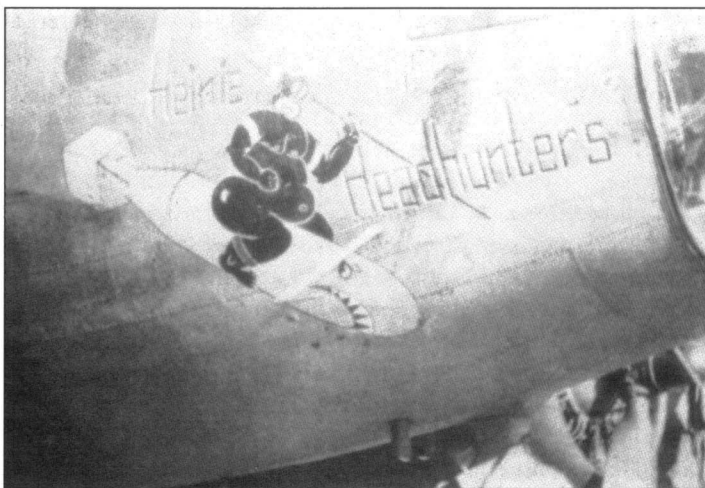
Shortly after the arrival of the 97th BG in the ETO, a second transatlantic movement took place when the 301st BG, under the command of Col Ronald Walker, began to arrive in England. By 21 August the group had assembled in its entirety at Chelveston, again in Northamptonshire.

On 5 September the 301st joined the 97th BG on a mission to the French city of Rouen, thus experiencing combat for the first time. The following day a third Fortress group in the form of the 92nd BG (based at

B-17F 41-24363 *Bad Penny* was one of the first Fortresses assigned to the 301st BG in June 1942. Flown both in the ETO and MTO by Capt John Bruce, it was lost to German fighters whilst he was at the controls during a mission to Bizerte, in Tunisia, on 28 November 1942. The bomber had only arrived in North Africa (Tafaraoui) with the 301st four days earlier (USAAF)



B-17F 41-24351 *Heinie Headhunters* was originally assigned to the 353rd BS/301st BG at Chelveston in July 1942, and it had flown 52 missions with the group by the time it was transferred to the 416th BS/99th BG in December 1943. Renamed *Tail End Charlie*, 41-24351 completed a further 21 sorties before moving once again to the newly-formed 840th BS/483rd BG in March 1944 – it subsequently participated in the latter group's first combat mission, on 12 April 1944. 41-24351 finally returned to the USA on 13 June 1944 and was sold for scrap in July of the following year (USAAF)



Bovingdon, in Hertfordshire), joined them as the Eighth Air Force targeted the Potez aircraft plant at Meaulte, in France. The B-17s came under constant attack from the time they made landfall, resulting in the 97th BG losing its first bomber to the Luftwaffe – the 92nd BG also lost a Flying Fortress to enemy fighters minutes later, the aircraft crashing into the sea.

A number of other missions were flown in September, and when both the 97th and 301st BGs returned to the Potez works on 2 October, yet another large scale air battle erupted. This time, however, all the B-17s made it back to the UK thanks to effective fighter cover provided by RAF and USAAF units. Seven days later the Eighth Air Force sent out its biggest force of 'heavies' to date when 108 bombers were sortied against the locomotive, carriage and wagon works at Fivres-Lille, in France. The mission was heavily opposed by the Luftwaffe, and two B-17s were shot down, including one from the 301st BG – the group had suffered its first combat loss.

Following this mission a spell of bad weather set in and the bombers avoided the German fighters until 21 October, when 66 B-17s and 24 B-24s set out to attack the Lorient U-boat pens on the French coast. Due to overcast conditions over occupied Europe, only 15 bombers from the 97th BG actually found the target after dropping down to just 7500 ft in order to get under the cloud cover. Attacking from this height, the B-17 crews surprised enemy flak defences, and the bombing proved to be highly effective against workshops and floating docks. However, as the Fortresses turned away from the target area an estimated 30+ Fw 190s from III./JG 2 attacked the bombers from above. Despite the gunners defending the B-17s as best they could, three Fortresses were lost in just a matter of minutes.

This mission would prove to be the last action that the pioneering 97th BG would see from bases in England, for on 9 November 1942 it commenced a theatre move to North Africa following the launching of Operation *Torch* (the Allied invasion of North Africa) just 24 hours earlier. The group would be followed out by the 301st BG 17 days later.

Once in-theatre, control of both groups passed from the Eighth to the Twelfth Air Force.

NORTH AFRICA

The weeks prior to the invasion of North Africa saw a number of secret missions flown by 97th BG crews. The first of these occurred on 18 October 1942 when recently promoted Lt Col Paul Tibbets flew Gen Mark Clark, then commander of all US ground forces in Europe, to Gibraltar, along with a mysterious wooden box. The latter held some US\$100,000 in gold 20 franc coins which were going to be paid to corrupt Vichy French officials in North Africa in order to secure their cooperation with the Allies. However, it seems the coins were lost overboard when they were dropped from a small boat in the final stage of their long journey!

More senior commanders were flown by the 97th BG on 5 November when Gen Dwight Eisenhower, Commander of Allied Forces in North Africa, Gen Clark and Gen Kenneth Anderson, Commander of the British First Army, journeyed from Britain to Gibraltar. The following day they were followed by Brig Gen Jimmy Doolittle, commander of the newly formed Twelfth Air Force. En route to 'the Rock', Doolittle's unarmed B-17 was intercepted by four Ju 88s over the Bay of Biscay, forcing pilot Lt John Summers to dive for the deck and make a run for it over the whitecaps. The first three enemy aircraft made their passes and left, but the fourth came in on nearly a collision course. As it passed over the B-17 one of the Ju 88's gunners fired a burst which wounded the co-pilot of the Fortress. Doolittle immediately rendered first aid, and once the injured crewman was taken care of, the General eased himself into the co-pilot's seat and helped fly the bomber to Gibraltar.

American forces landed in French North-West Africa on 8 November 1942 and initially met with little opposition from the Vichy forces in French Morocco and Algeria. The following day B-17s of the 97th BG transported Gens Clark and Anderson, and their staff, to Maison Blanche, near Algiers, and Gen Doolittle and his staff to Oran. No sooner had Clark and Anderson deplaned when Maison Blanche was attacked by 20 Ju 88 bombers.

In the immediate wake of the invasion, the Luftwaffe hastily moved both fighters and bombers into Sidi Ahmed airfield, 30 miles west of the Tunisian port town of Bizerte. This facility boasted concrete runways and good dispersal areas, and along with El Aouina airfield east of the Tunisian capital Tunis, Sidi Ahmed would become the major target for the B-17 crews during the campaign.

The first task facing the 97th BG in North Africa was to find a suitable base from which to operate heavy bombers. The group's 340th BS departed Polebrook on 10 November and flew to Gibraltar, where it remained for 48 hours before flying south-east to Maison Blanche. Once in North Africa, aircrews were taught how to refuel their aircraft using five-gallon 'Jerry' cans, in addition to loading their own bombs, for it would be some time before the ground echelon would arrive by sea to perform these tasks.

Lt Col Tibbets led the first 97th BG mission in-theatre several days later when six B-17s attacked the Luftwaffe airfield at Sidi Ahmed. Blighted by undercast all the way to the target, the Fortress crews dropped down to 6500 ft when it came time to make their bomb runs. Only one German fighter appeared in opposition, and it made a solitary pass before clearing off. Little flak damage was suffered by the B-17s.

The 97th flew a further two missions from Maison Blanche, both against El Aouina airfield. When crews returned from their target at dusk on 19 November they found their base under attack once again from Ju 88s. Brig Gen Doolittle joined the group as an observer for the mission to El Aouina on 21 November, and he duly reported that a number of German fighters had been destroyed on the ground without a single one of the dozen B-17s sortied having been damaged in return.

The following morning the 97th BG moved bases to Tafaraoui, south-east of Oran. Although this base shift left the group further away from its targets in Tunisia, it at last provided the B-17s with a hard surface runway. However, heavy rain followed the group into Tafaraoui, effectively flooding the airfield. The situation was so bad that crews soon dubbed their new base 'Tafaraoui, where the mud is thick and goeey'. To make matters worse, this was a British base, and crews had to endure austere RAF rations. These were not to the Americans' liking at all, and many began to rely on bartering with the local Arabs for oranges, tangerines and sand dates to supplement their 'bully beef' and hard tack biscuits.

On 24 November the 97th was joined at Tafaraoui by the 301st BG, and this influx of men and equipment further compounded the space and food problems already facing the bomber crews.

Despite such hardships, the war had to go on, and on the 28th the 301st joined the 97th on a mission to bomb the Bizerte docks from 15,000 ft. The 37 B-17s sortied were supposed to be escorted by P-38s from the 1st FG, but the USAAF fighters found themselves muddied-in at their base at Nouvion, so the bombers pressed on alone. Seizing their opportunity, 25 Bf 109s from JGs 51 and 53 intercepted the B-17s and a fierce battle ensued. Lt Robert Maher's aircraft soon had an engine knocked out, forcing him to make his bomb run on three engines. Minutes after bomb release, his aircraft was set upon by six Bf 109s (led by JG 53 *Gruppenkommandeur*, and 68-kill ace, Oberstleutnant Freiherr Günther von Maltzahn), and as the mortally wounded Fortress lost height, its gunners continued to return fire but to no avail. The B-17 crashed into the sea.

Capt John Bruce's B-17F 41-24363 *Bad Penny* was also attacked (by II./JG 51's Feldwebel Anton Hafner, who would score 204 kills prior to his death on 17 June 1944) soon after ending its bomb run. Four or five parachutes were seen to emerge from the aircraft just before it exploded.

In early December both groups left Tafaraoui, the 301st splitting its units between Maison Blanche and the new desert airfield at Biskra Oasis, in Algeria. The 97th BG concentrated all of its aircraft at the latter site. Most officers were quartered in nearby Biskra city, while enlisted men stayed in tents. The aircrews were cheered up at this time when their ground echelon finally arrived after an arduous journey from Britain.

The B-17 groups continued to focus their attention on Axis airfields and dock facilities in Bizerte and Tunis, and on 18 December the 97th BG had two aircraft (from a force of 36 bombers) hit by flak on their

bomb runs, which caused considerable damage. As they exited the target area both Fortresses came under heavy attack from Bf 109s from II./JG 51. Lt John Nichols' B-17 had had its No 2 engine hit hard over the target by flak, resulting in a runaway propeller and an uncontrollable fire. The aircraft's engineer had also been killed by the same flak burst. As the bomber lost height three enemy fighters attacked from 'two o'clock high'. The gunners continued to engage the Bf 109s, however, damaging the fighters despite having themselves been wounded. Nichols continued his dive for the ground until he was able to pull out and make a crash-landing near Le Kef, north of Tunis. Four crew members were killed in the action, and the remaining survivors were all severely injured.

Missions against the docks continued throughout December, and there was little to celebrate, not even Christmas. Indeed, dinner for the 97th at Biskra on the 25th consisted of hash, pickles, peaches and coffee.

On Boxing Day, while the 301st BG headed for the Tunisian port town of Sfax, the 97th flew yet another costly trip to the Bizerte docks. Lt Tom Border's B-17 suffered a direct hit by flak over the target and exploded, while Lt Claude Lawrence's machine sustained heavy damage and was forced to crash land on its way back to base near Souk el Arba. A veteran of this mission was the 97th BG's Lt Clarence, who remembers;

'It was Tom Border's last flight. He was hit over Bizerte on the bomb run. He was flying on my right wing and Claude Lawrence was on my left. My bombs had just dropped when Tom got hit. He got hit in his bomb-bay and all the bombs went off before he could get rid of any of them. His ship exploded into pieces. I didn't see any more than my crew did. I felt it when it happened, and the explosion shook us up pretty good, with a lot of the bomber's debris hitting us. My ship went out of control momentarily. One of Border's engines flew off in front of my wing. One of my boys tried to jump out without a parachute, but another member of the crew stopped him. He thought it was the engine from our ship.'

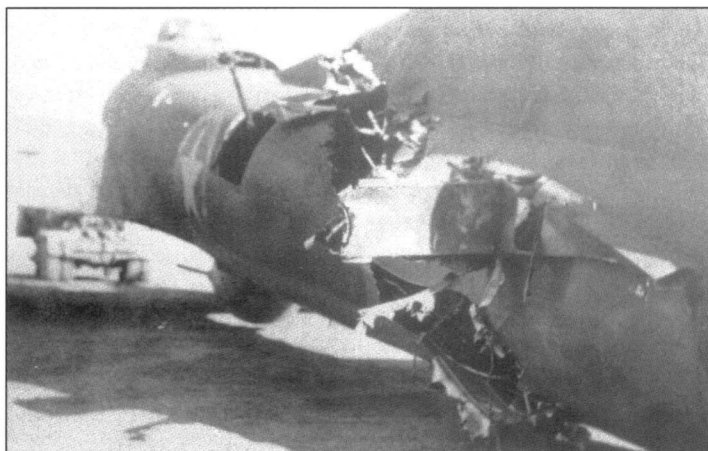
The new year brought a number of administrative changes for the B-17 force, with 97th BG CO Col Joseph Atkinson being promoted to brigadier general and given command of the new 5th Bomb Wing (BW), which controlled both the 97th and 301st BGs. Another move saw Lt Col Paul Tibbets of the 97th BG transferred to HQ Twelfth Air Force, where he was to serve on the staff of Brig Gen Doolittle. At about the same time, the Twelfth Air Force became part of the Northwest African Air Force.

Early January 1943 saw a continuation of missions against the Tunisian docks, although at the same time Biskra was also attacked repeatedly by the Germans, both by bombers at night and fighters during the day. The 301st succeeded in escaping from these raids when its contingent moved to Ain M'Lila, some 30 miles south of the Algerian city of Constantine. This new base was situated in a dry lakebed at an altitude of 2580 ft, which duly brought cold nights to the men in their pup tents.

Both the 97th and the 301st raided Bizerte again on 23 January, sinking a large freighter in the harbour. Thanks to a close escort by USAAF P-38s, no bombers were lost, although 11 301st BG machines were damaged and several crewmen wounded. The bomber gunners in turn claimed 16 enemy aircraft destroyed, 13 of them by the 301st.

It was back to Bizerte again six days later, and as the formation of 16 B-17s from the 97th BG turned towards the target they were hit by 15

On 1 February 1943 an Fw 190 from II./JG 2 sliced through the fuselage of 414th BS/97th BG B-17F 41-24406 *All American*, flown by Lt Kendrick Bragg. The German fighter had already taken the wing off of a B-17 immediately ahead of 41-24406 prior to inflicting the damage seen here. Despite having its fuselage ripped open and its left horizontal stabiliser and elevator removed, *All American* somehow stayed together long enough for Bragg to bring the bomber back to base and accomplish a successful landing (USAAF)



Bf 109s from JG 53. Capt Fred Dallas' bomber was singled out by Leutnant Franz Schiess (a 67-kill ace who also claimed a P-38 during this engagement) of *Stab* JG 53, who knocked out its No 2 engine on his first pass. The intercom between the flight deck and the nose was also rendered inoperable and the bomb-bay doors shot open, which created enough drag to force the aircraft out of formation. The controls to the flaps had also been shot away, whilst one of the waist gunners had been hit in the thigh, leaving him capable of firing from the prone position only. The ball turret was also out of commission, its gunner having been wounded in the left hand and shoulder. The No 3 engine soon began to blaze, although Dallas extinguished the fire by putting the aircraft into a dive. The second waist gunner put a parachute on his wounded compatriot, while the ball turret gunner took over the wounded man's position, even though he only had the use of one arm.

Schiess' next attack came from the rear, and he wounded the tail gunner with a 20 mm shell that exploded in his compartment. The radio gunner was also hit in the knee by a shell fragment and the top turret was knocked out when a round damaged the gun supports and turret wiring.

The German ace made one final attack which saw Capt Dallas hit three times in the chest by machine gun bullets. One of the rounds entered from the rear, passed straight through his body and smashed into the instrument panel. Fortunately none of the 'slugs' hit a vital organ. Now at an altitude of just 1000 ft, Dallas told his crew to huddle together in the radio room and prepare for a crash landing.

With only one engine operating, flaps up, bomb-bay doors open, ball turret guns straight down, a fire in the cockpit and wounded aboard, Dallas began bouncing the Fortress off a series of small hills in an attempt to slow it down. The third hill proved to be strong enough to take the impact and brought the aircraft to a complete stop, its tail having broken off. Upon extricating themselves from the shattered B-17, the men spotted a number of Arabs, who fortunately turned them over to a nearby patrol of British soldiers. They were then taken to Biskra and eventually flown to a hospital in Algiers. Capt Fred Dallas was subsequently awarded the Distinguished Service Cross (DSC) for his performance during this mission.

A joint mission by the 97th and the 301st BGs to the dock at Ferryville, Tunisia, on the last day of January produced quite spectacular results.

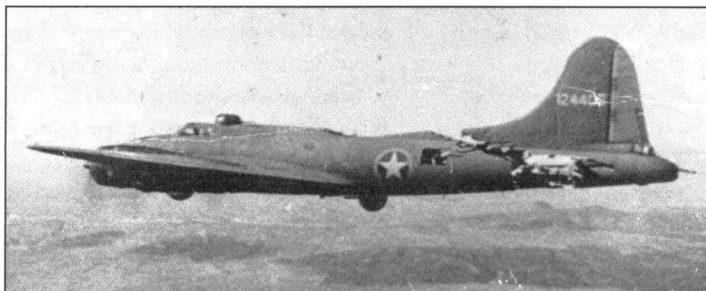
Of the three ships bombed in the harbour, one turned out to be loaded with high explosive, and the resulting blast pulled a dock crane from its foundation and threw it clean across three dry docks! A French destroyer was also destroyed.

Bizerte was bombed again on 1 February, and one of the ten B-17s sortied by the group was extremely lucky to make it back to base. As usual the bombers were attacked by Luftwaffe fighters, and two Fw 190s from II./JG 2 singled out the lead formation of four B-17s from the



Following *All American's* collision with the II./JG 2 Fw 190, the 414th BS adopted this motif as its official insignia for the remainder of the war (USAAF)

All American limps back to Biskra Oasis on 1 February 1943 after being hit by an Fw 190, the severity of the damage inflicted on the B-17 being clearly visible in this amazing photograph. The tail section remained attached to the fuselage by a few spars and a narrow section of aluminium skinning. Once back on the ground, the aircraft was the focus of much attention, and the tail eventually broke off whilst being examined by three group personnel. 41-24406 had initially been assigned to the 97th BG at Polebrook in August 1942, and had gone with the group to the MTO in November of that year. Following its 1 February collision, the bomber was repaired and transferred to the 353rd BS/301st BG at St Donat in early March 1943. The B-17 was eventually salvaged in March 1945 (USAAF)



414th BS, led by Maj Robert Coulter. Breaking directly into them, guns blazing away, the Germans closed rapidly, until it became obvious that the lead machine was not going to pull up. Perhaps the pilot of the Fw 190 had been hit, for he continued on a collision course until he crashed into Maj Coulter's B-17, ripping off a wing. The bomber immediately went into a terminal spin, although miraculously three men were able to bale out of the doomed aircraft. The fighter then ploughed into the rear fuselage of Lt Kendrick R Bragg's B-17F (41-24406 *All American*). This second impact caused the fighter to break apart, sending wreckage tumbling earthwards. However, Bragg's Fortress continued to fly.

Despite its left horizontal stabiliser and elevator having been sheared off, leaving its entire tail section swaying in the breeze, the bomber still had a solitary operable control cable running to the rudder and right elevator. Lt Bragg quickly went back to survey the damage, and he found that three-quarters of the fuselage had been destroyed and a large piece of Fw 190 wing was lodged in the wreckage. The tail section remained connected by just a few spars and a narrow section of aluminium skinning.

Bragg called his crew together and told them what their options were. They were free to bale out if they wished, but if they stayed they should be aware that the tail unit might break off at any time. If this occurred, it might be impossible to escape. The crew decided to stay nonetheless.

The Fortress continued its homeward journey and finally arrived over Biskra Oasis, Bragg circling the field slowly as the remaining B-17s all landed safely. The crew decided to remain with the bomber until it too had landed, the pilot telling them that he felt fully confident that *All American* would not let them down. Bragg let down on a long gentle approach, and on touchdown he eased the control yoke forward to keep the tail off the ground until it settled of its own volition. The Fortress rolled to a stop, dragging its tail in the sand due the absence of a tail wheel.

The whole base turned out to view the aircraft that had achieved the impossible. A Boeing rep in Algeria who closely inspected the bomber exclaimed 'There's no way that plane can fly'. Finally, three sightseers walked back into the shattered rear section of the fuselage and the B-17 broke in two. Sometime later an anonymous crewman drew a picture of a small brown puppy with his paws clasped in prayer astride the torn rear fuselage of a B-17. This later became the official insignia of the 414th BS.

A joint mission by 42 B-17s from the 97th and 301st BGs attacked the landing ground at Fatnassa, near Gabes in Tunisia, on 4 February. This was the new home of JG 77, and the bombers encountered heavy opposition from enemy fighters in clear weather. The battle raged for about 35 minutes, and a solitary Fortress from the 301st fell to JG 77.

Three days later 32 B-17s ventured out of North Africa for the first time when they attacked the airfield at Cagliari-Elmas, on Sardinia. Over 100 aircraft were seen on the field, and a quarter of these were claimed to have been destroyed. A number of the B-17s were damaged by Axis fighters scrambled from the island but none were lost.

On 15 February the 97th BG officially moved to Chateaudun-du-Rhumel in Algeria, the group conducting its base shift amid snow, wind and terrible weather. Despite these hardships, the new airfield proved to be a tremendous improvement over Biskra – for one thing, the 97th was never attacked again on its own airfield by Axis aircraft.

One week later the 97th went looking for Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's *Afrika Korps* following the latter's penetration of US positions in the Kasserine Pass, in Tunisia, on 20 February. The Axis advance directly threatened many Allied airfields, forcing the B-17s to be sent aloft in terrible weather. Struggling to find the enemy, the crews dropped few bombs during the course of three missions, and the group felt frustration at having seemingly done little to help their comrades' cause on the ground. However, the next morning the group began receiving calls from troops in the frontline congratulating them on their success. It seems that on one of the afternoon missions they had inadvertently bombed a German armoured column, causing great destruction. This in turn had prevented a pocket of Allied resistance from being overrun.

The two B-17 groups went hunting for Rommel's armoured forces on 22 and 23 February as well, but once again their efforts were thwarted by the weather. Finally, late in the afternoon of the 23rd the 301st sortied in search of German armour that had been spotted moving through the pass. The crews had been briefed to bomb from an altitude of 15,000 ft, but they eventually descended to just 5000 ft due to the solid undercast.

The rear formation in the group was made up of aircraft from the 352nd BS, and its leader spotted a break in the cloud. The squadron performed a complete 360-degree turn over the patchy undercast, and despite this manoeuvre splitting the unit away from rest of the group, the B-17s dropped their ordnance directly onto the German armour – their attack was opposed by heavy flak from six gun batteries.

The two groups joined forces once again on 1 March, when they attacked a 21-ship convoy en route to the Sicilian port of Palermo. The Fortresses flew without escort, and had to fight off 12 to 15 Ju 88s and Me 210s, which were shepherding the vessels. Bombing from 15,000 ft, the B-17s sunk one small ship and set three others alight.

Three days later the bombers enjoyed more success when they caught a six-ship convoy near Zembra island and sunk four vessels. 5th BW boss Brig Gen Atkinson was quoted in the press as saying, 'That's what I mean by spreading gloom' soon after this mission.

The 301st BG made yet another move on 8 March when it transferred to the airfield near St Donat, a small, dirty town a few miles from Constantine. The new base was situated on a high rocky plateau, which again made it rather cold at night for the crews, who were still living out of Pyramid tents. Sanitation was also poor due to the many flies that blighted the area, and food was in short supply. Indeed, most group personnel lost a significant amount of weight while at St Donat.

Poor weather allowed only a handful of successful missions to be flown in the first half of March, with targets in Tunisia and Sardinia again being hit. The 301st undertook a very successful, but tough, mission to the Palermo docks on 22 March, each of the two-dozen B-17s sortied delivering 12 500-lb bombs apiece from 25,000 ft. A few moments later the crews in the Fortresses were buffeted by a shockwave as an ammunition

ship exploded, leaving a 1000-ft by 150-ft hole in the dockside pier. In addition to the ammunition ship, four more merchant vessels were sunk and a further two thrown ashore by the force of the explosion.

The B-17s had successfully fended off intercepting Axis fighters prior to commencing their bomb runs, suffering little damage. However, as soon as they came off the target, 15 to 20 Bf 109s and Macchi C.202s returned, and in short order Lt Robert Duval's aircraft had been downed in flames. Minutes later Lt James Hair's Fortress burst into flames between the Nos 1 and 2 engines. The blaze spread across the wing and the aircraft continued downwards until it exploded at 19,000 ft.

A third B-17 flown by Lt Harbour Middleton was badly hit by flak and fighters and forced to fall out of formation. Seemingly a sitting duck, the bomber was saved when 1Lt John McGee turned his perfectly serviceable Fortress around and dropped down to cover Middleton's craft. If McGee had done this in 1944-45 he would have been court martialled for leaving his formation, yet on this day the protection he offered the damaged B-17 proved to be enough to help bring Middleton home with two engines shot out and the right wing spar severed.

Gen Carl Spaatz, commander of the Northwest African Air Force, described this mission as 'the most devastating raid thus far in the war'.

The 5th Wing received its first reinforcement when the 99th BG arrived in North Africa from the USA in March 1943. Crews had journeyed to the MTO via the southern route, which took them through Brazil, across the Atlantic and north-eastwards to Oran for further training. In late March the 99th moved to its new base at Navarin, in Algeria.

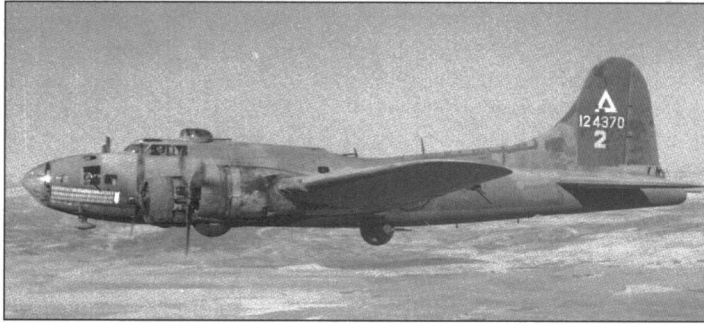
The new group flew its first mission on 31 March as part of a three group strike on the Sardinian airfields of Decimomannu, Cagliari and Monserrato. Fragmentation bombs were dropped and a large number of Italian Z.1007 and SM.79 bombers were destroyed on the ground.

The bombers attacked the Italian mainland port city of Naples on 4 April. In an effort to avoid detection by enemy radar, they crossed the Mediterranean at low level between Sicily and Sardinia. Once over the target area, the 97th BG bombed marshalling yards with high explosives and the 301st dropped fragmentation bombs on the airfield at Capodichino, on Sicily, where at least 12 aircraft were destroyed on the ground. A few fighters appeared but they did not intercept the B-17s.

The 301st was airborne again 48 hours later when it attacked a convoy off Bizerte. The 97th had already dropped its bombs, and missed, by the time the 301st showed up, so the latter group chose to attack from 10,500 ft. The 301st's lead bombardier was Lt Hyman Goldberg, who stated;

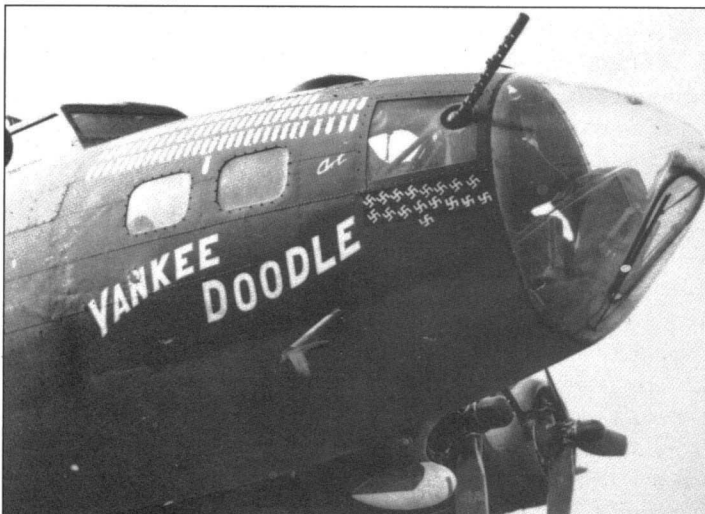
'We were bombing ships loaded with ammunition destined for Rommel's army. We got flak from shore batteries and the destroyer escorts, and the Messerschmitts were like flies. Just as we started on the bomb run I got hit in the back by a 20 mm shell which exploded and blew me off my seat. British observer U B Aitkens helped me, at my request, back onto my seat. I could see time running out on my target indices, and I knew I had to drop my bombs. I picked the bombs with just seconds left, and the results were unbelievable. We blew those ships out of the water.'

A 6000-8000 ton ship took a direct hit and blew up and another vessel was left in flames, whilst eight enemy aircraft were claimed as destroyed by the gunners of the 301st BG. This extraordinary performance duly



B-17F 41-24370 was officially recognised as being the first Flying Fortress serving in the ETO or MTO to complete 100 combat sorties. Initially assigned to the 92nd BG in June 1942, where it was christened *Pale Face*, the bomber was transferred to the 342nd BS/97th BG at Polebrook two months later. Renamed *Berlin Sleeper II*, it flew all 103 of its missions with this group, and was eventually returned to the USA in October 1943 (via Roger Freeman)

B-17F 42-29473 YANKEE DOODLE was also a multi-mission veteran of the MTO, although it was lucky to survive being rammed in the tail by another Fortress over Palermo on 9 May 1943. Assigned to the 347th BS/99th BG on 2 February 1943, the bomber later transferred to the 483rd BG in March 1944 and eventually ended its days with the 342nd BS/97th BG at Amendola as the squadron weather ship. 42-29473 was salvaged in March 1946 (via Roger Freeman)



earned the 301st BG a Distinguished Unit Citation (DUC).

The group was involved in another outstanding mission on 10 April when it was sent to bomb the Italian cruisers *Gorizia* and *Trieste* anchored off La Maddalena, on Sardinia. Some 60 Fortresses were dispatched and 24 B-17s from the 301st dropped 144 1000-lb bombs on the *Gorizia*. Attacking from

19,000 ft, the group's bombardiers performed a lengthy two-minute bomb run in order to line up their ordnance on the target, thus achieving full destructive effect. Twenty hits were scored, and the ship, protected by just three inches of armour on its upper decks, sank rapidly. The 97th BG, meanwhile, attacked the *Trieste*, although its nine-inch armour meant that the vessel managed to survive the attack.

For the rest of the month the bombers concentrated on attacking Luftwaffe aircraft on the ground at various bases in Tunisia and on Sardinia and Sicily. For example, on 20 April the 301st BG destroyed 44 of the 92 aircraft it found scattered across Castelvetrano airfield on Sicily.

Further reinforcements arrived for the 5th BW during April when the 2nd BG flew in from the USA. The group arrived via the southern route and completed its theatre orientation at Marrakech in French Morocco. Aircrews began moving into Chateaudun-du-Rhumel on 22 April, sharing the base with the 97th BG.

The 2nd BG's first mission was flown on 28 April, when the group was sent to Sardinia to bomb the docks at Terranova. However, complete undercast obscured the target, so the B-17s brought their bombs home.

The 2nd followed the 99th BG into action on 3 May when it attempted to bomb shipping at Bizerte, but again cloud blotted out much of the target and most of the crews aborted the mission. Thirteen B-17s did succeed in dropping their bombs on the target, inflicting modest damage to jetties and installations. Some flak was encountered and five aircraft

received damage and a single crewman was killed. Despite the weather, all 2nd BG aircraft somehow found their way home.

The same could not be said for the 99th BG, which aborted the mission and scattered in cloud in an attempt to avoid collisions. The crews then attempted to find their own way home, but five B-17s did not return to base. One ditched, losing several members of its crew, and the other four were either force-landed or abandoned over the desert. It was several days before the surviving crews made it back to base.



The 97th BG was involved in a running air battle with enemy aircraft on 9 May when both Italian and German aircraft intercepted the group during a 211-aircraft attack on Palermo. The flak over the Sicilian capital was intense, one B-17 crew member stating that it was the heaviest that he had ever seen, so he turned his turret around to 'six o'clock' while they flew through the barrage so that he could not see the shells exploding!

The B-17s, along with B-25s and B-26s, dropped their bombs on target and were then immediately jumped by a bevy of enemy fighters, including Bf 109s, Bf 110s, Me 210s, Fw 190s, C.202s and C.205s. B-17F 42-29473 *YANKEE DOODLE*, flown by the 99th BG's Lt Holmes, had two engines shot out and then lost its hydraulic system when it was hit in the rear by *Old Ironsides*, flown by Lt M Payne. This chopped part of *YANKEE DOODLE*'s tail off and caused the tail gunner to spill out of his compartment – his parachute was seen to open. Somehow, both B-17s managed to limp back to base.

This mission officially signalled the start of the Allied aerial offensive against Sicily, as well as the end of the North African campaign. Airfields, railroads and harbour installations were the primary targets for all 5th BW groups during May 1943, and although most missions against Axis airfields were hotly contested by German and Italian fighters, the Fortresses were fortunate to escape with relatively few losses.

31 May saw the first mission flown against airfields in and around the city of Foggia, on the Italian mainland. In due course these same bases would eventually become home for several of the bomb groups that were now doing the attacking. Aside from the Luftwaffe airfields in the area, the city itself was a major rail hub for commerce in central Italy. During the bombing the 2nd BG encountered some fighter opposition, but Allied escorts were able to fend off their Axis counterparts.

As the B-17s headed for home low over the Mediterranean, having parted company with their escorts, they were bounced by a formation of enemy fighters. This attack took the bomber crews completely by surprise,

A 97th BG B-17F is seen over Messina, Italy, on 8 May 1943, its deadly cargo erupting in a cluster of explosions 20,000 ft below. Note the streaked and stained Olive Drab uppersurfaces of the veteran bomber (USAAF)

B-17F 42-30082 from the 20th BS/ 2nd BG undergoes maintenance in the open at Ain M'Lila, in Algeria, in the late summer of 1943. Note that the veteran bomber has had its tail gun installation removed in preparation for the fitment of a new unit. Virtually all maintenance work in North Africa was undertaken in the open, and groundcrews had their hands full dealing with sand, sun, wind and rain, as well as swarms of flies. The sand in particular drastically reduced the life of the bombers' Wright R-1820 radial engines, and powerplant changes had to be effected without the assistance of proper stands and dedicated lifting equipment. 42-30082 features a red surround to its fuselage 'star and bars', this marking only being used by US aircraft for a short period in the latter half of 1943. Assigned to the 2nd BG upon its arrival in the MTO on 28 May 1943, this aircraft completed 36 missions with the group before being transferred to the 419th BS/301st BG in November of that same year. A combat survivor, 42-30082 returned to the USA in September 1945 and was salvaged the following month (USAAF)

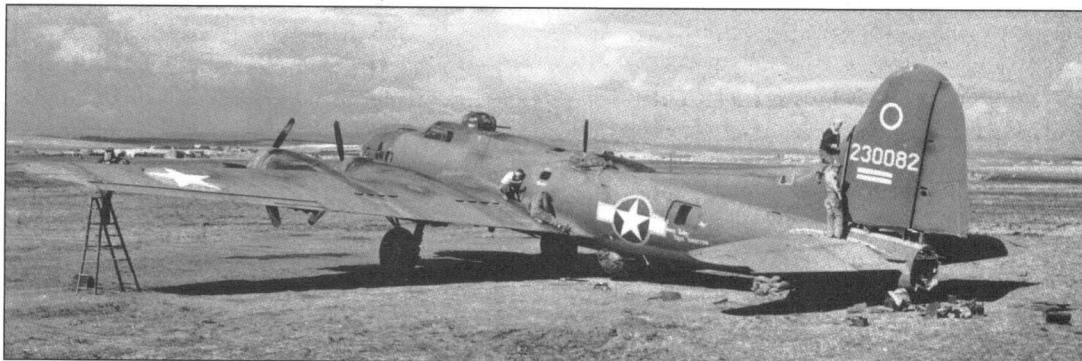
the German fighters initially dropping small bombs on the lead squadron from above, before making a series of conventional gunnery passes. Few bomber gunners managed to return fire, for many of them had already started the laborious process of stripping down their weapons and cleaning them! Fortunately, the Luftwaffe pilots never realised just how vulnerable the B-17s were, and they did not press home their attacks.

From 1 to 11 June Allied air power demonstrated its effectiveness in the MTO by exclusively securing the conquest of the island fortress of Pantelleria. Defended by 100 coastal guns, most of which protected the harbour, the island also boasted an airfield with a 5000-ft runway and a huge underground hangar into which the Germans had installed sophisticated radar equipment. Finally, the garrison on Pantelleria numbered some 12,000 men. The island installations were initially attacked by fighters and medium bombers, with the 5th BW getting in on the act on the afternoon of the 1st when coastal batteries and gun emplacements were hit. These raids continued through to 5 June. The air assault was bolstered by a Royal Navy bombardment on the 8th.

The attacks from the air increased until raids were taking place around the clock, and the island garrison was finally given the opportunity to surrender on 11 June. This was the first time ever that an entire installation had surrendered following an aerial bombardment. During this period the 5th BW flew 679 sorties and dropped 2000 tons of bombs. Some 6570 tons of bombs had been expended on Pantelleria in total, and once crews got the chance to look around the island they were surprised to see just how little damage the bombing had done.

For the rest of June operations were carried out in preparation for the invasion of Sicily, with airfields and shipping being the major targets. Several missions were flown against the port of Messina, which was the island's eastern terminus, and probably one of the most heavily defended targets in Europe at that time. The 97th BG had struck Messina just once prior to bombing it on 18 June, and returning aircrew had no great deeds to report after the mission. However, it was later determined that the group had sunk the *Romolo*, which was then the largest cargo-carrying submarine in the Italian fleet, capable of moving 200 tons of supplies.

Month-end saw four groups from the 5th BW strike Messina as part of the 'softening up' process before the invasion was launched, and military barracks and railway lines were also heavily bombed. Axis fighters were encountered in significant numbers, with all main German and Italian types being reported.





B-17F 42-29909 of the 20th BS/2nd BG shares ramp space with two P-38s, an A-20 and a C-47, as well as a solitary RAF Spitfire V, at Palermo airfield, on the island of Sicily, in October 1943. Assigned to the 2nd BG in April 1943, 42-29909 was written off in a taxiing accident with 49th BS/2nd BG B-17F 42-29623 at Amendola on 3 February 1944 (USAAF)

B-17F 42-29485 *Miss Fury* initially served with the 416th BS/99th BG in North Africa, arriving at Navarin in February 1942. It is seen here in early 1944, just prior to being transferred to the 483rd BG on the last day of March. Removed from frontline service in July, 42-29485 saw out the rest of the war as a weather ship with the 463rd BG (via Roger Freeman)

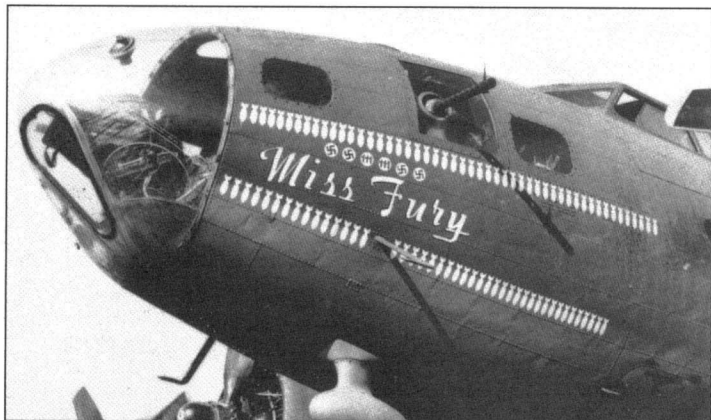
Lt Richard Eggers of the 2nd BG suffered engine trouble in his B-17 just prior to 'bombs away' and had to fall out of formation. Clearly in trouble, his aircraft acted like a magnet for enemy fighters, and Eggers' gunners fended off attacks for nearly 20 minutes. They claimed four probables, and Eggers managed to coax the crippled bomber back to Tunis, where he landed with no trim tabs and damaged elevator controls.

Capt Alfred Hinsey was not so fortunate. A determined Bf 109 pilot made a head-on attack on his B-17, and as the closure developed the top turret gunner, T/Sgt Charles Johnson, returned fire. Apparently, the latter registered telling hits on his German foe for the fighter continued to dive headlong until it crashed into the wing of the Fortress and exploded. The wingless B-17 rolled over onto its back and went into a flat spin, which continued until the fuselage broke in two aft of the radio room. Only one parachute was seen to emerge from the hapless bomber.

The 2nd BG experienced its heaviest fighter attack of the war on 4 July when it bombed the airfield at Catania, on Sicily. Between 50 and 75 fighters attacked the group for at least 30 minutes, using aerial bombs and making single and dual aircraft passes. Gunners from the 2nd BG claimed

13 Axis fighters destroyed whilst defending themselves.

Lt Dutton C Dutton soon found himself in trouble after leaving Catania when his B-17 experienced engine failure, which in turn forced him to drop out of formation. His gunners then had their work cut out defending the bomber for ten minutes, during which time they claimed two fighters destroyed before the rest broke off. Dutton successfully made it to Malta for repairs. Lt Richard Underwood also



headed for Malta after his aircraft was badly damaged, Axis fighters making 35 passes at his B-17 in 25 minutes.

Lt Walter Laich and his crew were the unfortunates who would not make it home that day. His aircraft was hit by an aerial bomb whilst coming off the target, and Laich fell out of position and came up off the left wing of Lt Philip Devine who, along with his bombardier, kept an eye on the cripple. Fire began streaming out of the nacelle of the No 3 engine and Laich shut it down

and feathered the propeller. However, he then decided to restart the engine in an effort to extinguish the fire, but this proved fatal for once the powerplant had begun to tick over again the blaze quickly enveloped the whole wing and then spread to the bomb-bay and radio room. Five or six parachutes left the B-17 but two crewmen hit the horizontal stabiliser and only one chute opened. Laich continued to fly on in an attempt to allow the crew to bail out, but with fighters following the B-17 down, upper turret gunner T/Sgt Carlton Grissom remained at his post blazing away. He was still firing when the bomber split in two and fell away.

In another preparatory attack before the invasion of Sicily, the 5th BW was sent to attack the airfield at Gerbini the following day. As the B-17s from the 99th BG approached the target, they were set upon by a 100-strong formation of German and Italian fighters. The Axis pilots pressed home their attacks in a desperate effort to break up the bombers, but the 99th fought back and continued to the target. There, the B-17 crews dropped 3240 fragmentation bombs on aircraft, hangars, ammunition dumps and fuel supplies, leaving the airfield in a ruinous state.

In the desperate air battle that took place the 99th BG was credited with the destruction of no fewer than 38 enemy fighters in the air, in addition to another 20 that had been destroyed on the ground. All this was accomplished at the cost of three B-17s. For its outstanding performance that day, the 99th BG was awarded a DUC.

Sicily was invaded on 10 July 1943, and although the B-17s were aloft to support the invasion, poor weather over the beachhead meant that no bombing took place. Allied forces raced across the island so fast in the next few days that only a handful of missions were flown in support.

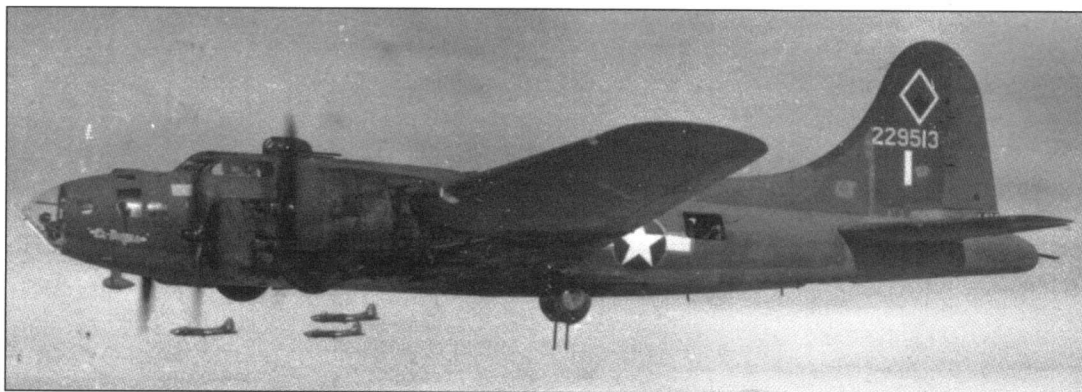
On the morning of 19 July 5th BW crews were thoroughly briefed prior to departing for the first raid on the Italian capital, Rome. Planners went to great lengths to point out the religious shrines and historical monuments in the city, none of which were to be bombed. The



B-17F 42-5388 NEVER SATISFIED had completed 104 missions by the time it was returned to the USA in May 1944. This photograph was taken to celebrate its 90th, and last, combat sortie with the 348th BS/99th BG on 11 December 1943. The aircraft was then transferred to the 817th BS/483rd BG, with whom it flew its final 14 missions. 42-5388 was salvaged in November 1945 (via Roger Freeman)

Fully bombed up, B-17F 42-5145 of the 32nd BS/301st BG was photographed en route to Viterbo airfield, in Italy, on 29 July 1943. Assigned to the group seven months earlier, this aircraft had completed 62 missions by the time it was transferred on to the 96th BS/2nd BG in November 1943. Having passed the century mark, 42-5145 was lost on its 102nd combat sortie when it was shot down by German fighters over Padula, Italy, on 11 March 1944. Six crewmen baled out (USAAF)





B-17F 42-29513 *EL-DIABLO* saw extensive service with the 346th BS/99th BG in the MTO between 23 February and 11 December 1943. Indeed, in that time it completed 114 missions. Deemed war weary, it was stripped of its armament and converted into a weather ship for the 304th BW at Cerignola, in Italy (USAAF)

These 32nd BS/301st BG Fortresses were also photographed en route to Viterbo airfield, in Italy, on 29 July 1943. The B-17F closest to the camera is 42-3343 *Slick Chick*, which had only been assigned to the group some six weeks prior to this shot being taken. Going on to complete 58 missions with the 32nd BS, 42-3343 was converted into a weather ship in 1944. The veteran bomber was salvaged in July 1945 (USAAF)



strategic target for the bombers was the marshalling yard at San Lorenzo, and this was attacked by all four B-17 groups. No fighters attempted interceptions, although a few Italian aircraft were sighted in the distance.

The 2nd and 301st BGs flew a long range mission four days later when they travelled 1400 miles to strike Leverano airfield in northern Italy. Their targets were the 58 aircraft located on the airfield itself, and more than 100 machines scattered across other strips in the immediate vicinity. The Luftwaffe intercepted the bombers and a vicious battle ensued for 45 minutes, yet despite the 2nd BG having two gunners killed and six wounded, all the B-17s returned safely.

The end of July 1943 saw the Sicilian campaign wrapped up, causing something of a lull in the air war. The groups of the 5th BW utilised this down time to move from Algeria into Tunisia, thus putting them a little closer to targets in Italy and the Balkans. The 301st BG moved to Oudna 2, 20 miles south of Tunis, whilst the 97th transferred to Pont du Fahs, 45 miles south-west of the Tunisian capital. The site chosen for the 2nd BG was Massicault, while the 99th BG also moved into Oudna 2. The 97th BG soon discovered that the dust was too bad for operations to be undertaken from Pont du Fahs, and by mid August the group had shifted to Depienne, this former Luftwaffe airfield being situated on a high plateau.

On 19 August a very large raid was mounted on Foggia, with all four groups from the 5th BW being despatched – the 2nd and the 301st BGs led the way, followed by the 97th and 99th. The city's electrical sub-station and marshalling yard were the prime targets, bombs knocking out the former with a tremendous explosion. Locomotives, rolling stock and repair shops were also hard hit, and several tracks severed, bringing rail traffic to a halt both in and out of the city.

The 2nd BG in particular paid a high price for this success, with practically every one of its aircraft sustaining damage from flak or fighters. Ten men were wounded, one fatally, and no fewer than five of

its B-17s were lost. The group's S/Sgt Neil MacDonald, left waist gunner in Lt Benard Pasero's crew, remembers;

'It was the roughest bomb run that I can recall on all my missions. The flak was thick and the sky black from the exploding ack-ack. I can still hear the "oomph-oomph" of the flak as it exploded near us. It was just moments after "bombs away" that our B-17 took a close hit, after which everything started to happen. No 2 engine failed and then No 4. I recall an aeroplane off to our right going down in flames. We began to lose formation fast due to our knocked out engines. As we left the formation and lost altitude, the Me 109s jumped us. They were all around us like bees on honey. Taking hits, we then lost the No 3 engine. This was it!

'The sky was full of bandits. Me 109s everywhere, coming at us from all angles. I could hear the bullets hitting all around us. I was hit in the right shoulder and fell to the floor. I got up and continued to fire my 0.50-cal gun. Then, both the other waist gunner, Sgt Stewart, and I were hit in the legs simultaneously. I took a round in my heel and also suffered a bad wound in my right leg, just above the ankle. Sgt Stewart's right leg was literally shot off, the limb hanging by flesh only. He somehow managed to bale out of the plane okay, however.'

Another bomber to go down was that flown by Lt John Bradley. The only survivor from his crew was S/Sgt James J Bradley, who saw the right waist gunner get hit and go down and then the ball turret gunner fall silent after firing off just a few rounds. Bradley was then himself hit in the knee by fragments from a 20 mm shell. He limped into the radio room for assistance and found the radio operator laying dead on the floor. Bradley then looked forward through the bomb-bay towards the flight deck and saw both the pilot and co-pilot slumped over the flight controls. Although the engines were still running, the B-17 was now effectively out of control. Sgt Bradley baled out at 15,000 ft.

The total loss of personnel for the 2nd BG that day tallied 29 crewmen killed in action and 19 made prisoners of war – three men evaded capture.

Despite the group still licking its wounds, the 2nd participated in the 25 August raid on the main Axis airfield at Foggia, which saw P-38 groups from the Twelfth Air Force flying in conjunction with the 5th BW bombers. In an attempt to fool the Luftwaffe, and thus inflict significant losses, 150 Lightnings took off from bases in North Africa and headed for Greece at a height of less than 500 ft, thus avoiding radar detection. They then turned west for the Italian coast, flying over the Adriatic Sea.

The Fortresses, meanwhile, flew straight over Sicily escorted by still more P-38s. Approaching from their usual high altitude, the 'heavies' were quickly detected, and the Luftwaffe made ready to intercept. Pilots raced out to their aircraft, climbed aboard and waited patiently for take off time. Minutes later the formation of low-flying P-38s out to the east raced over the Foggia base at tree-top height, catching the fuelled up, yet stationary, German fighters in the open on the ground. The Lightnings roared in with their guns blazing, shooting up the vulnerable fighters. Minutes later the bombers arrived overhead, raining death and destruction from on high in the form of thousands of 20-lb fragmentation bombs and 500-lb delayed action bombs.

Columns of black smoke rose from burning aircraft on the airfield, and ambulances criss-crossed the base as medics attempted to administer first

aid to pilots and groundcrew who had been gunned down in the attack. Less than a dozen fighters were able to rise to challenge the B-17s, and the only bomber lost was a 97th BG machine hit by flak. From that date on Axis fighter opposition fell away considerably.

On 3 September representatives of the Italian government signed an armistice with the Allies. This created great confusion in the MTO, as a considerable number of Italian air force units remained loyal to the Luftwaffe and continued to fight from bases in the north of the country.

In the days following the armistice, all 5th BW missions were flown against airfields in Italy as an Allied invasion force was assembled. Then, on 8 September, the US Fifth Army invaded Italy at Salerno.

That same day 150 B-17s from the 5th BW attacked the German High Command HQ in Frascati. The Fortresses, carrying a mixture of 500-, 1000- and 2000-lb bombs, cascaded 389 tons of high explosives on the target, causing extensive damage to all the buildings in the immediate area. The Commander-in-Chief of the German forces in Italy, Field Marshal Albert von Kesselring, was lucky to escape with his life.

The raiders were opposed by 25 enemy aircraft, primarily Bf 109s, and in a lengthy battle B-17 gunners claimed seven fighters destroyed for the loss of a solitary Fortress from the 97th BG. The next six missions flown by the 5th BW were primarily against various highways and bridges in support of the American advance at Salerno. Not a single enemy fighter opposed these flights.

Indeed, the ferocity of conditions in North Africa rather than attacks by Axis fighters inflicted greater attrition on B-17 groups – particularly the 97th and 301st – at that time. Sand and long overwater crossings had taken their toll on the aircraft, and at one point during the summer of 1943 the 97th had 25 B-17s grounded awaiting engine changes. 5th BW personnel had also suffered during almost a year of poor food, worse quarters and a shortage of everything from clothing to cigarettes.

Yet, despite this, the Fortress groups were briefed for their first attack on a target in Germany on 1 October 1943. They would be bombing the Messerschmitt aircraft factory at Augsburg.

The bombers encountered very bad weather en route to the target, and although most B-17 crews were able to get to Augsburg, they found the aircraft plant blanketed in cloud, forcing them to bomb targets of opportunity instead. The rest of October was also blighted by poor weather, and only a few missions were flown by the Fortresses, including a handful of raids on airfields in Greece, from where the Luftwaffe was supporting Axis forces fighting the Soviet Red Army in the Ukraine. Italian rail targets also came in for some attention as well.



Undoubtedly posing for the camera, 2nd BG bombardier Lt John Barron (left) shows the group Intelligence Officer where he dropped his bombs on his 50th mission on 9 December 1943. Note Barron's '50 mission crush' cap and the novel artwork on the nose of his bomber. 'Tojo' appears to have suffered a direct flak hit judging by the neat metal patch pop-riveted over his face! (USAAF)

THE FIFTEENTH AIR FORCE

In November 1943 saw four B-17 groups (and two fighter groups) from the Twelfth Air Force and two B-24 groups from the Ninth Air Force brought together within the new Fifteenth Air Force. This organisation had been created as part of the expansion of the US Strategic Air Forces (USSTAAF) in Europe, and its sole reason for being was to fly missions as part of the Combined Bomber Offensive, along with the Eighth Air Force in England and RAF Bomber Command.

The Fifteenth Air Force flew its first mission on 2 November when its bombers attacked the Messerschmitt assembly plant at Wiener Neustadt, in Austria. Two B-17 groups and two B-24 groups went in as the first wave over the target, and they were followed by two more B-17 groups 45 minutes later. Two of the Fortress units flew to the target via Sicily, where they stopped off to refuel on the way to the target.

Enemy fighter opposition was very heavy, with an estimated 100+ aircraft of all types attacking the bombers until they were well on their way home. The 2nd BG was the first group to suffer losses, having two B-17s shot down. 2nd BG pilot Lt Richard Eggers commanded B-17 *Raggedy A*, and he later recalled;

‘The fighter attacks began about the time we turned onto the bomb run. As we approached the target, I noticed that the squadron ahead had lost an aeroplane, and we were under heavy attack. My bomber was hit shortly after we turned off the target. I lost one engine, then my elevator and rudder controls went bad, and I could not stay in formation. That made me a sitting duck for the German fighters. Realising the B-17 could

Maj Bradford Evans of the 439th BS/2nd BG nurses his B-17F back to base with its port outer engine merrily blazing away in mid November 1943. Flying his 46th mission in the MTO, Evans had been bombing targets in Toulon, France, when his No 1 engine ‘blew up and caught fire’. Unable to make it back to his home base at Massicault, in Tunisia, Evans elected to set his ailing bomber down at the 99th BG’s landing ground at Oudna, again in Tunisia (USAAF)





not survive, I ordered the crew to bale out. As I reached for the parachute pack strapped on the back of my seat, the “twin fifties” in the upper turret started firing again. Evidently my engineer had been knocked out when his turret was hit, and had then come to not knowing that the rest of the crew had gone. I reached back, grabbed his flying suit and motioned to him to get out.’

The 301st BG was in the second wave, and its 20 aircraft dropped 120 1000-lb bombs from 25,000 ft. The group was then attacked by 45 enemy fighters, and during a 20-minute battle German aircraft approached the bombers primarily from ‘three’ and ‘nine o’clock’, closing to within 75 yards of the B-17s. The gunners claimed 11 enemy fighters destroyed, although four 301st BG Fortresses were also lost. The latter were all from the group’s last formation, and they were bounced as they came off their bomb run.

Lt James Gibson’s B-17 was knocked out of formation, but he was able to pull into the slot vacated by Lt Veazly, who had dropped back when his No 3 engine was set on fire. The enemy continued to attack Gibson’s aircraft, however, and they may have hit the pilot as the B-17 swayed from side to side before it dropped away out of control. Fighters also got to Lt Herbert Pattison’s Fortress, setting its No 4 engine alight. Pattison salvaged his bombs just before his No 1 engine failed. The bomber spiralled down and exploded.

Fighters made three passes on Lt Charles Mason’s B-17, causing it to leave the formation and drop away with its No 3 engine streaming smoke. Several parachutes were seen from the quartet of downed Fortresses. Three more B-17s did not return to base that day, having force landed on Sicily.

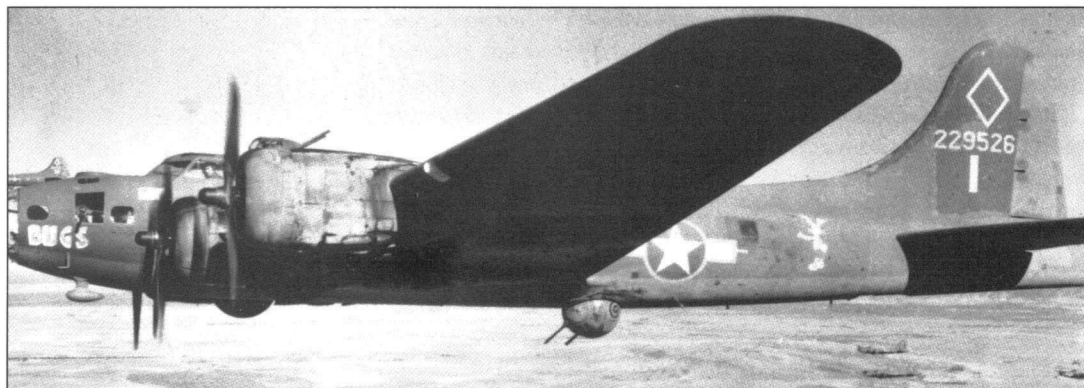
The 97th BG was also hard hit, and although it did not lose any aircraft, it had crewmen wounded.

During the course of the mission yet another unapproved rescue took place that would have resulted in

B-17F 42-3389 was assigned to the 347th BS/99th BG at Oudna in August 1943, and it is seen wearing the group’s distinctive diamond marking on the tail, along with the roman II associated with the 347th BS. Christened “Rangy LIL”, the aircraft was passed on to the 340th BS/97th BG on 14 November 1943 and was lost on the mission to Toulon eight days later. The crew was forced to ditch the battle-damaged bomber in the Mediterranean, and they were all subsequently rescued (via Roger Freeman)

Most photos of B-17s feature the nose, but this excellent shot of B-17G 44-8459 reveals details of the waist or fuselage door through which many gunners baled out. The tail markings are those of the 429th BS/2nd BG (USAAF)





B-17F 42-29526 survived long enough in the MTO to see frontline action with three of the 5th BW's six Fortress groups. Nicknamed *BUGS*, it was initially issued to the 346th BS/99th BG (in whose markings it is seen here) on 3 February 1943. By the time it had transferred to the 483rd BG on 31 March 1944, *BUGS* had completed over 100 combat missions. The newly-arrived 483rd passed the veteran bomber onto the 429th BS/2nd BG just weeks later, and it remained with the latter group until retired at war's end. Note that someone has painted a bull's eye on the back of the bomber's ball turret! (via Roger Freeman)

disciplinary action had it occurred later in the war. The 97th BG's Lt Kenneth Dahl dropped out of formation to cover the lead ship in his element when it fell behind as a result of mechanical trouble. Together, the two B-17s made a very successful bombing run, but as they came off target they were attacked by ten fighters – the gunners later claimed to have shot two of them down. Knowing that their fuel was running low, Dahl then escorted his leader to a friendly base, where he landed. Dahl continued on and put his B-17 down at another friendly field after dark.

Overall, the accuracy of the bombing at Wiener Neustadt on 2 November was rated very good for two of the Fortress groups and poor for the remaining two.

Mid-November saw a significant swap of aircraft between the four Fortress groups of the 5th BW, with the 2nd and 99th BGs trading their B-17Fs with 'Tokyo Tanks' (extra fuel cells fitted in the outer wing sections) to the 97th and 301st BGs, and receiving unmodified F-models in return. Following the swap, the 97th and 301st BGs became the first groups in the MTO to be fully equipped with 'long range' B-17Fs.

Aside from the Wiener Neustadt raid on the 2nd, few other missions of significance were flown in November up until the 27th, when the 97th BG attacked the marshalling yard at Rimini, in Italy. The Luftwaffe appeared over the target in force, some 50+ fighters downing two B-17s. Both were victims of line abreast attacks from 'twelve o'clock high'.

Few missions were flown by any 5th BW aircraft in early December, as all four groups were in the process of shifting from North Africa to Italy – specifically 13 airfields captured around Foggia on 27 September. Advanced echelons moved initially, and they worked with engineering personnel who were extending runways and building associated facilities specifically for B-17s. The 2nd BG moved to Amendola airfield, 12 miles from Foggia and the 97th transferred to Foggia main airfield, as its new base at San Giovanni was still not ready. The latter site was soon found to be unsuitable for 'heavies', so the 97th also moved into Amendola, which it shared with the 2nd BG until war's end. The 301st flew into Cerignola on 7 December and the 99th BG moved into Tortorella 48 hours later. All four groups made their moves in bad weather, with the ground echelon, and its associated equipment, following by ship to Italy.

The 2nd and 97th BGs participated in their first big mission following the move on 19 December, when they set out to bomb the Messerschmitt factory at Augsburg, in Germany. However, they turned back when faced

with bad weather over the target. The formation leaders duly decided to bomb the alternate target instead, which on this occasion was the marshalling yard at Innsbruck, in Austria.

Col Herbert Rice, CO of the 2nd BG, had been forced to abort the mission early on due to engine failure. Normally, the deputy group lead would have taken over, but as he was heading the second wave of the formation, which had fallen behind and could not catch up, Col Rice's right wingman, Lt Samuel Covert, took over as leader of the first wave. Dropping their bombs on small towns east of Innsbruck, the now widely scattered first wave was intercepted by a determined gaggle of enemy fighters and three B-17s were shot down.

Lt John Williams was the first to go when seven German fighters took it in turns to shoot up his bomber, setting the B-17's entire right wing alight. The crew began baling out, although Lt Williams appears to have gone down at the controls of the aircraft. The ball turret gunner was also lost, and the rest of the crew became PoWs.

Minutes later *Lydia Pinkham*, flown by Lt Robert Peterson, left the formation with its No 3 engine ablaze, and it was then finished off by a swarm of fighters south-east of Bolzano, in Italy.

The third aircraft to go in was also lost south-east of Bolzano, Lt Henry Vogel's Fortress initially dropping away with its right wing on fire before the bomber eventually went out of control. Witnesses said the B-17 performed a complete barrel-roll prior to plunging into the overcast. Lt Vogel was getting ready to bale out when he asked the co-pilot to hold the aeroplane steady while he disengaged his parachute pack. He then indicated for the co-pilot to bale out. Vogel jumped out through the bomb-bay and blacked out when his parachute opened. When he regained consciousness, he saw parts of the bomber falling around him. Apparently the B-17 had exploded just after Vogel jumped – he was the only survivor.

The 97th BG crews reported that they had bombed the marshalling yards at Innsbruck with good results. One aircraft was hit by flak over the target and forced to drop out of formation. Some 20 miles from Innsbruck it was attacked by fighters and shot down.

The 2nd BG lost another three aircraft on 20 December when it bombed Eleusis airfield in Athens, Greece. However, fighters were not responsible for the losses that day, as all three B-17s fell victim to intense flak. Lt William Slaughter lost Nos 2 and 3 engines over the target and then No 4 caught fire and was feathered. About this time fighters arrived, and after an exchange of fire the No 1 engine was lost too. The crew baled out and only the navigator was taken prisoner, the others being looked after by Greek villagers, who helped them evade capture. At one point the locals ambushed a German search party to ensure the crew's escape. It took 31 days for the men to walk to freedom, with the final leg of their journey being completed by boat across the Aegean Sea to Turkey.

The second B-17 was blasted in two by flak, five of its crew being killed and the balance taken prisoner. Finally, the third aircraft lost had two engines knocked out over the target, forcing the crew to crash-land on the Greek island of Corfu, where they were captured.

The 97th and 301st BGs sortied 64 B-17s on Christmas Day to attack the Bolzano Bridge and marshalling yard. The Fortress crews tried a new tactic whereby they flew east, past the target, before turning back and

attacking from the north. Flak was very heavy and accurate, and the bombing was not very good. Leading the 301st BG was group CO Col Jean Byerly, who began having engine problems on the bomb run, which in turn caused him to come in 1000 ft below the briefed height.

About two-thirds of the way into the bomb run Byerly's aircraft took a flak hit which knocked out the No 2 engine and started a fire. A second 105 mm round struck the fuselage near the radio room, and the Fortress headed down in a steep dive. A third shell then hit the fuselage again, and the B-17 fell another 10,000 ft before it exploded. Jean Byerly would prove to be the only 301st BG CO to be lost in combat.

January 1944 started slowly for the 5th BW, and other than a very successful mission against the ball bearing plant at Vella Perosa, the wing undertook a series of short runs against marshalling yards and harbour installations in northern Italy. Things took a turn for the worst on the 11th, however, when the 97th and 301st BGs attempted to attack the Greek port city of Piraeus. As the bombers headed towards their target the weather grew steadily worse. Eventually, the clouds were so thick that the trailing squadron of the 301st was forced to fly off course for two minutes in order to increase the distance between it and the lead element.

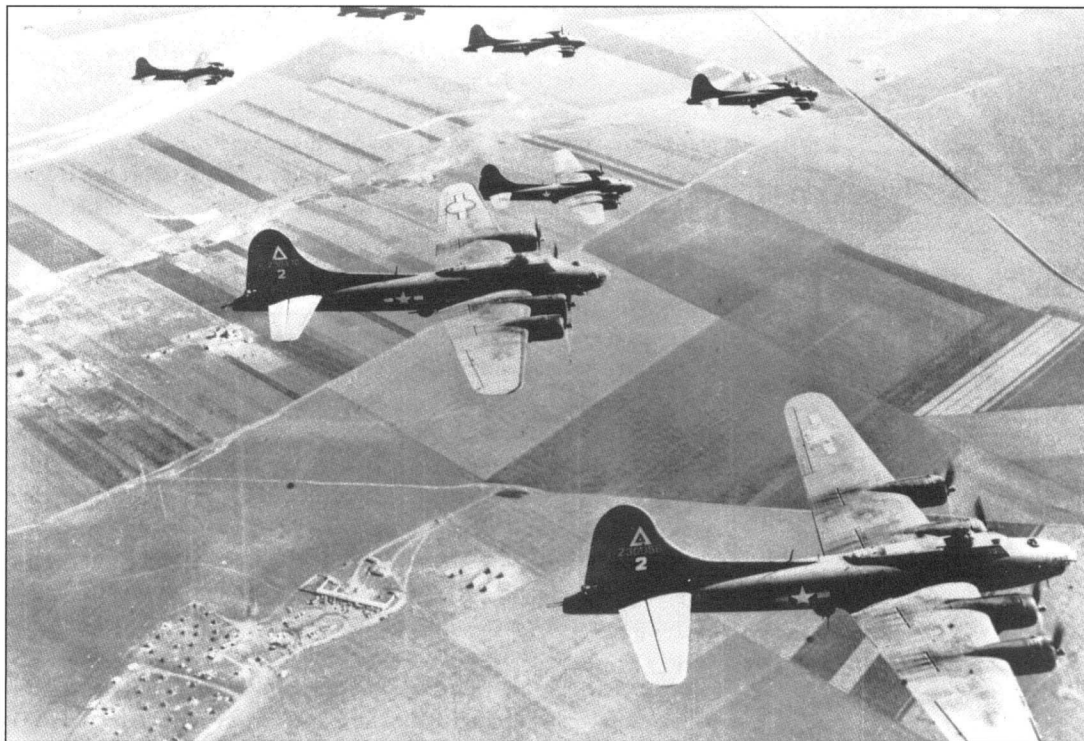
Some two minutes from the target, and as the lead aircraft of the 301st began to climb, two 97th BG bombers flew head-on into the formation. One passed below the leader's left wing and the other above and to the right, clipping the vertical stabiliser of Col Barthelmess' aircraft. The B-17 then hit another 301st aircraft before slamming into the lead Fortress of the second element. One bomber in the lead element exploded, as did two B-17s in the second element. Barthelmess' aircraft then went over on its back, as did three other B-17s. Two of them recovered at about 10,000 ft, but the remaining crews were not so lucky.

Five Fortresses from the 301st were lost in total, as were the two 97th BG bombers which triggered this tragedy. A few 301st aircraft went on to bomb the target and were then hit by fighters, which were driven off without further loss. Col Barthelmess' aircraft returned with a bent stabiliser.

Perhaps the most astounding escape story to emerge from this series of mid-air collisions was that of tail gunner Sgt James Raley. His aircraft had its tail section completely cut off from the rest of the fuselage, and Raley came down trapped inside it – the severed section had possessed just enough aerodynamic stability to flutter down. He landed in a clump of

B-17G 42-31855 of the 342nd BS/97th BG made it back to its Amendola base after bombing the Steyr ball bearing plant in Austria, on 2 April 1944 . . . but only just. As this photograph graphically reveals, the bomber had been struck in the tail by a rocket fired from a Bf 110. A large gaggle of bomber destroyers had brutalised the 97th BG for over half-an-hour, downing three B-17s and damaging numerous others. Once repaired, 42-31855 continued to serve with the group until converted into a weather ship in October 1944 (USAAF)





pine trees, opened his fuselage door and climbed out uninjured. Raley was the only survivor to emerge from the wreckage of his Fortress.

For ten days immediately after the Piraeus disaster the groups flew numerous missions against targets in Italy in preparation for the next Allied seaborne invasion, which was scheduled to take place at Anzio on the 22nd. The 97th BG lost a Fortress on the 20th while attacking an airfield at Centocelle and another bomber two days later attacking a highway bridge at Pontecorvo. More losses followed on the 24th when the 5th BW attempted to bomb marshalling yards in the Bulgarian capital, Sofia.

The weather over the target was very bad, and in order to drop its bombs one group descended down through a hole in the clouds. Confusion then set in when a second group climbed and performed a 360-degree circuit over Sofia in an attempt to find a new bombing altitude.

As a result of these changes to the mission plan a 2nd BG Fortress was hit by a bomb from a B-17 above it. The bomb struck the No 2 engine and passed straight through the right wing. The pilot of the aircraft, Lt Thomas Grissom, managed to keep his B-17 aloft until it was attacked by fighters, forcing the crew to bale out into captivity. A second Fortress was also lost on this mission, the aircraft being spotted over the Adriatic Sea turning towards Albania, possibly due to battle damage or a shortage of fuel. The entire crew of this B-17 also became PoWs.

Four more fuel-starved bombers were forced to ditch in the Adriatic, the excessive manoeuvring over the target due to the poor weather having run their tanks dry short of their Italian bases. Thanks to a calm sea all of the ditchings were successful and no men were lost.

For some time the Luftwaffe had been moving aircraft from Germany into airfields in northern Italy. As soon as the bombers were detected on

Armed with fragmentation bombs, B-17Fs from the 342nd BS/97th BG form up and head for the Anzio beachhead soon after the 22 January 1944 landing by Allied forces. The aircraft closest to the camera is 42-30056, which was lost during the mission to Brod, in Yugoslavia, on 2 July 1944. Seven of its ten-man crew survived being shot down and became PoWs. The bomber had served exclusively with the 342nd BS since arriving in the MTO in late May 1943

(via Roger Freeman)

radar taking off from their Foggia bases, the Axis pilots simply jumped into their Bf 109s and Fw 190s and set course in any direction to intercept the 'heavies'. On 30 January the USAAF employed a different tactic in order to break this costly routine. The 325th FG, flying P-47 Thunderbolts, took off and headed north 'down on the deck'. Once the fighters got close to the airfields at Udine and Villaorba, they climbed to 15,000 ft. Their surprise was complete, for the German aircraft were still struggling to gain height to react to this sudden radar contact when the P-47s fell on them from above. The 325th had a field day, its pilots being credited with the destruction of 38 enemy aircraft.

Two groups of B-17s then swept in and bombed the airfields, catching all of the aircraft that were still on the ground in the open. Two B-24 units also pounded the airfields, and by the time the bombers had departed the target area over 80 aircraft had been claimed as destroyed on the ground.

The month of February saw a number of memorable missions flown by the 5th BW, although things did not get off to a good start for the 301st BG when the group had to move to Lucera No 8 on the 2nd. The weather was bad and the new airfield was even worse, with the runway being only 100 ft wide and the taxi strips rough and ready. The steel mats were uneven and curled up at the tips, resulting in aircraft having to be towed to their dispersal points. The weather failed to improve, and the steel matting deteriorated even further.

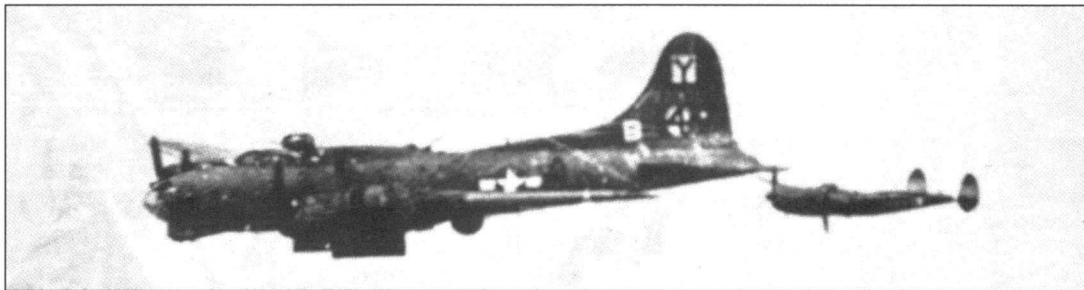
The group tried to get a mission off on 8 February, but of the 40 B-17s scheduled to take off only ten made it aloft due to the curled steel mats. The following day the 301st moved to Foggia Main, where it stayed until Lucera was improved. The group did not return to its new base until 9 April.

Four days earlier, on 4 February, the 97th BG had attacked the docks in the French port city of Toulon. The group was opposed by 20 Bf 109s and Fw 190s, which downed a B-17 (flown by Lt B O Walker) in a head on pass and left a gunner in a second bomber fatally wounded. Their attack on Walker's aircraft is described by the 97th BG's Ped G Magness;

'Approximately one-and-a-half minutes into the bomb run I looked straight ahead and saw two Me 109s making a head-on attack on our aircraft. I called the gunners and they turned their guns to the forward position and began hammering away. The sky was full of tracer bullets from many, many B-17 gunners, and also from the oncoming Me 109s. Since we were being attacked from the rear and the sides, not all the guns in the other Fortresses were pointing forward.

'The rate of closure was very fast, and it appeared that both Me 109s were dead bent on ramming our aircraft. The lead Me 109 peeled off to his right (our left) at the last moment and the upper turret gunner loaded his belly with 0.50-cal bullets and he went down on fire.

'The Me 109 wingman peeled off to his left (Lt Walker's right) and he pulled up the nose of the aircraft into the vertical. The fighter was now standing on its tail, and I always figured that its pilot went into a high speed stall or was dead at the controls. It was an awesome sight, and the Me 109 hit (or actually Lt Walker flew into him) between the Nos 3 and 4 engines of the B-17. Immediately, Walker's bomber burst into flames, with the Me 109 literally glued to the aircraft's wing. The two aircraft hung in mid-air for a split second like a pair of wounded birds, and as we



were already on our bomb run there was nothing that we could do to get out of the way of the inevitable blast of the exploding B-17. I didn't see Lt Walker's aeroplane blow up, but I was told later that it fell about 500 ft before it exploded. This probably saved some of us.'

On 10 February the B-17s targeted German forces that were attempting to repel the Anzio beachhead, ammunition dumps, supplies and trucks at Albino all being attacked. The 97th BG completed its bomb run from an altitude of just 14,000 ft, and the Fortress of Flt Off J L Brennan suffered a number of heavy flak hits in the process, shattering the bomber's nose and setting the right wing on fire. By then Brennan was back over water, so he turned eastwards to allow his crew to bale out over land. Once everyone was out, Brennan and his co-pilot, Lt Myron Shapiro, baled out, and they came down in no-man's-land. Both pilots were soon rescued and led to safety by American paratroopers.

Lt Frank Chaplick's crew from the 97th BG became involved in a life or death 'shoot-out' on Valentine's Day during the mission to the northern Italian city of Verona. On arrival over the target, the weather was so bad that the Fortresses aborted the mission, but the Luftwaffe still attacked. Chaplick's B-17 became the target of perhaps a dozen fighters, and when the bomber lost power in two engines, it skidded out of formation and the German pilots saw the chance of an easy kill.

Their first attack came in from 'six o'clock', whereupon the tail gunner's 'twin fifties' jammed. Noting no fire from this position, the second fighter opened fire from close range, killing the radio operator and one of the waist gunners, and wounding the other waist gunner – two other crew members were also slightly wounded. A third fighter then attacked, and although wounded, top turret gunner Sgt Frank E Bradley immediately exchanged fire and the Bf 109 exploded. As the other fighters continued to harass the bomber, the ball turret gunner shot a second fighter out of the sky, while the navigator and bombardier took care of another.

Minutes later the crew was saved when a flight of P-47s came to the rescue, allowing the able-bodied to attend to the wounded. A third engine failed near Calvi, on Corsica, and Chaplick ordered all the crew except the co-pilot into the radio room in preparation for ditching. He then set the bomber down just off shore, and although the B-17 broke up on impact, all the surviving crew made it into life rafts and were soon rescued.

On 15 February the 5th BW took part in one of the most controversial bombing missions of the war when it attacked the historic monastery at Monte Cassino. The square, four-storey limestone building housed thousands of religious artefacts, as well as one of the most valuable libraries in the whole of Europe. Yet, from its position 1700 ft above the

This rare combat photograph shows a B-17G from the 353rd BS/301st BG in close formation with an escorting P-38. Quite why the Lightning pilot has pulled in so closely to the Fortress remains a mystery, for the latter appears to still be on its bomb run, hence the bomb-bay doors being open. Perhaps the bomber had suffered damage over the target and its crew could not close the doors, hence the need for close protection from the P-38. Or maybe the Lightning pilot had suffered technical problems with his guns, or engines, and was relying on the B-17 gunners to offer him protection instead (USAAF)

Liri valley, the abbey proved to be an ideal defensive strong point from which the Germans could stall the Allied advance on Rome.

A series of frontal attacks by Allied troops achieved very little, and although many high ranking officers and religious officials alike were against the bombing of Monte Cassino, the commanders of the assaulting ground forces claimed that German paratroopers were encamped in the monastery, thus making it a legitimate target.

On 14 February leaflets were dropped on the monastery warning the monks and civilians that the building would be bombed. The following day the weather was good and the mission took place.

The morning of the 15th saw bombers from both the Twelfth and Fifteenth Air Forces sortied, and at 0925 hrs the bombardment began. Some 576 tons of bombs were dropped on the monastery, largely reducing it to rubble. A number of civilian refugees were killed, but the monks and the Abbot took refuge in the basement of the building and emerged unscathed. Fortunately, most of the religious effects were also undamaged, and much of the library survived too. Ironically, once the bombardment was over the Germans then moved into the wreckage of the monastery, having not previously occupied it. Now virtually impregnable to attack, Monte Cassino would remain a thorn in the Allied side for another two months before the Germans were finally forced out.

Back in November 1943, Allied leaders had approved Operation *Argument*, which called for priority targets to be identified and immediately attacked by USAAF and RAF 'heavies'. For much of the winter the weather had prevented *Argument* from truly getting into its stride, but following numerous administrative changes on the ground in the first weeks of 1944, senior Allied commanders pressed for the campaign to get underway. The key changes at the top had seen Gen Carl Spaatz assume control of all USSTAAF forces in Europe, while Lt Gen Jimmy Doolittle had left the MTO to take charge of the Eighth Air Force and Lt Gen Nathan Twining had replaced him within the Fifteenth Air Force.

It had been agreed by Allied political leaders that the invasion of Europe would take place in the early summer of 1944, and for it to be successful air supremacy had to first be wrested from the Germans. Now that the Eighth Air Force was beginning to receive adequate long range fighter support in the form of the North American P-51B/C Mustang, it was imperative that Luftwaffe aircraft manufacturing plants in eastern Europe become the top priority target for the heavy bombers. The Fifteenth Air Force was duly called on to attack these plants from the south, despite the fact that it possessed only a fraction of the escort fighters allocated to the Eighth Air Force.

Argument finally kicked off during the 'Big Week' offensive of 20-25 February 1944. The timing of this campaign could not have been worse for the Fifteenth Air Force, for it was also called on to help the beleaguered forces attempting to break out of the Anzio beachhead. The weather also conspired against the 'heavies' over the Alps. Nevertheless, the 5th BW played its part, with tragic results.

On 20 February the four B-17 groups were sent to bomb the Messerschmitt factory at Regensburg, but they were soon recalled due to solid overcast over the Italian coast. They finally got in on the act two days later when the 97th BG led the 5th BW back to Regensburg, although

only this group and the 301st BG actually found the primary target, onto which they dropped 153 tons of bombs.

The 97th was attacked by fighters during its bomb run and two straggling B-17s were shot down. The 301st encountered only a small force of interceptors and suffered no losses. Fifteen minutes later four groups of B-24s also attacked Regensburg, losing no less than 14 aircraft to German fighters.

The 5th BW sortied again on the 23rd, heading for the Daimler-Puch aircraft components factory at Steyr, in Austria. Poor weather forced yet another abort, however. The wing tried again the following day, and this time the B-17s made it to the target, where they met stiff opposition from the Luftwaffe. Col Frank Allen, CO of the 97th BG, led the 151-strong force that set out on the mission, but again the weather turned bad en route and only 87 B-17s dropped their bombs on the target. P-38s escorted the Fortresses, and the small force of Lockheed fighters did their best to defend the 'heavies' against overwhelming odds – 100+ enemy fighters, primarily Bf 109s, Bf 110s and Me 410s. The accuracy of the bombing varied by group, with some of the results being very good.

Being the lead group obviously helped the 97th BG, for it encountered less fighters and did not lose any aircraft. One crewman was killed and another wounded, and several aircraft were badly damaged.

The mission proved disastrous for the the 2nd BG, however, the group losing no less than 14 B-17s to fighters. The first attacks began at 1215 hrs about five miles north of Fiume, in Italy, and lasted for exactly an hour. Surviving 2nd BG crews estimated that they were attacked by 60 Bf 109s, 25 Bf 110s, 10 Fw 190s, 10 Ju 88s and six Me 410s. The attackers closed to within 50 yards of the bombers, approaching from all directions. Attacks were made both singly and in formations eight abreast, with some of the twin-engined types staying out of gun range and firing rockets. A number of the single-engined fighters also dropped bombs.

The 2nd BG was the last of three B-17 groups to pass over the target. It was meant to have been ahead of a B-24 group that never arrived, so it absorbed the brunt of the attacks being in the vulnerable tail end position. The 429th BS was the only squadron not to have an aircraft shot down, with the 20th BS losing two, the 49th BS all seven of its B-17s and the 967th BS five Fortresses. Lt Victor Marturano, the co-pilot in Lt Joseph J Pausha's crew from the decimated 49th BS, remembers;

'As we crossed the Italian coast, we were attacked by enemy fighters in the vicinity of Udine. Our squadron, being in the tail end position, became the target for the "storm fighter unit" Fw 190s, equipped with 30 mm cannon and well armoured. They attacked from the rear, flying four abreast, firing their cannon and staying out of range of our 0.50-cal machine guns, then rolling over and split-essing, thus exposing their armoured undersides. We took a hit in the No 3 engine, which started burning. Joe activated the extinguisher and feathered the engine. We were now unable to keep up, becoming a sitting duck.

'We jettisoned the bombs, and as they fell away a shell exploded near the cockpit. Fortunately Joe and I were wearing flak vests, and although I took a small piece of shrapnel in the left thigh, I was still able to activate the auto pilot, sound the alarm to abandon ship and give a verbal command to bale out (*text continues on page 49*).

1 B-17F-1-BO 41-24378 *War Eagle* of the 342th BS/97th BG Tafaraoui, Algeria, October 1943



2 B-17F-1-BO 41-24380 *SUPERMAN* of the 340th BS/97th BG, Chateaudun-du-Rhumel, Algeria, Summer 1943



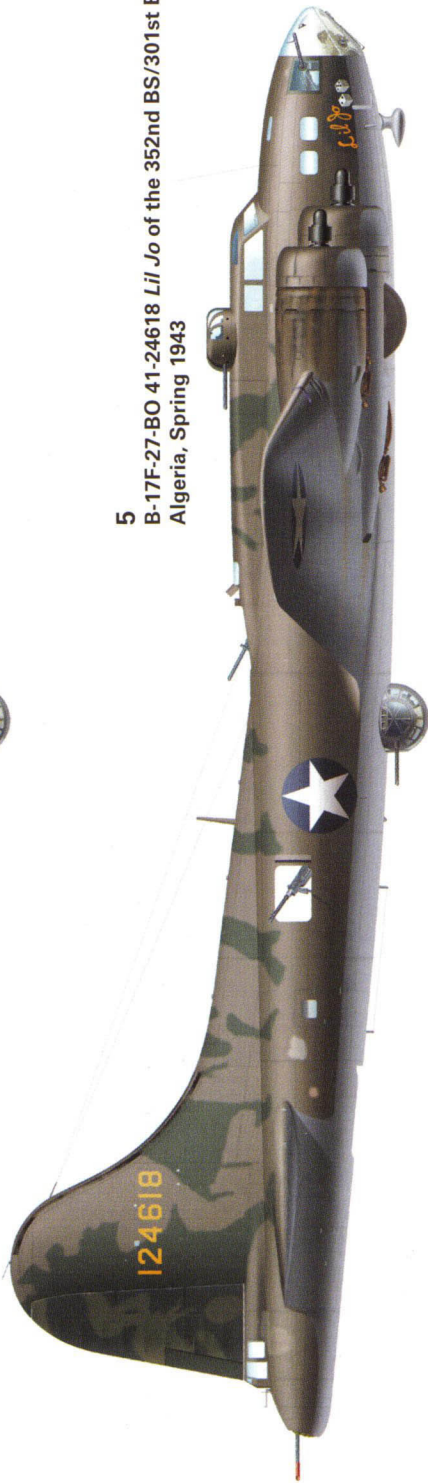
3 B-17F-5-BO 41-24407 *The GOON* of the 32nd BS/301st BG, Oudna, Tunisia, August 1943



4 B-17F-5-BO 41-24408 *PLUTOCRAT(E)* of the 32nd BS/301st BG, Biskra, Algeria, December 1942



5 B-17F-27-BO 41-24618 *Lil Jo* of the 352nd BS/301st BG, Tafaraoui, Algeria, Spring 1943



6 B-17F-10-DL 42-2981 *SINOZIN' SUZAN* of the 414th BS/97th BG, Chateaudun-du-Rhumel, Algeria, 8 May 1943



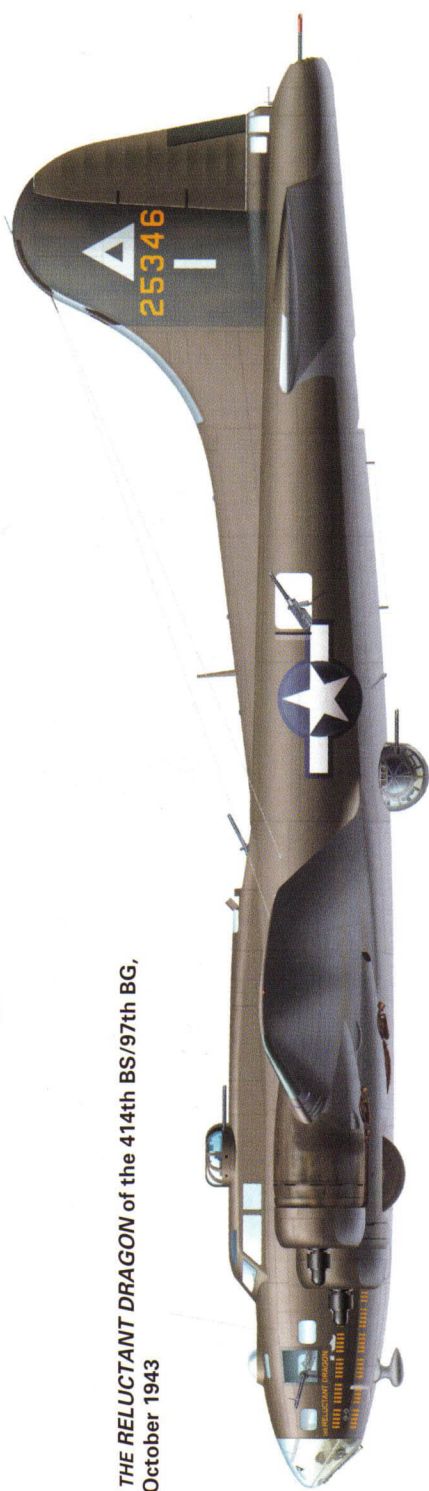
7 B-17F-50-DL 42-3343 "Slick CHICK" 32nd BS/301st BG, Lucera, Italy, January 1944



8 B-17F-40-BO 42-5233 "RIGOR-MORTIS" of the 32nd BS/301st BG, Ain M'Lila, Algeria, January 1943



9 B-17F-50-BO 42-5346 THE RELUCTANT DRAGON of the 414th BS/97th BG, Deplienne, Tunisia, 9 October 1943





10

B-17F-50-BO 42-5350 "Skinhead"/Nosy of the 32nd BS/301st BG, Oudna, Tunisia, September 1943



11

B-17F-50-BO 42-5388 NEVER SATISFIED of the 348th BS/99th BG, Tortorella, Italy, March 1944



12

B-17F-55-BO 42-29473 YANKEE DOODLE of the 347th BS/99th BG, Tortorella, Italy, February 1944

13

B-17F-55-BO 42-29485 *Miss Fury* of the 840th BS/483rd BG, Tortorella, Italy, April 1944



14

B-17F-55-BO 42-29507 of the 773rd BS/463rd BG, Celone, Italy, October 1944



15

B-17F-55-BO 42-29509 of the 840th BS/483rd BG, Tortorella, Italy, April 1944



16

B-17F-55-BO 42-29513 "EL-DIABLO" of the 346th BS/99th BG, Oudna, Tunisia, August 1944



17

B-17F-65-BO 42-29696 Fort Alamo II of the 840th BS/483rd BG, Tortorella, Italy, October 1944



18

B-17F-75-BO 42-29907 Rhomar II of the 49th BS/2nd BG, Massicault, Tunisia, September 1943



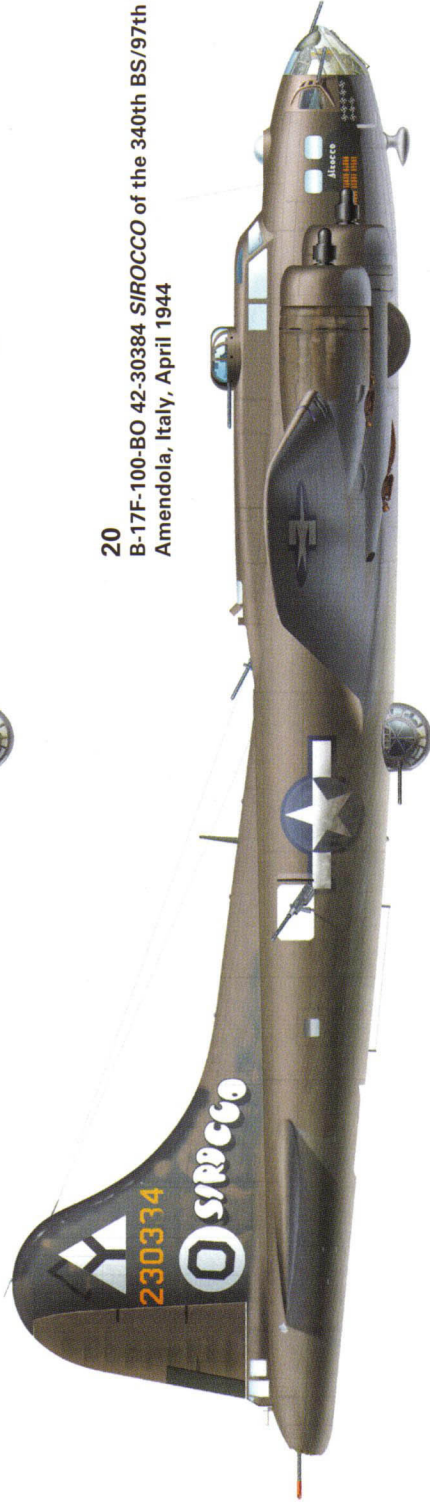
19

B-17F-95-BO 42-30267 *Hustlin' Huzzy* of the 414th BS/97th BG,
Amendola, Italy, February 1944



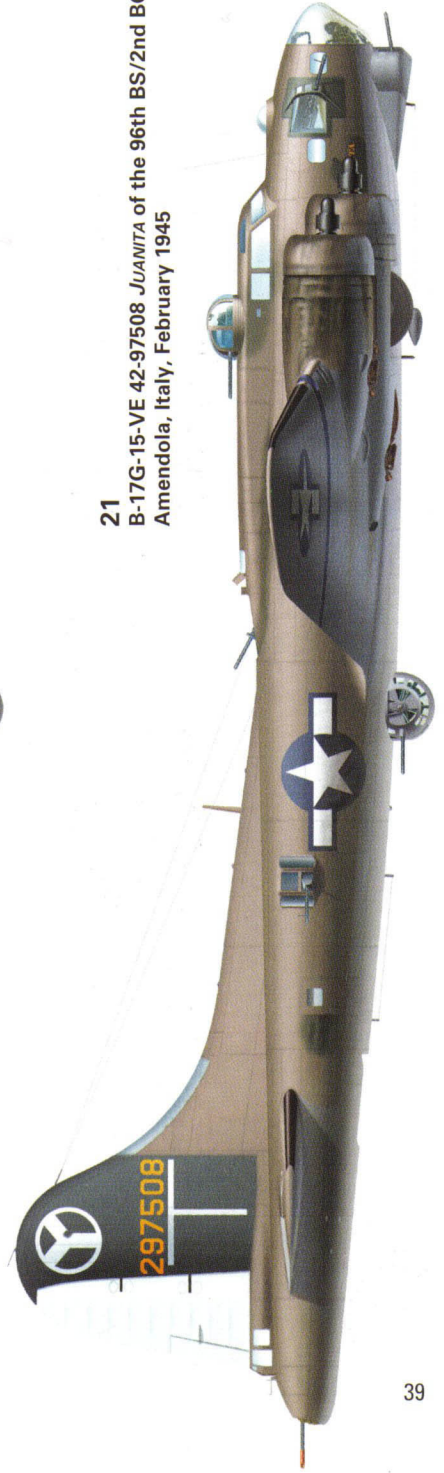
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B-17F-100-BO 42-30384 *SIROCCO* of the 340th BS/97th BG,
Amendola, Italy, April 1944



21

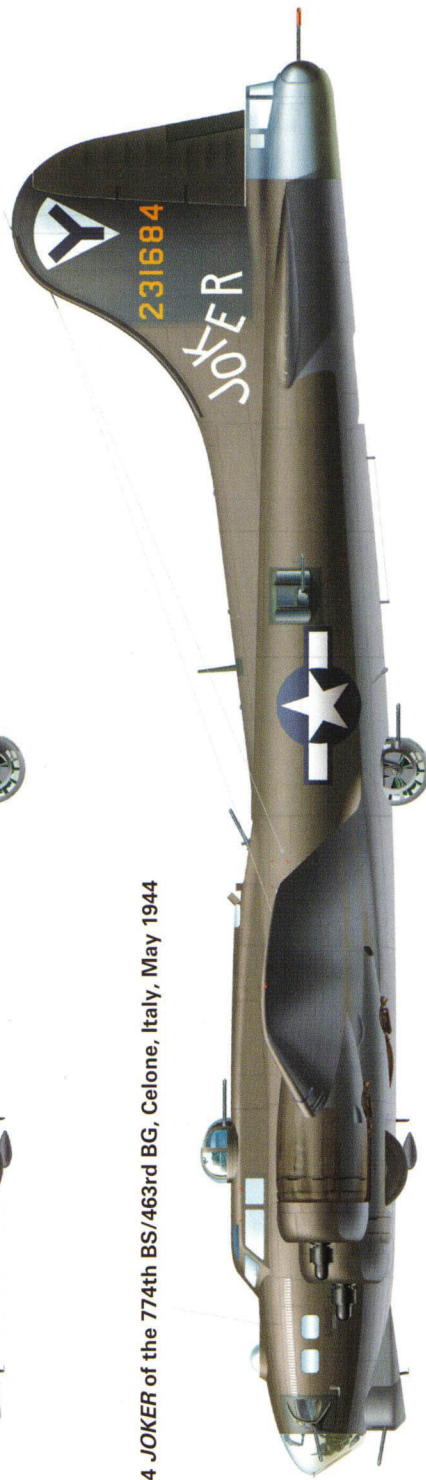
B-17G-15-VE 42-97508 *JUANITA* of the 96th BS/2nd BG,
Amendola, Italy, February 1945



22
 B-17G-20-BO 42-31452 "FIFTY PACKIN MAMA" of the 20th BS/2nd BG, Amendola, Italy, March 1944



23
 B-17G-25-BO 42-31684 JOKER of the 774th BS/463rd BG, Celone, Italy, May 1944



24
 B-17G-25-BO 42-31759 THE HUSTLIN' GAL of the 774th BS/463rd BG, Celone, Italy, April 1944



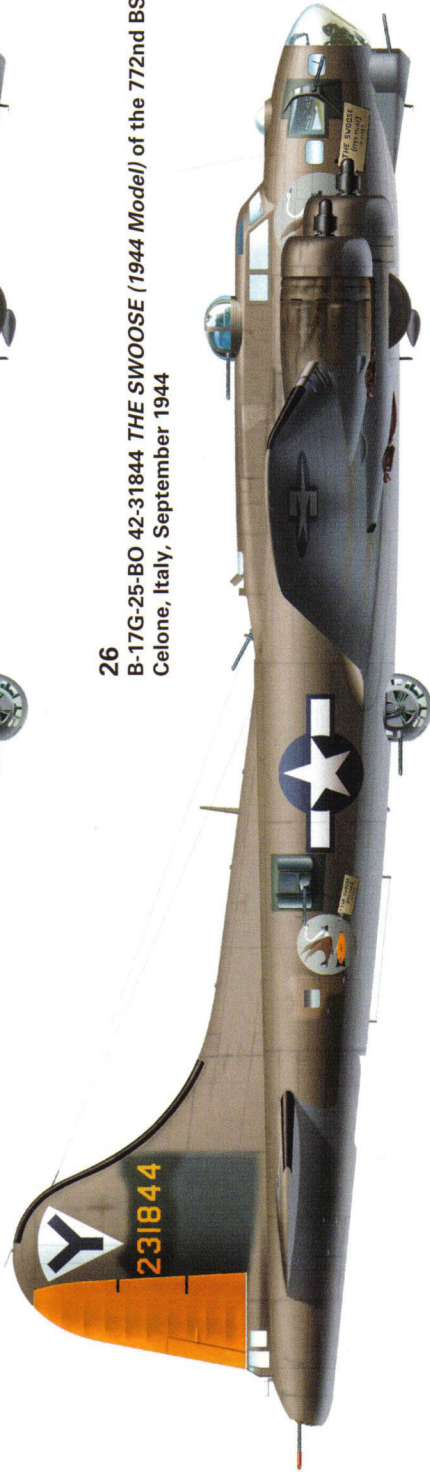
25

B-17G-25-BO 42-31836 *PIG CHASER* of the 772nd BS/463rd BG,
Celone, Italy, June 1944



26

B-17G-25-BO 42-31844 *THE SWOOSE* (1944 Model) of the 772nd BS/463rd BG,
Celone, Italy, September 1944



27

B-17G-30-BO 42-31886 "*amazin' MAZIE*" of the 32nd BS/301st BG, Lucera, Italy, April 1944



28 B-17G-35-BO 42-32044 *GOOD DEAL* of the 815th BS/483rd BG, Tortorella, Italy, January 1945



29 B-17G-30-DL 42-38201 *2nd Patches* of the 346th BS/99th BG, Tortorella, Italy, May 1944



30 B-17G-40-BO 42-97165 "*sleepy-time GAL*" of the 353rd BS/301st BG, Lucera, Italy, June 1944



31

B-17G-35-DL 42-106995 *Anthony J* of the 348th BS/99th BG, Tortorella, Italy, May 1944



32

B-17G-35-DL 42-107143 *SPORT* of the 840th BS/483rd BG, Sterparone, Italy, January 1945



33

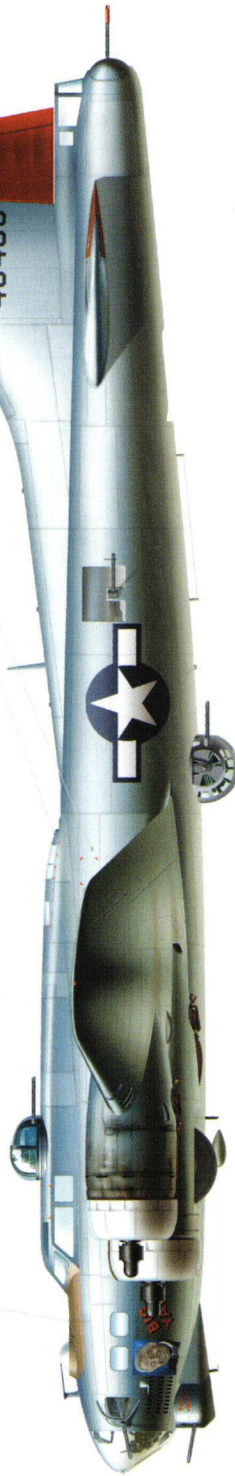
B-17G-50-DL 44-6283 *Mary Lou/Betty Lou* of the 773rd BS/463rd BG, Celone, Italy, March 1945



34 B-17G-50-DL 44-6362 *Jack HALEY'S COMET* of the 32nd BS/301st BG, Lucera, Italy, January 1945



35 B-17G-50-DL 44-6405 *BIG YANK* of the 840th BS/483rd BG, Sterparone, Italy, March 1945



36 B-17G-50-DL 44-6407 *Miss BeHavin'* of the 32nd BS/301st BG, Lucera, Italy, March 1945



37

B-17G-55-DL 44-6542 542 of the 429th BS/2nd BG, Amendola, Italy, December 1944



38

B-17G-50-DL 44-6544 "KWITURBITCHIN II" of the 414th BS/97th BG, Amendola, Italy, March 1945



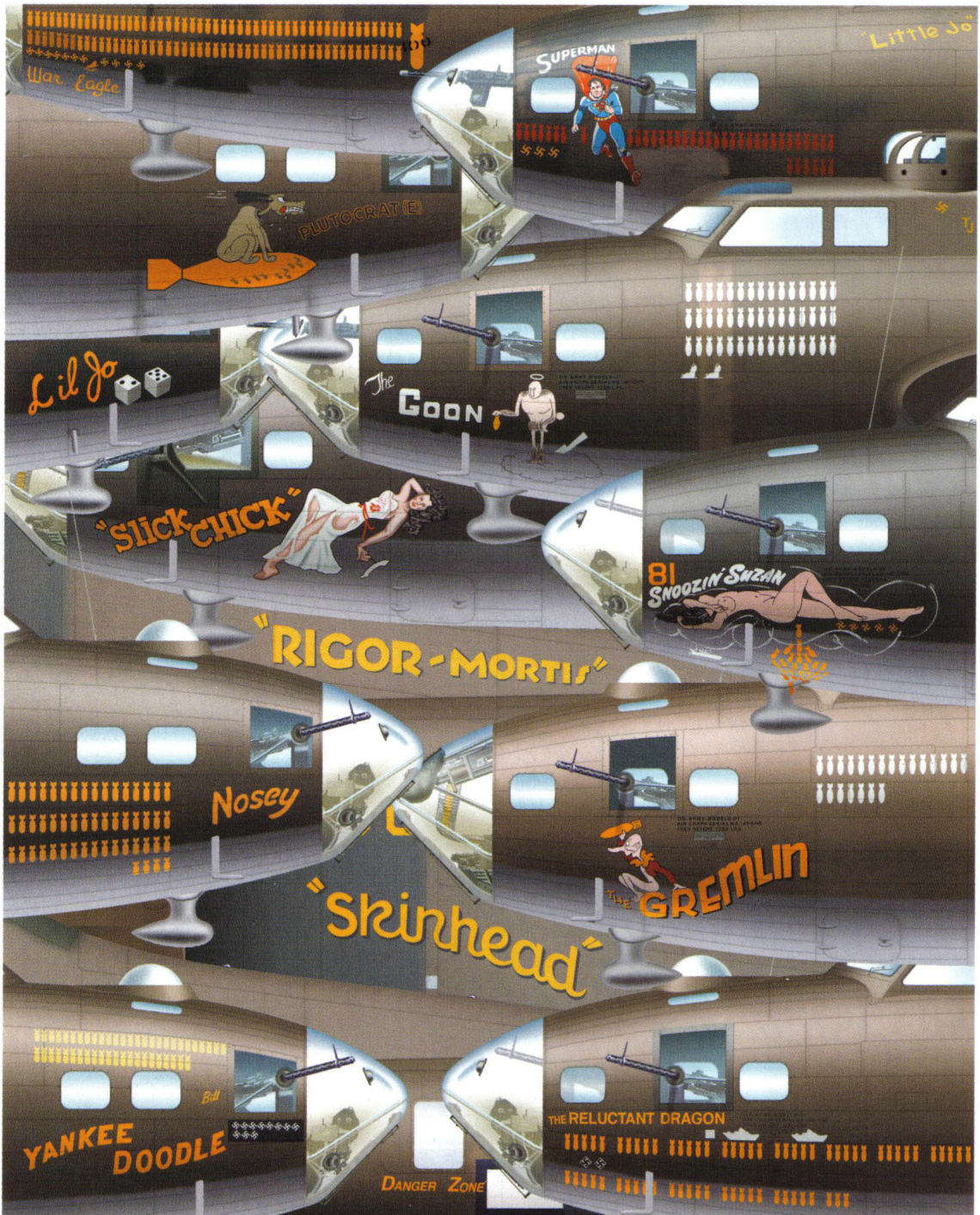
39

B-17G-55-VE 44-8247 *Leading Lady* of the 772nd BS/463rd BG, Celone, Italy, February 1945

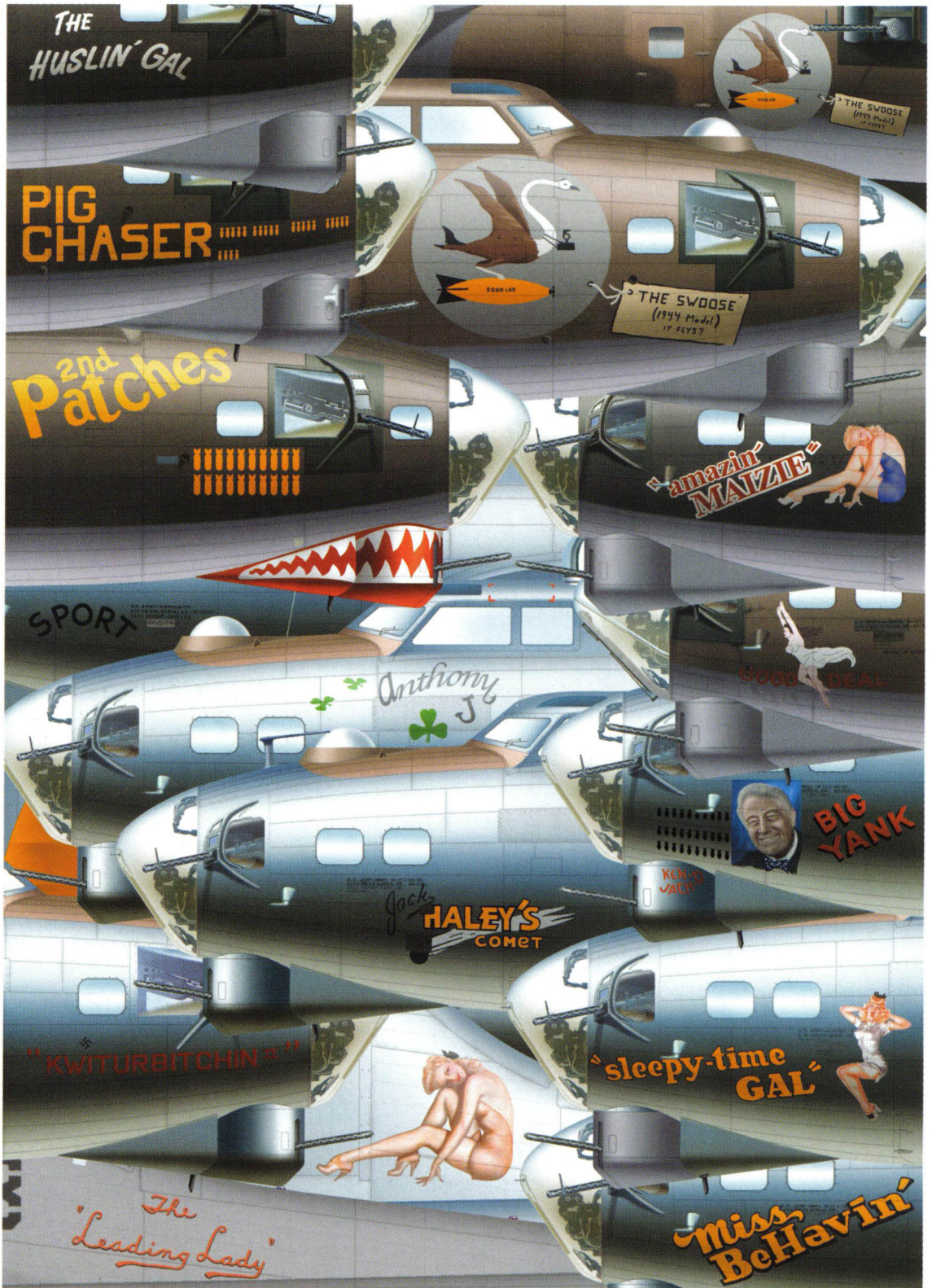


This nose art section has been specially created by profile artist Mark Styling so as to better illustrate the colourful artworks worn by the Flying Fortresses featured in profile within this volume. These drawings have been produced

following exhaustive cross-referencing with published bomb group histories, correspondence with surviving veterans and their families and the detailed study of original photographs.









Now the pilot of this 1st FG P-38J has definitely pulled in closer to his charges (B-17s from the 2nd BG), his oil-streaked starboard engine nacelle and tail boom, along with a feathered propeller, revealing the catastrophic failure of one of the fighter's twin Allison V-1710 engines. Damaged fighters would often seek out the bombers for protection on their way home (USAAF)

'Minutes later the the fighters broke off to attack someone else. Having seen the first 'chutes appear from our bomber, they decided that they had made their kill and there was more work to be done elsewhere. As I snapped on my check pack, I thought I had better look to see if everyone was out. Carrying my portable oxygen bottle, I walked back through the bomb-bay to the waist, where I found the ball gunner still in his turret.

'I picked up the crank, which was used to move the turret when there was no power, and pounded on the hatch to get the gunner's attention. He responded by opening the turret hatch, and I told him to bale out. As he stepped out of the turret into the waist, a lone Fw 190 pulled up abreast of our left wing, maybe wanting to get a closer look at the B-17 before it fell out of the sky. He had not been fired on during his approach, so he must have felt that he was safe—we had either bailed out or were dead. On seeing the Fw 190, the ball gunner (Sgt Phil Ashook) grabbed the left waist gun and fired at the fighter, shattering its canopy and killing the pilot. The aircraft fell away in a spin. The gunner then snapped on his chest pack and left via the waist door.'

Veteran 49th BS pilot Lt James D Wise was flying with Flt Off George Durney (in B-17F 41-24618 *Lil Jo*) on this fateful mission, having already completed 41 combat sorties to date. He later recalled;

'We were crossing the Alps, and it was here that they decided to hit us. I looked up and there were 21 fighters in line abreast coming at us. After the first pass I don't know how many of us were left. They would come in six or eight at a time in criss-crossing waves at our rear. We were set upon by between 120 and 130 of them.

'Early in the game we took a bad hit in the left wing and lost the No 2 engine. We didn't have to feather it but lost a lot of power, forcing us to salvo our bombs in order to stay near the squadron. The glass above and behind Durney came through at this point and his head started bleeding.

I thought that he might be hit so I shook him, and he shook his head back.

‘Although we were both damn busy, I still saw a number of our aeroplanes veer away on fire. I couldn’t see much of the fighting though, as it was all happening behind us. Far below a B-17 was gliding down apparently okay – maybe his wheels were down and there were no fighters near him. After this we swung our two wingmen into trail as per our instructions at briefing. At the IP (Initial Point) on the bomb run we lost one of them. We were No 5 Sqn, and I didn’t have any idea how No 6 Sqn was doing, but could make a damn good guess. The flak over the target was welcome, as the fighters broke off for a short while.

‘It wasn’t long before all the B-17s behind us were gone. The No 3 engine had lost power and our bomb-bay doors wouldn’t close, causing more drag, and in no time we were dropping back ourselves. I quickly scanned the cockpit gauges and told Durney I didn’t think that we could make it. Thirteen aeroplanes had gone down. I called Group Leader and asked, no, pleaded with them to slow down.

‘Slim Campbell came down from his top turret and said he was out of ammunition, as were two other gunners. The rest were also running out fast. We were at 19,000 ft and losing altitude fast. Most of the controls were shot out. A 20 mm shell then exploded nearby and hit the top turret that Slim had just climbed out of.’

Moments later the B-17 crew thought that they had been saved when a flight of P-38s was sighted, yet despite being called they did not respond.

‘The fighters made two more passes. On the first pass they got Dumey’s controls and he told me to get his ’chute. While I was getting it they hit us again and great flames rolled up inside the bomb-bay. It was time to go. The navigator later told me that there was not a piece of Plexiglas left in the the bomber’s nose.’

The 2nd BG was not the only group to suffer losses that day, for the 301st BG had preceded the 2nd to the target, and fighters had also struck its formation. On the bomb run, Lt Jack LaForge’s Fortress was hit before getting its bombs away, forcing him out of formation with smoke billowing from the bomb-bay. The pilot immediately salvoed his load.

The B-17 flown by Charles Abramson was also crippled on the bomb run, the Fortress dropping out of formation with its No 4 engine burning. Some 20 miles north of Steyr seven parachutes were seen to exit from the aircraft. Finally, 30 miles north of Lucera, Lt Cecil Robertson banked too late in his damaged Fortress whilst attempting to avoid a mountain and slammed into it whilst at a height of 600 ft. No one survived.

The 99th BG also suffered a single loss on 24 February when it became separated from the bomber stream and attacked Fiume instead.



A happy man indeed! Having just survived his 50-mission tour of the MTO with the 2nd BG, gunner T/Sgt John Zoebelin poses in front of the *Wabash Cannon Ball*. The latter boasted over 100 missions (and nine fighter kills) on its nose when this photograph was taken on 9 December 1943 (USAAF)

Despite these terrible losses, the 5th BW attacked the Prufening aircraft factory at Regensburg the following day. The 2nd BG led the way with just ten aircraft, followed by the 99th, the 301st and the 97th.

Once again Luftwaffe fighters attacked in great numbers, with the Fortress crews from the 2nd BG first encountering the enemy as they turned in on their bomb run. The aircraft flown by Lt Lloyd Withers was intercepted by three Bf 109s, as Lt Edward Wronkoski reported;

'I saw three Me 109s come in on the nose of 42-31416 from "twelve o'clock high". The first two attacked and peeled off but the third came boring in, firing fiercely. He passed over '416 not ten feet above it. It was then that I saw Lt Withers fighting the fire that was enveloping the cockpit. The aircraft seemed partially under control, although within seconds '416 commenced a steep dive. After dropping approximately 2000 ft, it pulled up. We then pulled into position and I lost sight of the aeroplane.'

Unfortunately, only Withers and two gunners got out of the bomber.

The 2nd BG also lost two other B-17s in a mid-air collision, the accident being caused by a damaged bomber that slowly began to fall out of position within the main formation. As it descended, the B-17 chopped off the top of the tail of the aircraft below it, and both Fortresses spun away. Two of the gunners were killed in one of the aircraft while the entire crew of the other stricken bomber somehow survived.

The two squadrons of the 99th BG which made up the balance of the first wave were also set upon in the target area, losing four of their number to either Luftwaffe fighters or intense flak over the target.

The most severe losses on this day were inflicted on the 301st BG, however, which lost 11 B-17s over enemy territory and another two in forced landings closer to home. One 301st gunner who survived the action stated, 'During the return flight to base I could see fires dotted all over the Alps. The place was covered with wrecked burning aeroplanes'.

The attacks against the 301st were very intense, involving approximately 150 German fighters. Well before the group had approached the target area, crews had spotted a large gaggle of enemy fighters above them at 'seven o'clock high'. They initially attacked two straggling Fortresses before tearing into the main 301st BG formation. Most attacks occurred in line abreast and from the rear, with often as many as 20 fighters concentrating on one squadron. Fighters accounted for all 13 B-17s lost on the mission, with most aircraft initially being hit in the engines, which started uncontrollable fires.

Ten full crews and part of an eleventh baled out over Germany, two aircraft ditched – one 30 miles west of Fiume and the other off the Anzio beachhead – and the thirteenth crash-landed, killing one crew member. Returning aircraft also brought back two mortally wounded crewmen.

The crew that ditched off Anzio was very lucky to survive, for the bomber had been so badly shot up that the pilot, Lt Thomas, had actually given the order to bale out over Germany. The navigator immediately jumped, and as the bombardier attempted to don his parachute and follow him, his 'chute opened prematurely and was sucked out of the aircraft, leaving the crewman still in the bomber. At this point Thomas decided to see if there was some way of getting the B-17 safely down.

The pilot lowered his landing gear, which was a universally recognised signal of surrender. German fighters soon began to formate with the B-17

in an effort to force the bomber down onto a Luftwaffe airfield. However, instead of following this procedure Thomas suddenly raised the gear and headed as fast as he could for nearby Switzerland! The crew then began throwing out whatever they could in an effort to lighten the aircraft – even the ball turret was jettisoned. As the bomber overflew Switzerland, Thomas decided to press on to southern France, and once over the Mediterranean he flew south until he could ditch off the Anzio beachhead. The remaining crew members were all rescued by patrol boats.

Lt Robert Snyder and his crew also experienced an unusual return after their Fortress lost its No 3 engine (its propeller could not be feathered and ran away) soon after leaving the target. The oxygen system then partially failed, forcing Snyder to rapidly descend to lower altitude. As the pilot lost height, he was unaware that the intercom system to the rear of the aircraft had also quit. Oblivious to the oxygen problem, and fearing that their B-17 was in a terminal dive, six of the crew baled out! A German fighter also followed the Fortress down but for some reason it never attacked. Despite major damage, Snyder nursed his aircraft home.

Six of the 301st BG Fortresses that did make it back to base had suffered major damage, and three others were less seriously shot up. Not a single B-17 returned without some form of damage. For its outstanding performance on this mission, the 301st was awarded its second DUC.

When it came to winning such honours, however, the 2nd BG surpassed all other 5th BW groups by earning two DUCs on consecutive days – the first for the Steyr mission on 24 February and the second for the Regensburg raid on the 25th.

The latter mission brought 'Big Week' to a bloody end. Just how much these maximum effort strikes achieved has been argued about ever since. There is no doubt that the German aircraft factories had been damaged, but nowhere near to the extent that had been hoped for. Yet, there was no doubting the losses that the Luftwaffe had suffered defending these targets. The number of German aircraft that were claimed to have been shot down in the air battles was greatly overstated, but at war's end Luftwaffe records confirmed that of the 303 aircraft lost during this period, 198 were single-engined fighters.

The losses suffered by the Allied heavy bomber force had also been high, but not as high as had been feared prior to 'Big Week'. The Eighth Air Force lost 157 bombers, or 4.8 per cent of those sortied, the RAF 131 bombers, or 5.7 per cent, and the Fifteenth Air Force 90 bombers, or 14.6 per cent. The latter figure clearly shows that the Fifteenth suffered both from poor weather and a gross lack of suitable long range escort fighters.

March 1944 brought a change of emphasis for the 5th BW, with most sorties being flown in support of Operation *Strangle* – the campaign designed to cut channels of communications and hinder the flow of men and machinery from Germany into Italy. Rail links, highways, bridges and motor transport were the bombers' primary targets.

Airfields in northern Italy also became important targets once again, as the 5th BW attempted to destroy the fighters and base installations that were being used to intercept the Fifteenth Air Force bombers en route to targets in Austria, Germany and the Balkans.

One of the most significant missions during *Strangle* took place on 18 March, and once again the 2nd BG was in the thick of the action. The

Another multi-mission veteran, B-17F 42-29472 of the 349th BS/99th BG rolls along the metal runway at Tortorella in early 1944, sending water and slush streaming from beneath the bomber. Flown exclusively by the 349th BS, this aircraft arrived in the MTO in March 1943 and had completed 111 missions by the time it was converted into a weather ship in late 1944. Nicknamed *Sweater Girl*, the B-17 returned to the USA in September 1945 and was scrapped shortly afterwards (USAAF)

group had been sent to attack Villaorba, where it dropped 20-lb fragmentation bombs. A number of aircraft were destroyed or damaged on the ground, as were hangars, workshops and fuel and servicing facilities.

The Luftwaffe engaged the bombers some 30 minutes from the target, and continued to pursue the B-17s as they fled back south once they had dropped their bombs. In addition to the usual quota of single-engined Bf 109s and Fw 190s, the B-17 crews also reported the presence of numerous twin-engined types. Of particular interest were a number of Ju 88s that stayed outside the B-17s' gun range and lobbed rockets into the formation. T/Sgt Raymond Terrell of the 20th BS remembers;

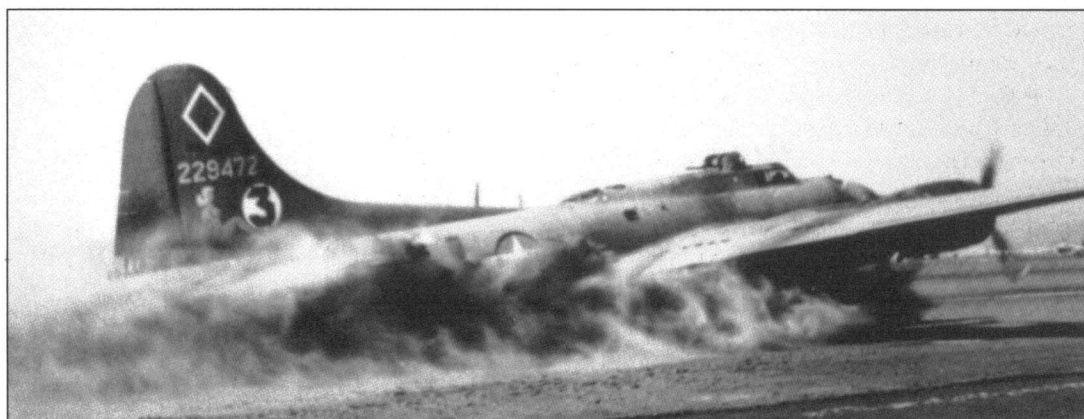
'When enemy fighters attacked our formation, eight Ju 88s came in from "six o'clock level". Four of them attacked our squadron and four others attacked the No 3 squadron. From a distance of approximately 600 yards, the Ju 88s began firing rockets at the formation. From what I observed, I would say the enemy fired one rocket at a time, each Ju 88 taking turns from right to left. I believe the third or fourth rocket scored a direct hit on the tail section of B-17 42-31749 and exploded on contact. The explosion destroyed the left horizontal stabiliser and most of the vertical stabiliser. The aeroplane immediately nosed up in a manoeuvre that resembled a chandelle. It then went into a falling leaf spin, and I lost sight of it as it fell from my line of vision. I saw no 'chutes leave the ship.'

Only one crew member succeeded in escaping from this aircraft. Two more B-17s were lost following attacks by enemy aircraft.

While the 2nd BG was bombing the airfield at Villaorba, the 97th BG went after the base at Udine, where it too encountered some 50 to 75 enemy fighters that blasted the B-17s with cannon and rocket fire. Three more bombers were lost, one of which was seen to crash into the centre of the town of Udine itself.

The following day the 5th BW was again sent to bomb the ball bearing plant at Steyr. Poor weather was encountered en route, so the wing headed instead to the Austrian town of Klagenfurt to attack its airfield. As usual, the Luftwaffe was up in force, and interceptions commenced on the bombers 30 minutes before the B-17s arrived over the target area.

The first wave of 20 to 30 fighters made two passes on the B-17s before they were chased off by the bombers' escorts. The second wave of 20 to 25 fighters proved more difficult to shake, and they stayed with the 2nd BG for 48 minutes, up until the group dropped its bombs. The second wave





lobbed in rockets and then finished off its attacks with 20 mm cannon rounds. Two Fortresses from the 2nd BG fell victim to the fighters, whilst a third was claimed by flak over the target itself.

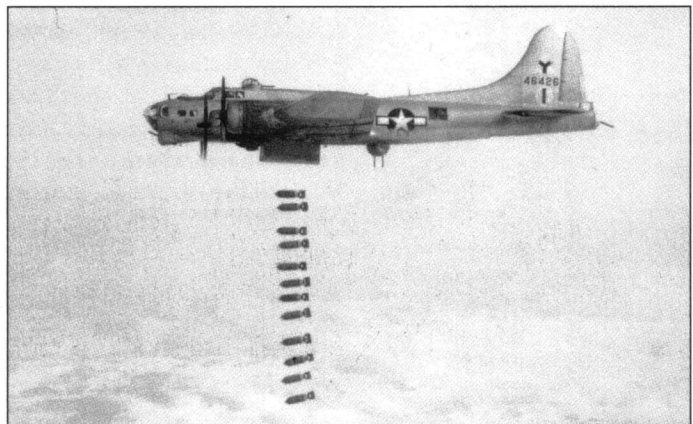
One of the aircraft lost was flown by Lt Keith Chambers, who departed on the mission with the rest of the 2nd BG, only to return to base shortly afterwards to have a crew chief on the line hastily remove the protective case from the all important pitot tube. The pilot then took off again in an attempt to catch up with his formation, although as he climbed for altitude he saw that this would be impossible. Chambers then spotted a formation from the 97th BG just ahead of him, so he decided to join up with them. Pulling up alongside the tightly packed B-17s, he attempted to formate off the right wing of a bomber on the outside of the group but misjudged his approach speed and slid into its wing instead. Chambers' B-17 broke in half and fell away. The 97th BG machine banked off to the left seemingly out of control, and it continued down until it crashed into the water. There were no survivors from either bomber.

A veteran of these early battles in 1944 was 97th BG pilot Ped Magness, who witnessed an unusual event during the course of a bombing raid in late March;

'A B-17 was hit and on fire and the crew was baling out. One of the airmen pulled his ripcord too fast and his parachute opened and caught in the bomb-bay. The man was hanging and the wind was whipping him against the aircraft. The war, and time, seemed to hesitate, and everyone stopped shooting. An Me 109 then flew into the middle of the B-17s. The gunners were amazed at the guts the German displayed, as he must have known that all our of guns were pointed at him.

B-17s from the 353rd BS/301st BG lead a large formation of 5th BW bombers over the Alps, bound for an undisclosed target, in early 1944. Closest to the camera is B-17F 42-3026, which previously served with the 346th BS/99th BG – note that the 301st BG's Y and 3 markings have simply been painted over the 99th's diamond and roman I (USAAF)

'Bombs gone!' A dozen 250 'pounders' fall away from 341st BS/ 97th BG B-17G 44-6426 in September 1944. Bombing altitude for the 5th BW was usually no lower than 26,000 ft. The ball turret gunner has pointed his guns directly downwards, thus giving him the best view for watching the fall of the bombs. He then reported what he had seen to the pilot (USAAF)





Fire fighters from Air Service Command jump to their posts in the 'three alarm' tradition as smoke and flame pour from 341st BS/97th BG B-17G 44-6195 at Amendola on 12 March 1945. Although the crew successfully escaped the blaze unhurt, the bomber was consumed by the conflagration. Having completed yet another mission to Austria, the bomber had burst into flames just minutes away from base. 44-6195 had served with the 97th BG since its arrival from the USA on 10 July 1944 (USAAF)

B-17F 42-29509 "BAD PENNY" lived up to its nickname and always came back. Indeed, it completed no fewer than 126 missions between February 1943 and March 1945. The bulk of these sorties (114) were flown with the 416th BS/99th BG, the bomber then transferring to the 840th BS/483rd BG on 31 March 1944. Gunners serving aboard this combat veteran also claimed 14 enemy fighters shot down (USAAF)

The fighter pilot eased up to that boy and shot him. Not a shot was fired back. He peeled off and came out of there, our gunners letting him go, and then the war started again.

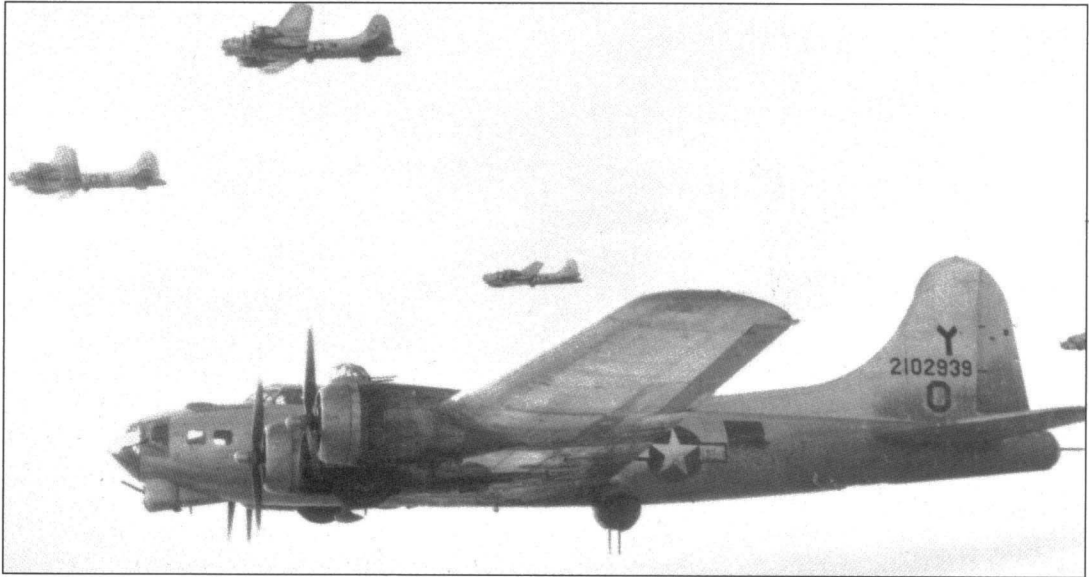
'The boy was doomed to a horrible death. We didn't want to shoot him. Indeed, we were trying to get away from him because we knew that his B-17 was going to blow up, and the resulting fragments would have struck a lot of us. It was the humane thing to do, and that was why no one shot the German down.'

March 1944 also saw the operational debut of 'Chaff', which was designed to help save the lives of B-17 crews. An idea borrowed from RAF Bomber Command, 'Chaff' was simply strips of aluminium foil (similar to Christmas tree tinsel). When deployed in 2-lb packages of 3000 strips in the space of a minute, it appeared as a bomber-sized return on enemy radar screens. German flak and fighter control, as well as airborne radar, were all adversely affected by the strips, and when very large amounts of 'Chaff' was dropped, ground radar could be blanked out completely. The most difficult problem with 'Chaff' was that it took several tons of aluminium to produce enough strips for just one mission!

On 28 March the 99th BG swapped all of its B-17Gs for the B-17Fs of the 2nd BG, thus allowing the latter group to become the first unit in the Fifteenth Air Force to be fully equipped with the G-model Fortress.

The 483rd BG also began arriving in the MTO in late March. The group had trained at McDill Field, in Florida, and then travelled overseas





on the southern route via South America, Ascension Island and North Africa. In view of the fact that the 483rd's base at Sterparone was not yet ready upon its arrival in-theatre, various squadrons were farmed out to the four veteran groups of the 5th BW. The new group was also in for one more big surprise when the 99th BG took the 483rd's brand new B-17Gs and exchanged them for its own war-weary F-models!

It was back to the Steyr ball bearing plant on 2 April, the 97th BG becoming involved in a frantic air battle that saw a large number of Bf 110s firing rockets at the bombers. The engagement lasted for at least 30 minutes, and cost the 97th three B-17s. The 301st BG was also attacked by the same enemy force, which downed two of their number.

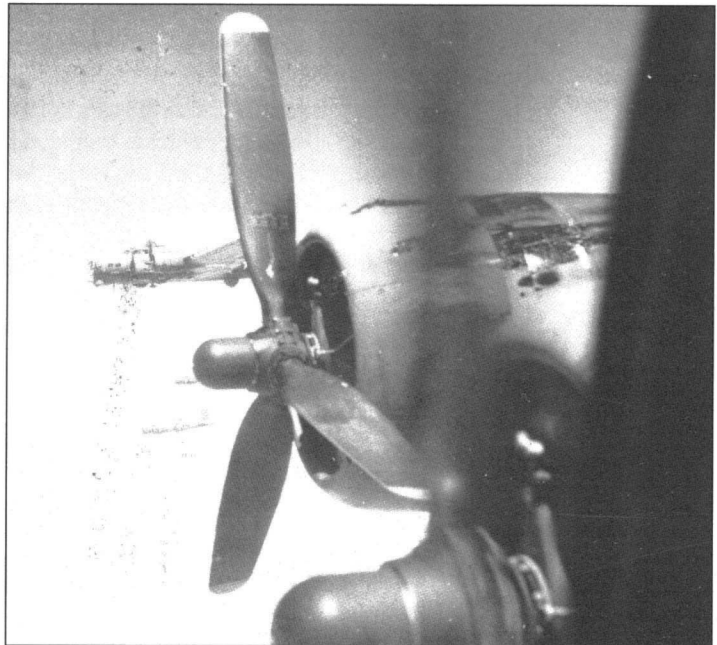
The first aircraft to be lost had fallen behind the main formation during the bomb run when it suffered an engine failure. Shortly thereafter it nosed up, stalled and went into a spin, falling away until the fuselage broke in two. Several men were seen to fall from the wreckage but no parachutes were reported.

Bf 109s then pounced on a second Fortress, which lost part of its left wing all the way to the No 1 engine. The B-17 spun away, and again no parachutes were seen.

All four groups were sent to the Hungarian capital Budapest the following day to strike at the Dunai aircraft factory, which was licence-producing Me 210s. The 99th and 301st BGs put 40 per cent of their bombs within 1000 ft of the aiming

B-17Gs from the 340th BS/97th BG head north for Austria in the late summer of 1944. The aircraft closest to the camera was lost in a mid-air collision with B-17G 44-6757 during the mission to Vienna on 16 March 1944. Only three crewmen from 42-102939 survived the subsequent ditching in the Adriatic (USAAF)

'One fan feathered' – a battle-damaged B-17 from the 463rd BG struggles home, its No 4 engine streaming oil (USAAF)





This unidentified B-17G from the 483rd BG had its No 2 engine ripped off its mounts in a crash-landing that almost certainly resulted in the bomber being salvaged. The date and location of this incident also remain unrecorded (USAAF)

Gleaming in the warm sunlight, B-17G 44-8020 was the lead PFF 'Mickey' ship for the 49th BS/2nd BG from 23 July 1944 until VE-Day. Seen dropping 500-lb RDX bombs just weeks after its arrival in the MTO, the aircraft has its radar 'dustbin' extended, although the lack of cloud on this particular day would surely have meant that the bombardiers attacked using their Norden sights. Lt Col Abbey was at the controls of 44-8020 when this photograph was taken (USAAF)



marshalling yards at Ploesti, in Rumania. This was the first time that the vast refinery complex at this site had been targeted since the highly publicised low level mission by North African-based B-24s in August 1943. The bulk of the bombing force for this mission was made up of B-24s, and they were the targets for most of the 125 to 150 Axis fighters that attacked the 'heavies' that day – eight of their number were downed by the enemy.

The 301st BG also lost a single B-17 when Lt Jess Coppedge's aircraft had an engine knocked out by flak during the bomb run. The Fortress dropped its bomb in the target area, but once away from Ploesti the crew discovered that they could not feather the damaged engine's propeller, which effectively acted like an air brake. The B-17's airspeed dropped to just 140 mph, and it soon fell far behind the main formation. Six to eight Bf 110s then attacked the bomber as it attempted to reach Turkey, making three passes which started fires in the waist, bomb-bay and left wing tanks. The crew quickly baled out.

The 483rd BG had moved into its new base at Sterparone when the group finally flew its first mission on 12 April, the unit being sent on something of a 'milk run' to Split, in Yugoslavia, in its old war-weary B-17Fs. That same day 99th BG crews flew a more challenging mission to Wiener Neustadt in their shiny new B-17Gs that they had acquired from the 483rd just days earlier. They were attacked by the Luftwaffe, but on this occasion the bombers' inflicted losses on the fighters, rather than the other way round.

13 April saw the 5th BW attack the Hungarian Railway Carriage and Engineering Works at Győr, where Bf 109Gs were being built – this was the most important factory of its kind in Hungary. RDX (Very Highly Explosive) bombs were dropped, and these caused widespread destruction. Flak was light, but around 30 Hungarian Bf 109s set about the 'heavies' with a vengeance, and by the time the

P-38s arrived to chase them away, the enemy fighters had already downed four 2nd BG B-17s.

The 5th BW returned to Ploesti again on 15 April, the groups employing Pathfinder (PFF) radar-equipped lead B-17s for the first time, which allowed the bombers to drop their ordnance accurately despite the target being shrouded in cloud.

RAF Bomber Command had pioneered radar-guided bombing with its H2S system in 1943, this device presenting the crew with a map-like image of the ground below them via a cathode tube. The new equipment met with some success, enabling the British to improve the accuracy of their night bombing. The Eighth Air Force initially made use of H2S as well, whilst simultaneously developing its own airborne radar system which was variously designated H2X, AN/APS-15, 'Mickey Mouse' or simply 'Mickey'. This system employed a radar antenna fitted into a retractable dome that was carried by the B-17 in place of the ball turret.

From the very start of its strategic bombing campaign in Europe, the USAAF had insisted on attacking targets visually, but by the spring of 1944, senior Allied commanders believed that it was better to bomb than not to bomb, and 'Mickey' provided them with the means to do this.

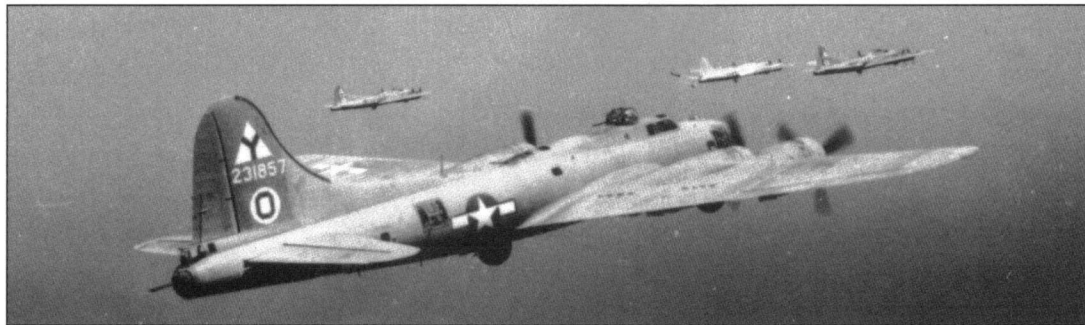
The initial PFF attack on Ploesti did not produce the levels of destruction that would have been possible had the bombardiers been able to see their target, but at least the mission had not been aborted.

April also saw the arrival of a new and highly secret bomb at the 301st BG's Lucera home. This device was fitted with a set of ailerons, a control unit, radio receiver, strut antenna, gyro stabiliser and a guidance flare, all of which was mounted onto the tail of a standard 1000-lb bomb.

A few seconds after the weapon was released, the flare ignited in the tail of the bomb, enabling the bombardier to follow its downward arc. Gyros kept the device from rolling while the bombardier guided it laterally by means of a radio control box mounted next to the bombsight. The

Two B-17Gs from the 416th BS/99th BG head over the majestic Alps, en route to targets in Austria. To have had to bale out over such topography would have resulted in almost certain death. Much has been written about Eighth Air Force bombers getting across their return mission 'obstacles' – the English Channel or the North Sea – but practically nothing has appeared in print describing how crippled Fifteenth Air Force 'heavies' struggled to cross the Alps when heading for home. The lead bomber in this two-ship formation is 44-6380, which completed 79 missions with the group between August 1944 and VE-Day (USAAF)





A newly-delivered B-17G 'Mickey' ship guides three Olive Drab veterans from the 340th BS/97th BG northwards in the early spring of 1944. B-17G 42-31857, in the foreground, served with the 340th BS from January 1944 until it was shot down by flak on the raid against Wollersdorf airfield, in Austria, on 29 May (USAAF)

weapon was officially known as AZON (Azimuth Only), and six crews, and their specially modified aircraft, joined the 301st BG's 419th BS in mid April. When not flying AZON missions, these crews flew combat sorties in unmodified B-17Gs.

The first dedicated AZON operation was flown on 17 April, and as a result of navigational problems the B-17s overshot their target and were jumped by Fw 190s. Some were hit, but all returned to base with their bomb loads still intact.

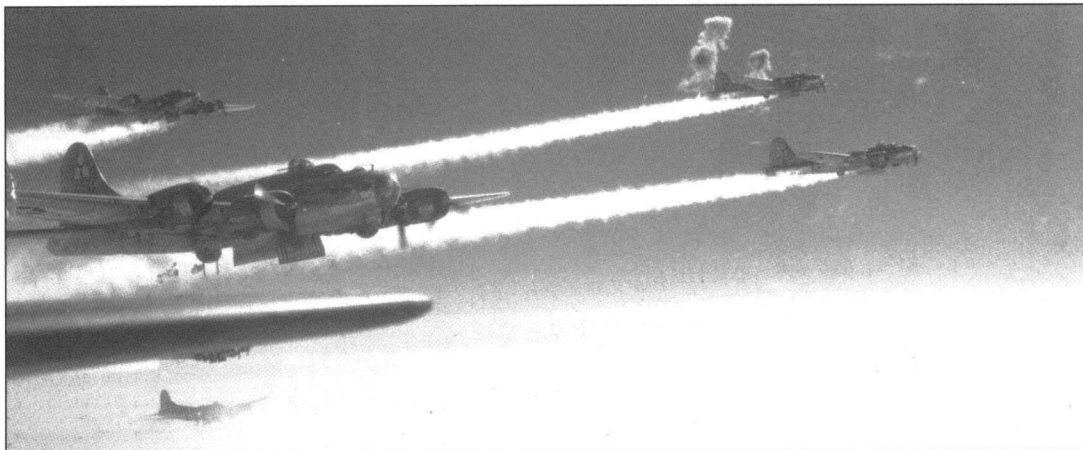
Several other missions were flown by the AZON aircraft, but the results varied greatly. Initially, their scores were good, but then they fell off dramatically. The general consensus was that the bomb drops were too complex for one bombardier to handle alone.

Several B-17 groups from the 5th BW ventured to the Bf 109 assembly complex at Wiener Neustadt yet again on 23 April. Whilst over the target the aircraft flown by 97th BG CO Col Jacob E Smart was hit by flak, knocking out its No 1 engine and setting fire to a 12-ft section of its right wing. Smart told the crew that if anyone wanted to bale out they should do so now, but everyone stayed aboard. A short while later he salvoed the bombs, allowing six crew members to jump out through the empty bomb-bay once the bomber was over Yugoslavia. Within two hours Marshal Josep Tito's partisans had rounded up the men, and they were duly returned to Italy 30 days later. Once back at base, the crewmen learned to their chagrin that if they had stayed aboard the B-17 they would have made it back to Italy, for those men that remained with the bomber had extinguished the fire and got the bomber home.

On that same 23 April mission 36 Fortresses from the 99th BG fought their way through fighters and intense flak to destroy a large section of the assembly plant. While no aircraft were lost, 31 of the B-17s were extensively damaged. The 99th's performance that day earned the group its second DUC of the war.

The 463rd BG, which was the sixth, and last, B-17 group to arrive in the MTO, also saw much action on the Wiener Neustadt mission. Having participated in several lesser operations from its Celone base earlier in the month, the group experienced a true baptism of fire over Austria. The 463rd's bombing results were particularly poor due primarily to the fact that the lead bombardier was hit by flak over the target, causing the group's formations to overshoot the factory.

The 5th BW returned to Ploesti the following day, and this time all the groups bombed on target. Some of the B-17 formations saw no fighters at all, but others ran into serious trouble. Flying without a fighter escort, the



Over the target and contrailing, with bomb-bay doors open and flak bursting above them, B-17Gs from the 97th BG's 342nd and 414th BSs are seen just moments away from dropping their bombs in late 1944 (USAAF)

B-17Gs from the 352nd BS/301st BG leave the ball bearing works at Turin badly damaged in the wake of their attack on 24 July 1944 (USAAF)



463rd BG was again badly mauled by at least 50 interceptors, and the group's gunners claimed seven German aircraft destroyed.

The month of May brought with it more raids on Ploesti, which became the Fifteenth Air Force's primary target. The 5th BW returned to the oilfields on the 5th, where it was attacked by a small but very aggressive gaggle of Rumanian Bf 109s. The 97th BG lost one of its aircraft to them, and had numerous others badly damaged.

Five days later 97th BG CO Col Jacob E Smart led yet another mission to Wiener Neustadt to attack the Bf 109 factory. This sortie was meant to be the Colonel's 'farewell' mission, for he was due to take command of the 5th BW. Halfway to the target, the bombers ran into heavy cloud, and 300 of the 400 bombers briefed to attack Wiener Neustadt turned back. The 97th BG remained on course, however.

Minutes from the target a mass of enemy fighters intercepted the bombers, and they pressed home their attacks until the 'heavies' entered the flak belt that surrounded the factory. Col Smart's aircraft was then struck by flak. Lt Leo Dennison describes what happened next;

'I was flying the No 2 position – deputy group lead – on the mission. We started getting shot at as soon as we reached the Initial Point. There were three bursts of flak in front of the Colonel's aeroplane. The first was low, the next higher and the third was on his level, in front of the bomber's nose. The fourth shell scored a direct hit. The whole front of the B-17 from the leading edge of

the wing forward just disappeared, the rest of the shattered aircraft then falling away below us with all its engines still running.'

Although Col Smart delayed his jump from the wreck of his bomber in the hope that he would pass through the deadly flak before he was forced to open his parachute, he was still hit by shrapnel prior to his chute deploying. He came down in a muddy field and had the canopy pull him along for quite some distance before he came to a stop. Smart then discarded his harness and crawled into a thicket, where he lost consciousness. Three hours later he awoke to find himself in the custody

of German soldiers, who were attached to a nearby flak battery. Weeks later Smart discovered that his co-pilot, Maj Homer Hill, and the tail gunner had also survived being shot down. All three were PoWs, and Maj Hill later died in captivity.

The fighters again went after the B-17s as soon as they came off their bomb run, one Bf 109 making a head-on attack at the Fortress flown by Capt Rush Spradley. The Rumanian pilot was in turn hit by the bomber's top turret gunner, and his fighter collided with the B-17's right wing, removing almost five feet of its wingtip and peeling back a further ten feet of its top surface. The bomber's tail assembly and rear fuselage were also badly holed by flying debris. Fortunately, none of this damage proved to be fatal to the Fortress, and Capt Spradley was able to fly it home.

Once again the 463rd BG suffered the greatest casualties. Having done an excellent job of putting its bombs directly on target, the group was jumped by between 50 and 60 enemy fighters. Making numerous close passes in line abreast formation, the Axis interceptors downed several B-17s. Also lost was tail gunner Sgt Louis Munoz, whose position was literally blown away by a burst of flak which hit the rear of his B-17.

The 5th BW again attempted an attack on the Romano-Americana Refinery at Ploesti on 18 May, but all groups were turned back by poor weather bar the 463rd BG. Bombing using PFF assistance, and without a fighter escort, the group was



Col Herbert E Rice (left), CO of the 2nd BG, and Deputy CO Lt Col John D Ryan pose with veteran 20th BS B-17G 42-31452 in April 1944. This aircraft was lost to flak on the Ploesti raid of 22 July 1944. Only three crewman survived (USAAF)

Lt J O Preston's B-17 goes down over Nis, in Yugoslavia, on 15 April 1944. This was the first bomber lost in combat by the 483rd BG. Despite the parachute seen behind the Fortress, no one survived (USAAF)





bounced by up to 100 Axis aircraft when it came off the target. In a bitter fight, the Fortress crews maintained their formation and slugged it out, losing seven of their aircraft in the process. The bomber gunners in turn claimed to have destroyed 18 enemy fighters.

The 463rd BG's exceptional performance over Ploesti that day earned the group a DUC.

There seemed to be no rest for the weary as far as the 463rd BG was concerned, for the following day it took part in the raid on the Atzgerdorf aircraft components factory south of Vienna. Enemy fighters were encountered both before and after the bomb run, costing the 463rd yet another B-17.

The 5th BW took on a very long range mission on 27 May which lasted for more than nine hours. Sent to bomb a marshalling yard in St Etienne, in southern France, the crews placed an accurate pattern of bombs across the target and the B-17s met with no opposition.

May had proven to be a very costly month for the new 463rd BG, with its missions to Ploesti and Vienna resulting in the group losing a total of 17 Fortresses.

The 5th BW participated in a new kind of mission on the morning of 2 June when the the 2nd, 97th, 99th and 483rd BGs, along with the 325th FG, were selected to take part in Operation *Frantic* – the first shuttle mission to Russia. Negotiations between the American and Soviet governments had been ongoing since the autumn of 1943 as the USAAF attempted to secure access to Russian bases. Such access would allow the 'heavies' to fly one-way missions to targets in eastern Germany, and then recover in the USSR, where the fighters and bombers would refuel and rearm, before returning home to England or Italy.

An advance party had initially been sent to Russia in early 1944 to

Flak in the MTO could be hell too, as this photograph of 5th BW B-17s clearly illustrates (USAAF)

B-17Gs 44-8380 and 44-8194 were two of just a handful of 'Mickey' ships delivered to the MTO in Olive Drab. Assigned to the 97th BG's 342nd and 414th BSs respectively in October 1944, 44-8380 fell to flak during the raid on Landsberg, in Germany, on 16 February 1945, whilst 44-8194 made it through to VE-Day (USAAF)

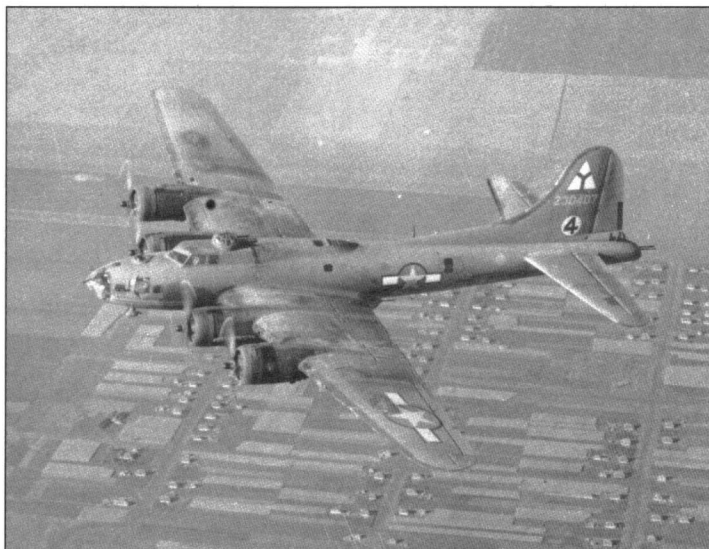


set up base facilities and stock supplies and aircraft parts in preparation for these missions, but approval had been delayed until late May. Even then, things were certainly not finalised in the manner in which the Americans had hoped, for all operational details of the mission had to be approved by Marshal Joseph Stalin himself. The specific reason for these missions was to attack targets which the Eighth or Fifteenth Air Forces could not hit from their own bases, yet the two targets selected by Stalin were both German airfields of low priority in Rumania that could have been easily bombed from bases in Italy.

Only a handful of anti-aircraft batteries were also provided by the Russians at the bases where the B-17s landed, despite complaints by the Americans that more guns were needed. This would duly cost the Eighth Air Force dearly on 21 June, when the Luftwaffe destroyed 44 bombers on the ground and severely damaged 26 others.

Yet, despite these problems, the Americans were still anxious to persevere with the shuttle missions, so off to Poltava the Fifteenth Air Force went after the bombers attacked the Debrecen marshalling yards in Hungary on 2 June. Good escort was provided by Fifteenth Air Force fighters and no Axis aircraft were sighted. All went well until a single Fortress began to lag behind the formation, its right wing ablaze. The aircraft exploded minutes later, and only two parachutes were seen.

The remaining B-17s droned on towards the target, with the commanding general of the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces, Lt Gen Ira Eaker, riding aboard *YANKEE DOODLE II*. Despite supposedly leading the mission, the 97th BG had to wait to drop its bombs for somehow the 99th BG had arrived over the target first! With smoke and debris rising from the target, the 97th ended up making several runs at the target before its crews could drop their bombs. As they departed the target, a derisory six bursts of flak belatedly appeared above the overcast.



B-17F 42-30407 of the 414th BS/97th BG is seen en route to Russia during Operation *Frantic* on 2 June 1944. This aircraft completed more than 100 mission (USAAF)

A heavily weathered 32nd BS/301st BG Fortress crosses the treacherous Alps after completing yet another mission (USAAF)





B-17G 42-102918 was assigned to the 342nd BS/97th BG on 26 May 1944, and seven days later it became the first Fifteenth Air Force aircraft to land on Soviet soil following Operation *Frantic*. This photograph was taken on that occasion, and it shows Russian officers standing to the left of the runway watching the bomber on short finals. Nicknamed *Idiot's Delight*, 42-102918 was to enjoy only a brief career in the frontline, for it was lost on the mission to Munich on 19 July 1944 when a direct flak hit started a fire that eventually severed the bomber's tail (via Roger Freeman)



The B-17s subsequently landed without any dramas at Poltava, the airfield's runway having been doubled in length from 3000 to 6000 ft by an all-female workforce specifically for this mission.

Tents had also been erected and wood-framed buildings topped with canvas to improve the messing and briefing facilities at the base. The next morning Gen Eaker was whisked away to Moscow to confer with Soviet officials as to the success of the mission, and to discuss future operations.

Back at Poltava, the B-17 crews were royally entertained by their Russian hosts for the next four days, being feted by dancers, wined and dined and taken on tours of the surrounding area. Naturally, in the course of the festivities many vodka toasts were also enjoyed!

The Fortresses sortied from Poltava again on 6 June (D-Day for the Allies at Normandy), bombing the airfield at Galati, in Rumania. The target was badly damaged and the B-17s returned to Russia without incident. Five days later the Fortresses headed back to Italy, attacking Focsani airfield, near Bucharest, en route – 15 Rumanian aircraft were destroyed on the ground. A squadron of enemy

B-17G 44-6387 of the 815th BS/483rd BG was lost on the bloody mission to Ruhland on 22 March 1945, the bomber being hit by flak and then finished off by an Me 262. Eight of its ten-man crew survived the incident as PoWs (USAAF)

This anonymous 97th BG aircraft took a direct flak hit which ruptured a fuel tank and knocked out its right wing flaps and a wing spar (USAAF)





B-17G 44-8591 'Mickey' ship leads a number of 817th BS/483rd BG bombers along one of the numerous taxiways at the unit's Sterparone base in January 1945. PFF aircraft usually led formations over the Alps in the final year of the war in the MTO. Delivered to the 817th on 3 January 1945, 44-8591 made it through to VE-Day (USAAF)

B-17G 42-38078 of the 429th BS/2nd BG also survived the war, despite the damage seen in this astounding photograph (more views of this machine can be seen on pages 79 and 80). An ex-99th BG aircraft, 42-38078 suffered a direct flak hit in the centre fuselage whilst on a mission to Debrecen, in Hungary, on 21 September 1944. Three of its crew were killed, but the pilot somehow managed to nurse the B-17 back to base (USAAF)

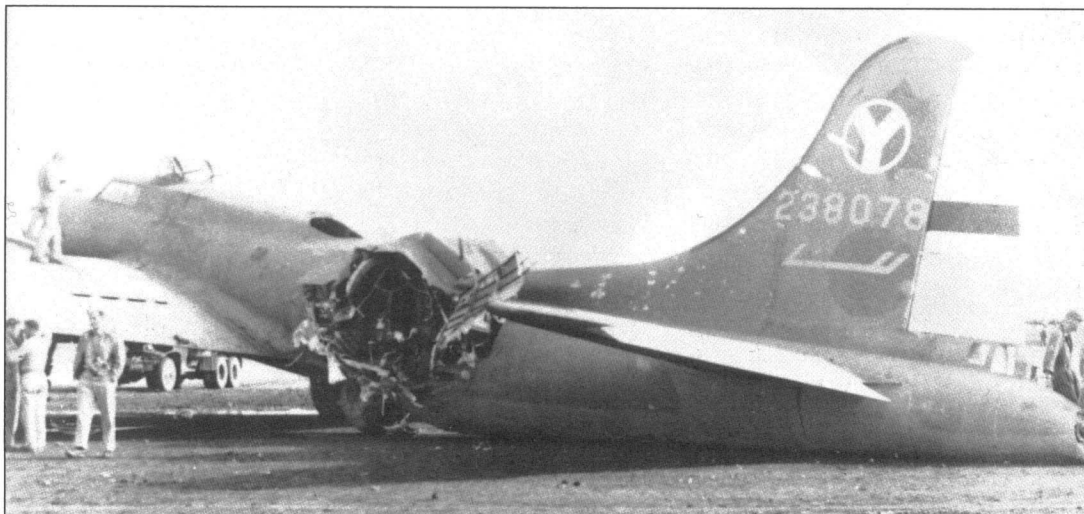
fighters was encountered near the target and a single Fortress was lost after it straggled behind the main formation. Escorting Mustangs claimed eight enemy fighters destroyed for the loss of two of their own.

While the accomplishments of the mission were not great in terms of target destruction, *Frantic* did provide the opportunity for US and Soviet personnel to meet and get to know each other on a personal basis. It was hoped that this would be the basis of bigger and better missions to come, but this would prove not to be the case for the Fifteenth Air Force.

Upon returning to Italy, the men of the 5th BW learned that Gen Carl Spaatz, Commander of Strategic Air Forces in Europe, had decreed that oil was now the top strategic target for all heavy bombardment groups in the ETO and MTO. The wing did not have to wait long to feel the effects of this new policy, for on 14 June its bombers went to Budapest to attack the Koolaz and Fante oil refineries. The refinery at Koolaz was one of the largest in Axis control outside of Rumania, and the bombing was effective despite very heavy, and accurate, flak.

Another oil refinery was hit two days later at Florisdorfer, in Austria.

With the oil offensive now underway, it was only natural that the 5th BW would target Ploesti once again, and on 23 June a large force of



'heavies' attacked the Dacia refinery. The target was shrouded in cloud and smoke, the latter created by myriad smoke pots that were used by the enemy to cover these all important targets.

Coming off the target, the 97th BG was bounced by enemy fighters, the crews radioing their P-38 escorts with urgent requests for assistance. For some reason the fighter pilots did not respond and two B-17s were downed in quick succession.

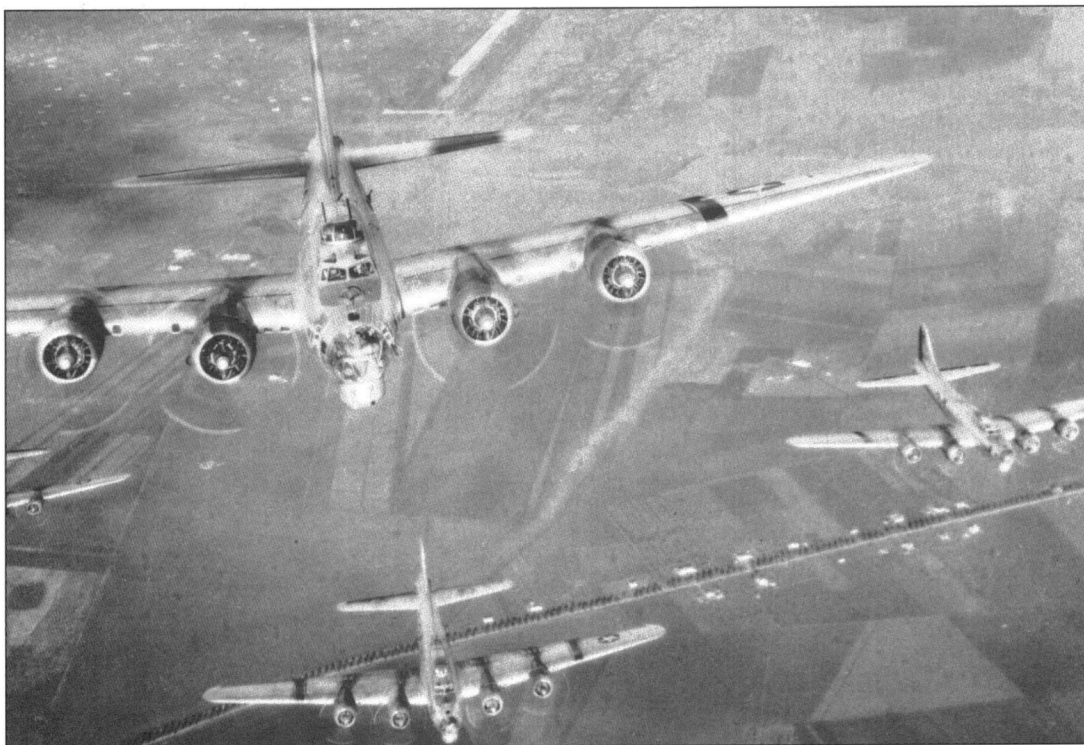
The first bomber lost was that flown by Lt Edwin O Anderson, which had taken a direct hit in the right wing while on its bomb run, shattering the control surfaces and ripping a fuel tank loose. Completing its attack with one engine out, the B-17 emerged from the flak and was immediately pounced on by fighters. Tail gunner Sgt Michael J Sullivan was wounded by a 20 mm shell that ripped through his position, knocking out his intercom. Crawling out of his wrecked turret, Sullivan was picked up by the waist gunners and taken through into the radio room. There, bombardier Lt David R Kingsley administered first aid. As Sullivan later recalled;

'I was pretty banged up and my 'chute harness had been shredded by the 20 mm shell. I was in a daze and shocked, and I couldn't see what was



Well maintained B-17Gs from the 840th BS/483rd BG prepare to land back at their Sterparone base at the end of another mission in mid 1944. Note how close their formation was even on return (USAAF)

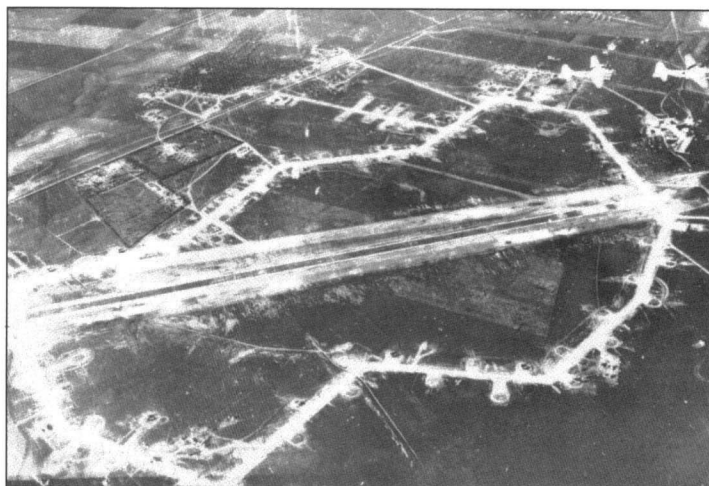
Boasting dark blue elevators and wing bands (added in the final weeks of the war), 2nd BG B-17s form up and begin their climb to altitude – note Amendola's runway behind them (USAAF)





Fortresses from the 414th BS/97th BG head home from Russia on 11 June 1944. The aircraft on the extreme right is B-17F 42-30407 *War Pappy*, which was also seen in a photograph on page 63. Possibly the last F-model used by the group, it served with the 97th from July 1943 until late 1944, when it was finally retired (via Roger Freeman)

Amendola airfield on the Foggia plain was home to the 2nd and 97th BGs from December 1943 until VE-Day. This view shows the base's two pierced steel runways and numerous dispersal areas (USAAF)



going on in the ship. The waist gunners initially gave me first aid, but they couldn't stop the flow of blood that was coming from my right shoulder. They called up Lt Kingsley, and he gave me a tourniquet to stop the blood, by which time I was pretty weak. Seeing that my parachute harness was ripped, Kingsley took his off and put it on me. Whilst I was laying in the radio room he told me that everything was going to be alright, as we had two P-51s escorting us home. At that point we were still 500 miles from base, and the ship was pretty badly shot up. Due to our reduced speed, our escorts began to run low of fuel, and they told our pilot that they would have to leave. Before they departed they asked our pilot if he thought that we could make it, and he replied in affirmative.

'As soon as they were gone we were then attacked by eight Me 109s, who came out of the sun and started making passes at us. Finally, after about a 15-minute fight, we were told by the pilot to get ready to bale out as our ship was pretty well shaking apart in the air, and most of the guns had been knocked out. This was the third group of enemy fighters to hit us that day.

'As soon as the bale out bell was given, the rest of the gunners jumped. Lt Kingsley then took me in his arms and struggled to the bomb-bay, where he told me to keep my hand on the ripcord and to pull it after I cleared the ship. Then he told me to bale out. I watched the ground go by for a few seconds and then I jumped. Before I jumped, I looked up at him and the look he

had on his face was firm and solemn. He must have known what was coming because there was no fear in his eyes at all. That was the last time I saw Lt Kingsley.'

The bombardier then went forward and ran into co-pilot Lt Symons, who was about to bale out. He and the pilot jumped at almost the same time, nearly colliding with each other. Kingsley then apparently looked for a spare parachute, which should have been aboard but was not. Symons and Anderson both noted that the aircraft performed some unusual manoeuvres after they had baled out, and they felt that Kingsley may have been attempting to crash-land, but with only one engine still functioning, this proved too much for him. The bomber finally went into a tight spin and crashed.

The crew was soon captured, whereupon it was duly informed that Lt Kingsley's body had been found in the wreckage of the B-17. For his unselfish action in saving the life of his fellow crew member, David R Kingsley was awarded a posthumous Medal of Honor.

The 5th BW's next action occurred on 27 June when it attacked the Rakos marshalling yard in Budapest. Up to 40 Hungarian fighters aggressively defended the target, downing four B-17s (two from the 301st BG).

The 301st put five AZON Fortresses into the air on 2 and 3 July, and they went after the Szolnok railway bridge in Yugoslavia. Each aircraft dropped six 1000-lb bombs without success. These specialist crews had not, apparently, been briefed on another feature of Yugoslavia – its numerous flak batteries.

The B-17s had descended to 14,000 ft to improve the chances of hitting the bridge, and they immediately ran into a cluster of flak shells. One round exploded directly below the Fortress flown by Lt Phillip Olavarri, wounding a crew member and leaving a three-foot hole in the wing. Yet despite his bomber having punctured fuel tanks and a charred left wing, the pilot performed a successful ditching in the Adriatic. A non-swimming crewman drowned shortly afterwards.

7 July saw the first mission to two targets that would become the nemesis to the Fifteenth Air Force until they were finally overrun in 1945. They were the north and south Blechhammer synthetic oil refineries, which were producing some 500,000 tons of oil a year. This level of output made them the world's third largest producer of oil, and they were kept busy feeding the Axis war machine. Both sites were well protected with flak



Bombardier Lt David R Kingsley of the 97th BG was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions on 23 June 1944, when he selflessly gave up his parachute to a wounded crew member during the mission to Ploesti (USAAF)

Living up to its nickname, 2nd Patches (alias B-17G 42-38201) of the 346th BS/99th BG heads for its target in the summer of 1944. Originally assigned to the 815th BS/483rd BG in the USA, this aircraft was passed on to the 99th BG upon the former's arrival in the MTO on 31 March 1944. The bomber had completed 41 missions when it crashed on take off at Tortorella on 24 August 1944, ending its combat career (USAAF)





installations that often downed bombers, and hundreds of smoke pots were also effective in hiding the targets. Finally, whenever the Blechhammer plants were attacked many fighters swarmed to their defence.

All these defensive elements were present on the 7th, when between 40 and 60 enemy fighters intercepted the raiders and downed nine B-17s. Four of the bombers came from the 463rd BG, while another four were 2nd BG machines. Flak downed the first Fortress lost by the latter group, and the second B-17 downed (flown by Lt Harold Tomlinson) had all of its gunners killed during the first pass made by the fighters – Bf 109s, Fw 190s and Me 410s – which arrived on the scene as soon as the bombers came off the target. As usual, the Me 410s sat out of gun range and fired their rockets into the tightly packed formations prior to the single-engined fighters getting in amongst the 'heavies'.

The few survivors from Lt Tomlinson's crew reported that the first Bf 109s to attack concentrated on the tail of the aircraft, killing the tail and ball turret gunners in quick succession. The second attack was

Having suffered serious flak damage to its right inner flaps over the target area, a 341st BS/97th BG Fortress heads for home over snow-covered enemy territory in early 1945. The identity, and fate, of this aircraft remain unrecorded (USAAF)

B-17F 42-29696 *Fort Alamo II* of the 840th BS/ 483rd BG's sports 131 mission symbols (USAAF)



directed at the mid section of the aircraft, fatally wounding both waist gunners, the radio operator and the top turret gunner, who was knocked out of his turret. T/Sgt Martino Cardone checked the rear of the B-17 for survivors but found none. He, the pilot, co-pilot and navigator then parachuted into captivity.

The remaining two 2nd BG Fortresses that fell to the fighters managed to limp away from the target area before the survivors baled out. Most of these men also became prisoners of war.

The 463rd BG had suffered particularly badly at Blechhammer due to the fact that its fighter escort arrived ten minutes late – a delay that would cost the group four of its B-17s. Gunners from the 463rd claimed 16 enemy aircraft downed in return, such was the intensity of the action.

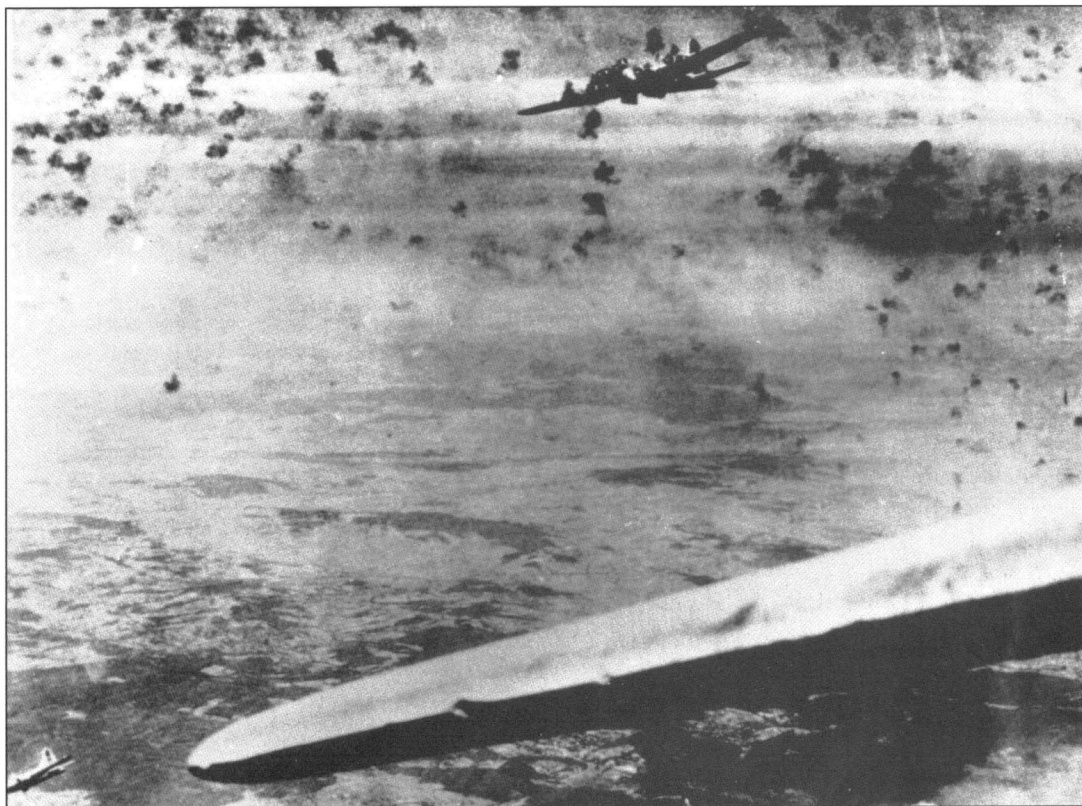
Weather washed out further missions over the next few days, although the B-17s returned to Ploesti once again on 15 July and bombed through cloud using PFF.

Weather also played its part during the mission to the Winterhafen oil storage facility south-east of Vienna on the 16th. Some 175,000 tons of oil was stockpiled here, making it the highest priority target in-theatre at the



B-17G 42-31684 *JOKER* flew with the 774th BS/463rd BG from 9 March 1944 until it was downed by an enemy fighter over Blechhammer on 7 July that same year (USAAF)

One of the most famous 5th BW shots of the war shows 99th BG B-17s running the flak gauntlet over Vienna in 1944. The Austrian capital was second only to Berlin in terms of the number of flak guns defending it (USAAF)





time. Both B-17s and B-24s were sent to attack Winterhafen in a full force raid, and by this stage of the war Vienna had become the second most heavily defended target in Europe behind Berlin due to its numerous oil targets and aircraft manufacturing plants. The Fifteenth Air Force calculated that there were 318 heavy flak guns in the area, 212 of which were so located that they could train on most bomber formations at any one time. If the flak was not enough, there were literally thousands of smoke pots to disguise the landscape, as well as a heavy fighter presence.

16 July proved to be yet another day of bad weather for the crews, who were forced to PFF bomb once again. Intelligence reported that heavy damage was inflicted on the target despite the fact that the flak was intense and accurate – 11 bombers were lost, including six from the 5th BW.

97th BG B-17s accounted for half of the wing's losses, while the 2nd BG had two aircraft destroyed. One of the latter was Lt Robert O'Brien's *Winged Fury*, which was hit by flak and fell out of formation with its No 3 engine on fire. The bomber then rolled over on its back before righting itself again. The flak hit had knocked most of the Plexiglas out of the nose, and had left bombardier Lt Jorgensen with a broken leg. The navigator had attempted to help him when the aircraft violently rolled, knocking him out. Jorgensen duly baled out through the broken Plexiglas.

The other Fortress lost by the 2nd BG also suffered a direct flak hit in the nose, killing the bombardier. Fires broke out both in the shattered nose and in the No 3 engine, and the aircraft rolled over onto its back and went straight down. Other than the bombardier, all of the crew survived, however.

A formation of B-17Gs from the 340th BS/97th BG wing their way towards Linz, in Austria, while their P-38 escorts contrail above them (USAAF)

On 18 July the 'heavies' attacked Memmingen airfield, in Germany, after USAAF reconnaissance aircraft had found some 70 to 75 Bf 110s and Me 410s dispersed all over the base. The entire 5th BW was dispatched, but weather prevented most of the group making it to the target – two groups returned to base and another attacked an alternate target. The 483rd BG, led by Capt Louis T Seith, pressed on, having not received the recall message transmitted on the mission frequency by the wing leader. The group's escort of P-38s did hear the recall, however, and they promptly headed back to Italy.

As the 483rd crews neared the Initial Point and began to spread out into their bombing formation, approximately 75 single-engined fighters were sighted preparing to attack the rear of the Fortress formation. A second, larger, gaggle of at least 100 German fighters was also spotted forming up on the horizon. Having realised that there were no escorts, the Luftwaffe pilots took their time positioning themselves for the most effective attack possible. Coming in line abreast, with five to six aircraft in each section, the fighters fell on the B-17s with their guns and cannon blazing.

The firepower proved to be so intense that all seven aircraft of the 816th BS were shot out of the sky. Three of the B-17s were destroyed while still in formation, a fourth went down out of control and broke apart as it started to spin and the remaining three all slowly dropped out of formation and were finished off by other fighters.

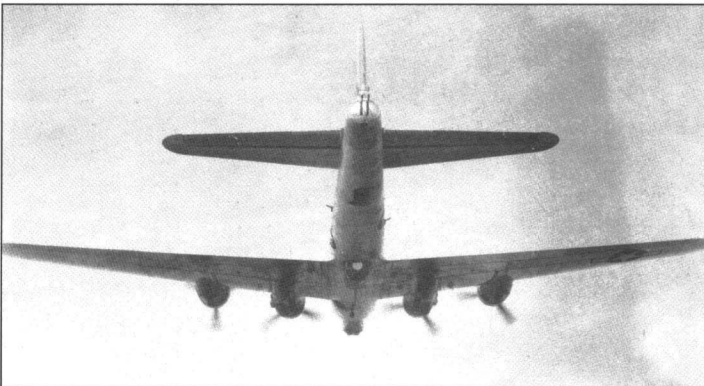
The attackers then used the same tactics to rip apart the 817th BS. In just a matter of minutes five more B-17s had been knocked out of formation and picked off by German fighters. Meanwhile, the two lead squadrons powered on to the target, Capt Seith screaming repeatedly over the radio for the fighter escorts. He was well aware that if his unit did not receive some sort of help the 200+ force of the Luftwaffe fighters would annihilate what remained of his group.

As the B-17s turned off the target 12 'P-38s' (the official 483rd war diary states they the group was saved by P-38s, but it was in fact a dozen Mustangs from the 31st FG that came to its rescue, the P-51 pilots claiming 12 kills for the loss of two of their own) arrived on the scene and immediately engaged the German fighters, despite being well and truly outnumbered. By then much of the damage had been done, however, the 483rd having lost 14 of the 26 aircraft that it sortied. The group's gunners claimed 53 enemy aircraft destroyed. Despite being badly mauled, those crews that made it to the target achieved good bombing results, with at

least 17 aircraft being destroyed on the ground, along with three large hangars, warehouses and assorted installations.

Such losses were difficult for the 483rd to absorb, having only been in combat for about three months. Capt Seith was awarded a DSC for his leadership and gallantry on this mission, and the 483rd BG was awarded a DUC for its performance. A post-war assessment of this raid determined that a total of 65 airmen

This is a 'six o'clock low' view of a B-17G as might have been seen by an attacking Luftwaffe fighter pilot. The latter would no doubt have been greatly concerned by the 'twin fifties' mounted in the bomber's Cheyenne tail and Sperry ball turrets (USAAF)

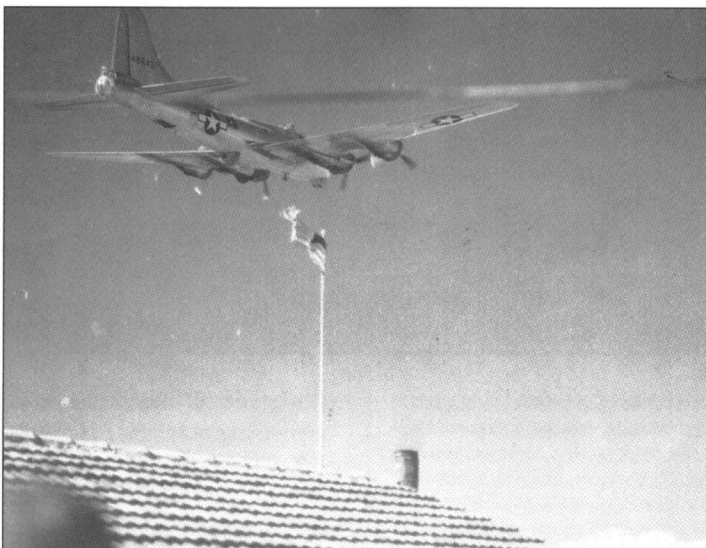


from the 483rd lost their lives on the Memmingen raid, and 87 ended up as PoWs.

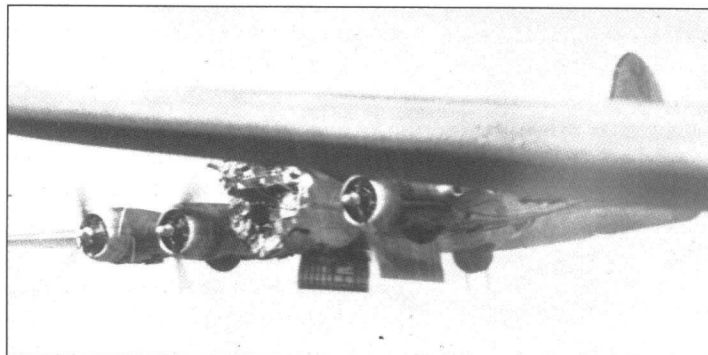
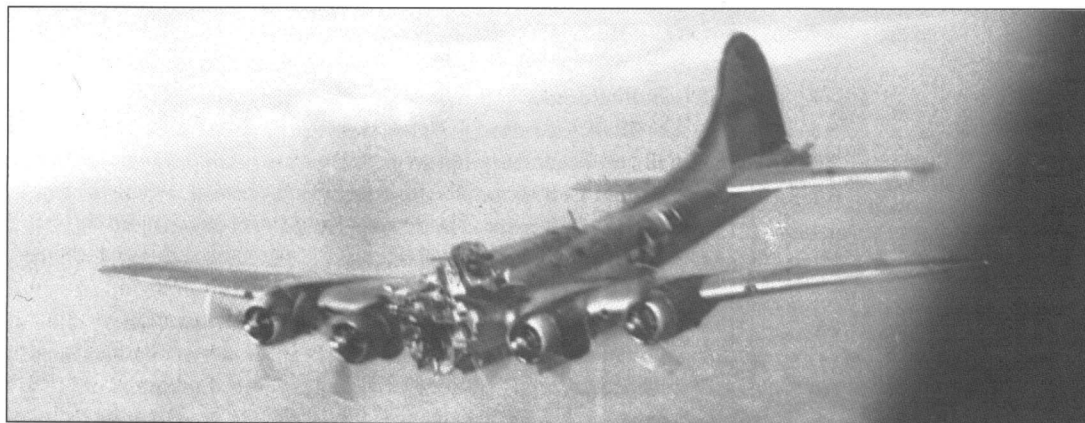
The Fifteenth Air Force sent more than 500 bombers to Ploesti on 22 July, but they were prevented from hitting their briefed target by a thick smoke screen. The 5th BW lost five Fortresses to flak during the mission, three from the 97th BG and two from the 2nd BG.

Four days later the wing attacked an aircraft factory at Neudorf, in Austria. During the course of the mission the 301st BG seemed to be singled out for attention by 100 to 150 German fighters that attacked as the group arrived at the Initial Point. The enemy aircraft then chandelled back up to altitude, before striking again from 'eleven o'clock high'. This tactic worked well for the fighter pilots, who downed 11 Fortresses from the 301st.

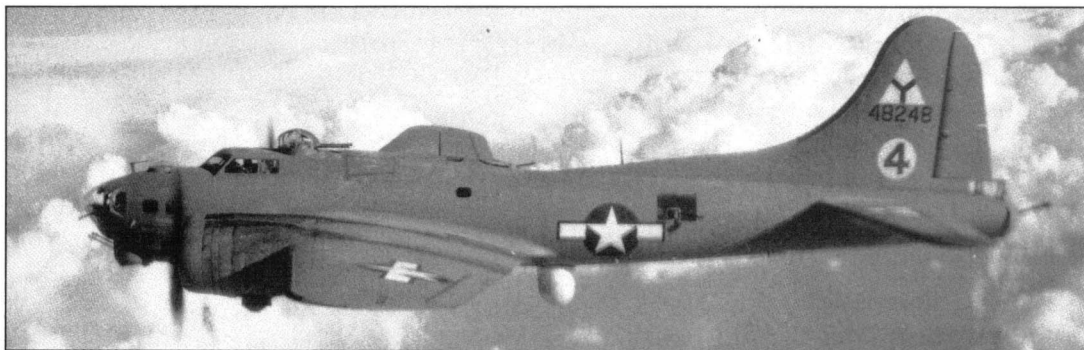
The first to go down was the B-17 flown by Lt Otto Rinderknecht. His aircraft had experienced engine trouble prior to reaching the target, which caused the Fortress to drop out of formation. Bf 109s soon picked the lone bomber off, starting a fierce fire in the oxygen system.



B-17G 44-6643 of the 96th BS/2nd BG beats up Amendola. This aircraft arrived in the MTO in October 1944, and it had completed 17 missions by the time it crashed into mountains whilst on a practice flight in December. Four of its five-man crew were killed in the accident (USAAF)



These horrific photographs of an unidentified 483rd BG B-17G were taken just moments after the bomber's nose had been blown off by a direct flak hit on 14 July 1944. Unbelievably, the pilot kept the aeroplane in the air for ten minutes, allow the surviving crew members to bale out (USAAF)



B-17G 44-8248 *Dottie* of the 414th BS/97th BG was yet another Olive Drab 'Mickey' ship. Delivered to the group on 17 October 1944, it boasted a Cheyenne tail turret for improved rearward protection. Ironically, it was a mechanical failure which brought this aircraft down in neutral Switzerland following the mission to Augsburg on 27 February 1945 (USAAF)

Rinderknecht attempted to head for Switzerland, but a brace of fighters set two engines alight and the crew hastily baled out.

The interceptors then latched onto the trailing squadron in the formation – the 419th BS – and sent two of its number down with engine fires. Both aircraft eventually broke up as the crew jumped out. A third Fortress was hit in the right wing and vertical stabiliser, the latter being all but shot off. An engine also burst into flames and the B-17 spun away.

It was then the 32nd BS's turn to be attacked, Lt Deloney's B-17 being so badly shot up that only two crewmen were left alive to bale out. Lt John Sullivan's aircraft was then consumed by flames, rolling over on its back and exploding. Immediately thereafter three more bombers left the formation on fire. A few minutes later Lt Kerr's Fortress was also set alight just prior to reaching the target, the bomber spinning out of control into the B-17 flown by Lt Ernest Howell. A huge explosion destroyed both aircraft, killing 17 of the 20 men aboard.

Just 14 B-17s from the 301st made it to the target, dropping their bombs into the overcast.

The 5th BW flew two more missions to Ploesti before month end, and overall bombing results improved after a reconnaissance aircraft was sent to the area in advance of the main bomber force to see where the smoke screen was less effective. The 'heavies' would then switch their Aim Point to which ever part of the huge oil complex was most visible at that time.

The 97th BG ran into troubles on its mission to Ploesti on 10 August, when the flak was particularly 'hot, heavy and accurate'. One aircraft came off its bomb run with a feathered engine, and it was immediately set upon by up to eight fighters and shot down. A second Fortress was also worked over, but its crew managed to crash-land back at base. Another B-17 had its pilot wounded and oxygen system knocked out, and as it dropped behind the main formation it was quickly picked off by the Axis fighters.

The highlight of August 1944 was the invasion of southern France by Allied forces. It had been debated for some time as to whether or not such a landing would ever take place due to hesitation by Prime Minister Winston Churchill, but when he approved Operation *Dragoon*, President Franklin D Roosevelt gave the order to invade at dawn on 15 August.

For a few days before the landings on the French Riviera, 5th BW bombers had been pounding artillery positions at Savona and Genoa, on the Italian coast, in an effort to soften up Axis resolve in the area. Then on the 14th coastal guns on the French Riviera itself were attacked.



Early the following morning crews were awakened at 0200 hrs at their Italian bases and briefed about the invasion – they were to bomb the landing beaches prior to the first troops coming ashore at 0730 hrs. The 97th BG had overnighted on Corsica so that it would be closer to the action, and although its crews briefed and took off, upon reaching the target area they were confronted with so much cloud that they were denied clearance to drop their bombs due to the proximity of Allied troops wading ashore. Several hours later B-17s did drop their bombs on targets further inland.

There was no Luftwaffe presence over the beaches and the troops landed with the minimum of casualties. The following day the bombers struck at bridges and other interdiction targets.

By 18 August the 5th BW had returned to its usual targets, the 97th BG hitting the large Romano-American refinery with great precision on this date. This target had previously escaped the heavy bombing during the oil offensive due to effective smoke screening and intense flak coverage. On the 18th, a reconnaissance aircraft preceded the 97th, which was being led by Col Nils Ohman (who was being groomed to take command of the group). The reconnaissance aircraft initially reported that there was too much smoke from the pots for accurate bombing to take place, but at the last minute the wind shifted and the B-17s were guided to the target.

One Fortress was lost and quite a number were damaged, but the bombing was spot on. The 97th BG was rewarded for its exceptional job of leading such a successful strike with the award of its second DUC.

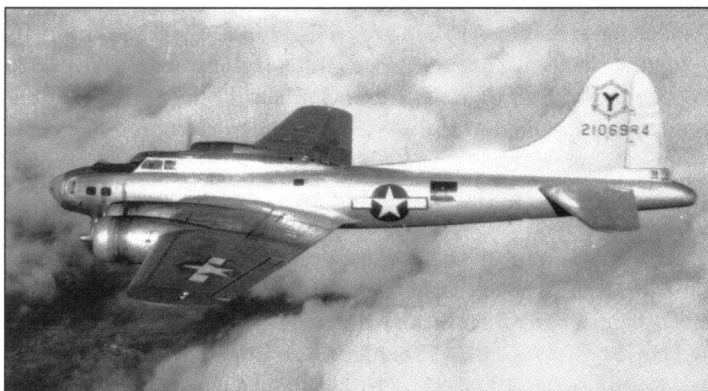
The 5th BW was back over Ploesti the following day, and long before the bombers arrived over the Dacia Romano refinery, they had spotted a column of black smoke rising from the Romano-Americana facility that topped off at around 30,000 ft.

The 19 August mission to Ploesti proved to be the last time that the 5th BW would attack this by now familiar target, for within weeks Rumania had been invaded by the Red Army.

The Fifteenth Air Force had flown 24 missions against Ploesti between 5 April and 19 June 1944, during which time the defences protecting the refinery complex had increased. Indeed, for much of this

B-17Gs of the 20th BS/2nd BG undergo routine maintenance on the line at Amendola in early 1945. Note the sheep grazing in the foreground, the relatively rare USAAF Fairchild UC-61 'hack' to the right of the closest Fortress and B-17s from the 97th BG parked away in the distance (USAAF)

Formerly with the 816th BS/483rd BG and then the 346th BS/99th BG, 71-mission veteran B-17G 42-106984 *Glittering Gal* was converted into a transport aircraft for Gen Charles Lawrence, 5th BW CO, in October 1944. Stripped of its turrets and guns, the old warrior served with the 5th BW HQ until returned to the USA in May 1945. Note the unique 5th BW badge on the tail (USAAF)



period Ploesti had been protected by between 75 and 160 fighters. It was only in August that this figure dropped to just 40 aircraft. Flak batteries also steadily increased in number until there were 278 heavy guns spread around the complex. Such defences combined to down 239 USAAF aircraft during the Fifteenth Air Force's offensive against Ploesti. Some 45 of these machines were 5th BW B-17s, which had been lost during the course of 15 missions.

Despite the demise of Ploesti, the 5th BW continued to go after oil targets by bombing synthetic refineries in Oswiecim, Poland, on 20 August and in Odenthal, Germany, two days later. The wing also ventured further afield to Blechhammer and Moosbierbaum in search of oil targets.

On 29 August B-17s attacked the Privoser refinery in Moravska Ostrava, Czechoslovakia, and this mission proved to be yet another tough one for the unlucky 2nd BG. Once again it was a case of whomever was flying alone, or occupying the 'tail-end Charlie' position, would bear the brunt of the fighter onslaught. The Privoser refinery was only a small facility, but it was in turn a key part of a larger complex spread over the immediate area. As part of the attack B-24s would hit nearby marshalling yards before the 97th BG came in to bomb the Fanto oil refinery. The latter group was in turn to be followed by the 463rd BG, which would also attack the Fanto plant. The 483rd BG, meanwhile, would hit another marshalling yard and then the 2nd BG would drop its bombs on the Privoser refinery, thus signalling an end to the raid.

As things worked out the 2nd BG did indeed come in last, but it followed the 97th BG instead. The fighter escorts had done their job well, and no enemy aircraft were seen. The USAAF fighters then left the 97th BG and went on ahead to sweep the area, which was their usual tactic. One B-17 from the 2nd BG's 429th BS lagged behind the rest of its unit and wound up flying to the target with the 'tail-end Charlie squadron', the 20th BS. Also tagging along was an ailing B-24 from the 454th BG, the Consolidated 'heavy' having dropped far behind its unit. Unfortunately for its crew, the pilot then joined up with the 20th BS for protection.

Laying in wait for the 2nd BG was a force of 65 Bf 109s and 24 heavily armed *Sturmstaffel* Fw 190s, their sole aim being to destroy the 'tail-end Charlie' unit when it came into view.

The 429th BS B-17, piloted by Lt John Fitzpatrick, was the first bomber to go down, having lost two engines in the fighters' first pass. The crew attempted to flee to friendly territory but were forced to make a crash-landing in Hungary.

Then the 20th BS met its fate. Lt Roy Dickinson was the squadron navigator in Lt William Tune's aircraft, the latter leading the unit. He stated;

'All seven aircraft in our squadron and nine of the 28 B-17s in our group were shot down that day. German fighter pilots prudently chose to attack unprotected groups. Our fighter cover picked us up over the Adriatic Sea and took us as far as southern Czechoslovakia. A second group was to take us to the target and part of the way back. The third group would meet us and bring us back to friendly skies.

'The second group was late, and the Germans knew this. We were sitting ducks headed north from Bratislava, near Vienna, to Ostrava, which was our target on the Polish-Czech border. Five of our bombers came down in the Slavacin area, which is where I landed in a ploughed field.'

S/Sgt Jesse Barker, ball turret gunner in Lt William Garland's crew, gave a vivid description of his final mission upon his return from a German prison camp at the end of the war;

'Our squadron was attacked from the tail at just about the Initial Point. Our communication system was destroyed almost immediately, and the No 2 engine then burst into flames. We were unable to converse with the front of the ship. I left my ball turret when the guns hopelessly jammed and the left wing was on fire.

I found the left waist gunner lying on the floor unable to move, but conscious. With the help of the right waist gunner, who had been manning his gun, we restored oxygen to the wounded gunner. The tail gunner and radio operator were also wounded, but were able to take care of themselves. The tail gunner helped me get the left waist gunner to the waist door after the right waist gunner had secured a spare 'chute for the radio operator, whose pack had been badly damaged. We secured the safety strap to the ripcord of the injured gunner.

'When the pilot came back to the waist the right waist gunner jumped. The pilot told each of us to follow, and then released the body of the left waist gunner. Then the pilot baled out. I failed to mention that the pilot had previously put the bomber into a dive in an attempt to put out the flames, but to no avail.'

The B-24 that had tagged onto the 20th BS for protection was also downed in the same attack.

The full effect of this tragedy was felt at the end of the war when head counts were made as the PoWs returned. Of the 90 crewmen that had gone down with the nine Fortresses lost, 40 of them had been killed. This death toll was even higher than when the 2nd BG lost 14 B-17s on the 20 February 1944 mission to Steyr.

Despite this setback, the events of the next few days brought jubilation to the bomber crews of the Fifteenth Air Force. On the evening of 27 August a single Bf 109 took off from Rumania piloted by Capt Prince Carl Cantacuzino and headed for Italy. Tucked away in the fuselage of the German fighter was Lt Col James A Gunn III from the 454th BG, who had been shot down over Ploesti in a B-24 and taken prisoner. With the oilfields about to be overrun by the Red Army, the Prince and Gunn had flown to Italy to arrange USAAF flights to Rumania and Bulgaria to liberate American PoWs being held in both countries.

Once Lt Col Gunn had had the opportunity to talk with Gen Sir Harold Wilson, Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in the Mediterranean, and Gen Ira Eaker, Commander of US Air Forces in the Mediterranean, a rescue mission was set in motion to bring the men out. Floors were built in the bomb-bays of B-17s to seat the passengers and virtually all the armament was removed to reduce weight. Finally, only a minimum number of crewmen were carried. Bombing missions were suspended so that fighter groups could escort the rescue aircraft.

Utilising 36 B-17s, Operation *Reunion* got underway on 31 August, fighter escort being provided by both Mustangs and Rumanian Bf 109s, the latter circling over their airfields to see that all went well. The operation lasted three days, and 1162 PoWs were returned to Italy.

Once the *Reunion* missions were over, it was back to work for the 5th BW, and a number of B-17 crews flew a most interesting and successful



mission on 4 September. Following the invasion of southern France, Allied intelligence kept a weather eye on the whereabouts of the German U-boat force, which had fled French bases following Operation *Anvil*. In early September a routine reconnaissance flight had discovered that three submarines had docked in Genoa harbour, so the 5th BW was called in to sink them. Catching the vessels still tied up to the dockside, the B-17 crews hit them with a number of 500-lb bombs. Post-mission photographs duly showed that all the U-boats were either sunk or damaged, and the destruction to the surrounding harbour was very heavy.

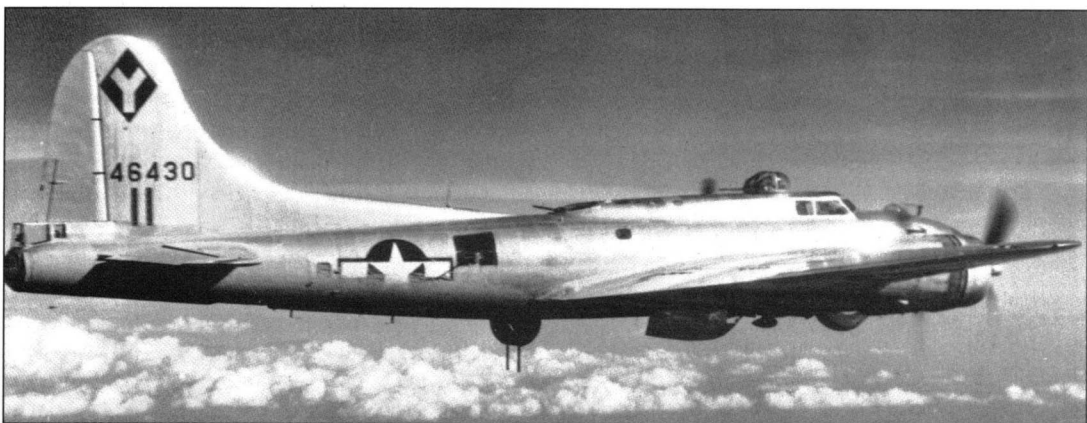
An oil-related target was hit again on 11 September when the Schwechat refinery in Vienna was attacked. Intense flak greeted the bombers over the Austrian capital, and the 97th BG lost one B-17 and had a number of others badly damaged.

Since its first mission in the ETO in August 1942, the 97th BG had been very fortunate in that its losses had been mercifully light in comparison with other 5th BW groups. Indeed, all other B-17 units in the MTO had taken a beating at some point in the campaign, but this had never happened to the 97th. This would all change on 11 September, however. The target for the day was Blechhammer North, and the bombers were carrying RDX (British 'Research Department Formula X') bombs which were new and very 'touchy' – and extremely powerful.

As the 97th trudged down the bomb run the sky was covered with very accurate black and white flak bursts, indicating both 88 mm and 105 mm

Hastily converted 5th BW B-17s (two 2nd BG machines flank a 97th BG aircraft) are seen at an airfield in Rumania during Operation *Reunion*, staged in late August 1944. Some 1162 former PoWs were shuttled back to Italy by these aircraft over a three-day period, 36 B-17s having had special decking built in their bomb-bays to carry the ex-prisoners (USAAF)

B-17G 44-6430 of the 347th BS/99th BG is seen with its bomb-bay doors knocked askew following flak damage inflicted on the 4 October 1944 attack on the Tordinone Bridge in northern Italy. The crew elected to drop their bombs through the disabled doors nonetheless, and duly made it back to base in one piece. 44-6430 was not so lucky on 7 November, when another flak hit forced the crew to bale out of the aircraft whilst on a mission to Maribor, in Yugoslavia. Seven parachutes were seen and three crew evaded, with the remaining four being captured (USAAF)





Later to be all but shot in two over Hungary on 21 September 1944 B-17G 42-38078 *Sweet Pea* is seen in happier times during Operation *Frantic* on 2 June 1944. Originally delivered to the 347th BS/99th BG (note the oversprayed markings on the tail) on 7 January 1944, the bomber transferred to the 429th BS/2nd BG after 14 missions on 28 March 1944. It remained with the unit until it was written off in a heavy landing at Bari on 1 June 1945, the veteran bomber being consumed by fire (via Roger Freeman)

B-17G 44-6548 of the 49th BS/2nd BG undergoes maintenance at a muddy Amendola in early 1945. The performance by the mechanics who maintained these aircraft in all weathers, and in the crudest conditions imaginable, was nothing less than fantastic from November 1942 through to VE-Day. This particular aircraft served exclusively with the 49th BS, and was eventually returned to the USA in July 1945 (USAAF)



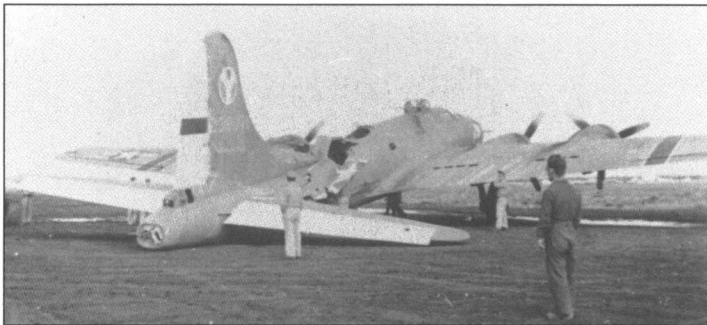
guns. The deadly accurate batteries surrounding Blechhammer got closer and closer to the Fortresses until it happened. The lead bomber in the 97th BG's 340th BS was blown apart by a direct hit. In seconds three more B-17s from the unit (including the author's!) had gone down, followed by a fifth Fortress from the 332nd BS. Five in one day was the most that the 97th ever lost in World War 2. Three other B-17s were badly damaged.

As mentioned in chapter two, the 97th BG had had its miracle aircraft in B-17F 41-24406 *All American*, which had been all but cut in two over North Africa by an Fw 190. On 21 September the 2nd BG got its miracle aircraft in the form of B-17G 42-38078 *Sweet Pea*. Well into its bomb run over the Debrecen marshalling yards in Hungary, the bomber was hit by an 88 mm shell that slammed into the mid section of the fuselage and exploded.

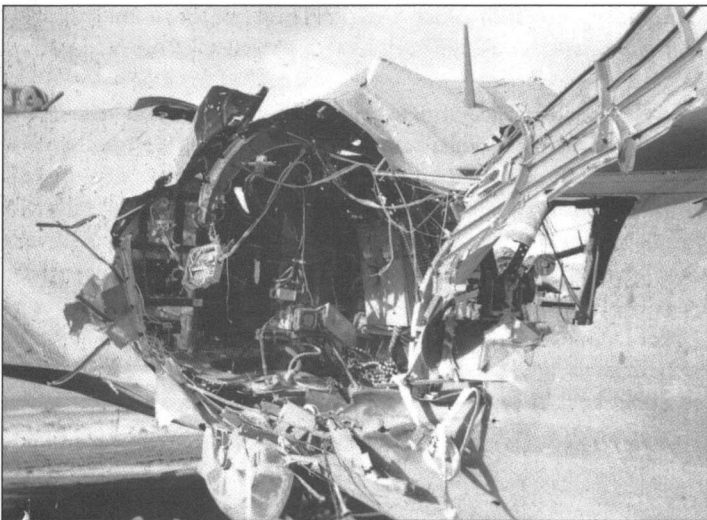
The Fortress was nearly torn in two, with large sections of the the waist blown off, the control cables cut, communications and electrical systems destroyed, half the bombs knocked out of the bomb-bay and the ball gunner left stuck in his turret. The left waist gunner was killed instantly and the tail gunner was mortally wounded. The right waist gunner's life was saved by virtue of the fact that his backpack parachute bore the brunt of the blast. The radio operator was also peppered with shrapnel.

Pilot Lt Guy M Miller and co-pilot Lt Thomas Rybovich immediately decided to try and fly the aircraft home. Most of the control cables were gone so they had to turn the bomber by varying the power of the engines, which were all apparently undamaged. Miller thought of telling his surviving crew members to bale out, but with one man dead and another close to death, three wounded and the ball gunner stuck in his turret, he was determined to give it his best shot and fly on.

The bombardier went back and assisted with the tail gunner, but the injured man soon died. The engineer gunner also went aft, and he successfully freed the ball gunner, whose turret was only hanging on by its three safety catches. He also released the remaining bombs with a screwdriver.



These three photographs of B-17G 42-38078 *Sweet Pea* were taken immediately after the bomber had ground to a halt off to the side of one of Amendola's two runways on 21 September 1944. It beggars belief that this aircraft had managed to hold together after suffering a direct flak hit in the radio room. Just as amazing is the fact that *Sweet Pea* was eventually repaired and returned to frontline service (USAAF)



Against all the odds the pilots brought *Sweet Pea* home, although once the B-17 hit the runway its fuselage broke in two.

Another miracle witnessed by 5th BW crews in September was the almost complete absence of the Luftwaffe. Very few enemy fighters were seen, and even those did not attack. Unknown to the Fifteenth Air Force, the Luftwaffe was pulling all of its fighters back to Germany in an attempt to bolster the defence of the Fatherland, which the *Führer* had declared would be defended to the very end. Targets in the Balkans were also disappearing rapidly as the Red Army surged westwards, and only a moderate air defence of targets in Vienna would now be made.

The Autumn of 1944 saw the Fifteenth Air Force inaugurate a new type of mission – night bombing. Nocturnal raids had been the domain of RAF Bomber Command since virtually the start of the war, and the USAAF had been happy to shy away from such missions. However, in late 1944 the 5th BW began attacking targets at night with radar-guided formations of B-17s, with as many as 30

Fortresses being sent out in twos and fours from the various groups. Some of these sorties, known as ‘Lone Wolf’ missions, were successful and others were not – a lot depended on the weather. These operations carried on into early 1945, although only two ‘Lone Wolf’ missions were flown in the final months of the war.

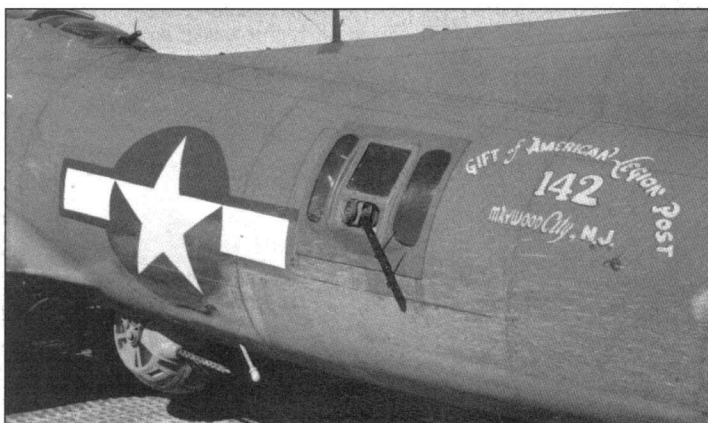
With the demise of the Axis threat in the Balkans, Allied strategists also toyed with the idea of moving the Fifteenth Air Force to southern France. This would have been a major shift in all areas, and the logistical support required would have been massive. The proposal did not get very far.

Oil targets dominated the bombing schedule during October and November, and once again the 97th BG suffered the largest single loss when it had three aircraft downed during a mission to Brux – two of these were lost as a result of a mid-air collision.

The 301st BG saw three of its B-17s shot down by flak when it ventured to Blechhammer on 26 December. Two of the badly damaged Fortresses succeeded in force-landing behind Russian lines. A few Fw 190s were also seen in the area but they did not attack.



‘Bombs away’ for B-17G 42-31884 MISS MAYWOOD of the 340th BS/97th BG in late 1944. The veteran bomber flew over 100 combat missions in the MTO, three of which found the author diligently manning the left waist gun (USAAF)



These detail views of B-17G 42-31884 MISS MAYWOOD show off its name and ‘payment’ details to good effect. Despite looking and smelling combat weary by late 1944, the old warrior still managed to fly the 97th BG’s 10,000th combat sortie on 18 November (this was the aircraft’s 95th mission) and then pass the century mark on 9 December when it completed a trip to Regensburg. The bomber was retired shortly afterwards, and eventually scrapped on 30 November 1945 (USAAF)



Yes, it did snow in Italy. These were the conditions in Amendola's 'tent city' for much of the winter of 1944-45. There were no Eighth Air Force comforts such as brick accommodation blocks and cosy pubs in the Fifteenth Air Force (USAAF)

Another 301st BG aircraft was lost when the group bombed Innsbruck three days later. Lt Lyle Pearson and his bombardier were on the last mission of their tour, and were flying in a brand new B-17G. The Fortress took two flak hits just prior to the Initial Point over the Brenner Pass, one round striking the ball turret and the other detonating in the bomb-bay, starting a fire. As Pearson racked his aircraft steeply over to get

out of the formation, its right wing and tail fell off.

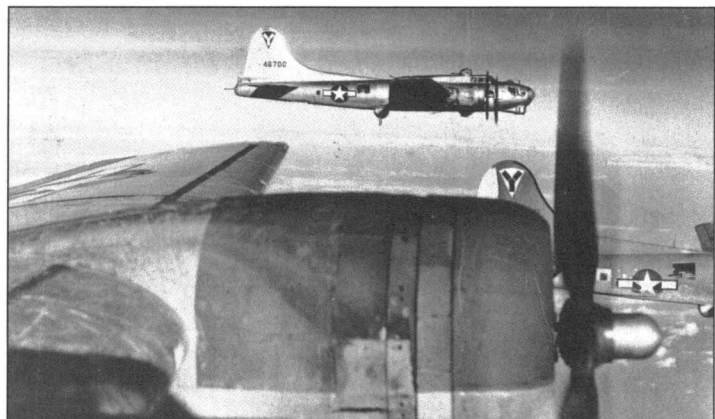
Pearson was knocked unconscious and blown through the Plexiglas nose, but he recovered in time to deploy his parachute. The navigator, Lt Arthur Frechette, impacted the ground without an open parachute, but he survived the fall by virtue of the fact that he hit the side of a 45-degree slope covered with two feet of snow! He suffered a broken leg, smashed knee cap and a lot of friction burns. Co-pilot Lt Sam Wheeler had also been blown out of the bomber without his parachute pack, and as he tumbled to earth he straightened his body out to stabilise his descent. As he did so a parachute pack hit him in the face! Wheeler immediately snapped it on and pulled the ripcord.

The 5th BW flew only eight missions in January 1945 due to poor winter weather, but the groups really got back into their stride during



Lacking any distinguishing personal or squadron markings, this B-17G from the 483rd BG defies identification on the snow-covered tarmac at Terparone in early 1945 (USAAF)

B-17Gs from the 774th BS/463rd BG head for Vienna on 7 February 1945. No less than 23 heavy bombers failed to return from this mission, although only three of them were Fortresses (via Roger Freeman)



February. The Vienna area was targeted for most of the sorties that were flown, and bomber losses were heavy. Indeed, the flak defences around the city increased significantly as the European war entered its final months. By February Vienna was defended by 300 heavy guns, and their effectiveness was graphically revealed on the 7th of that month when 23 bombers did not return from a single mission. Twenty of them were B-24s.

The 5th BW flew a most historic operation on 22 March when it attacked a large synthetic oil refinery in the Ruhland, some 75 miles south of Berlin. This target was 700 miles from the bomb groups' bases in Italy, and it proved to be one of the longest missions ever flown by the Fifteenth Air Force. The bombing was very good, and when the B-17s departed the target smoke was rising up to 20,000 ft into the air. Flak was intense and accurate, but the weapon that inflicted the most casualties was the Messerschmitt Me 262 jet fighter.

Hardest hit was the 483rd BG, which was attacked from 'six o'clock' by a dozen Me 262s that intercepted them after the bomb run, flying right through the flak. As the 'heavies' pulled off the target, Bf 109s came in from 'eleven o'clock', and while they did some damage, it was the second attack by the jets that really did the trick. With their 30 mm guns blazing, they initially downed three B-17s from the 817th BS. Before the jets had finished six Fortresses from the 483rd BG had been destroyed. The 2nd BG was also hard hit, losing five B-17s. One was downed by an Me 262 and two more were struck by flak over the target, all three crews baling out over Germany but only two men survived. It was reported that some personnel had been strafed in their parachutes by the Bf 109s.

The second flak-damaged aircraft that fell out of formation headed for Red Army-held territory, where it was intercepted by Russian fighters. Suddenly, they began firing at the B-17, and the bomber's gunners baled out after their aircraft suffered further damage. Some of them were then strafed coming down in their parachutes but they all survived to be taken prisoner by the Germans.

Two more Fortresses from the 2nd BG were not reported missing after they sought refuge behind Russian lines, having been badly shot up by flak. One suffered further damage when it too was attacked by communist fighters before crash-landing. The second crew that landed in Russian-held territory was not attacked, but it was questioned extensively before any move was made to return the men to American custody.

B-17G 42-97324 "Silver Sheen" was a multi-mission veteran that served with the 341st BS/97th BG from October 1944 until it was shot down over Ruhland on 22 March 1945. It was one of 11 B-17s lost on this long range mission into the industrial heart of Germany (USAAF)



The loss of these aircraft boosted the total number of B-17s destroyed by flak and Me 262s during the attack on Ruhland to 11.

Two days later, on 24 March, the 5th BW flew its first mission to Berlin. The target was the Daimler-Benz tank works, and the round trip would cover 1500 miles – the farthest distance the wing would ever fly. The mission was headed by the 463rd BG, with Col George McGregor in the lead B-17. Before the target was reached the group ran into very heavy and intense flak that knocked two aircraft out of formation. One attempted to make it to Russian lines but failed, its crew baling out over Czechoslovakia and becoming PoWs. The second B-17 made it to Yugoslavia, from whence the crew was recovered.

Another two bombers from the 463rd were lost to flak before some 15 Me 262s arrived on the scene and downed a fifth B-17. Another two Fortresses went down before the completion of the mission, the 2nd BG losing one aircraft to the Me 262s and another to flak. The eighth, and last, bomber to be destroyed was from the 483rd BG. Despite these losses, the bombing was good and the target was badly damaged.

Another tough feature of the Berlin mission was the fact that a number of the Fortress crews took off fully aware that they did not have enough fuel to make it back to their home bases on the Foggia plain. They were therefore forced to land at whatever base they could find in northern Italy upon their return across the Alps.

The 5th BW put in a final outstanding bombing performance on 20 April, when 132 B-17s dropped 388 tons of bombs on Vejetino marshalling yard. Accuracy was excellent, and the 2nd and 301st BGs placed 91 per cent of their bombs within 1000 ft of the Aim Point. The 99th BG beat them both, however, achieving an incredible 93 per cent in the target circle. However, flak was very intense and extremely accurate, and eight B-17s were brought down.

The 5th BW flew its last missions on 1 May, when it sent formations of bombers to the Austrian cities of Kolbnitz (to bomb a railway bridge) and Salzburg (to attack a marshalling yard).

At midnight on 8 May 1945 the war in Europe finally came to an end.

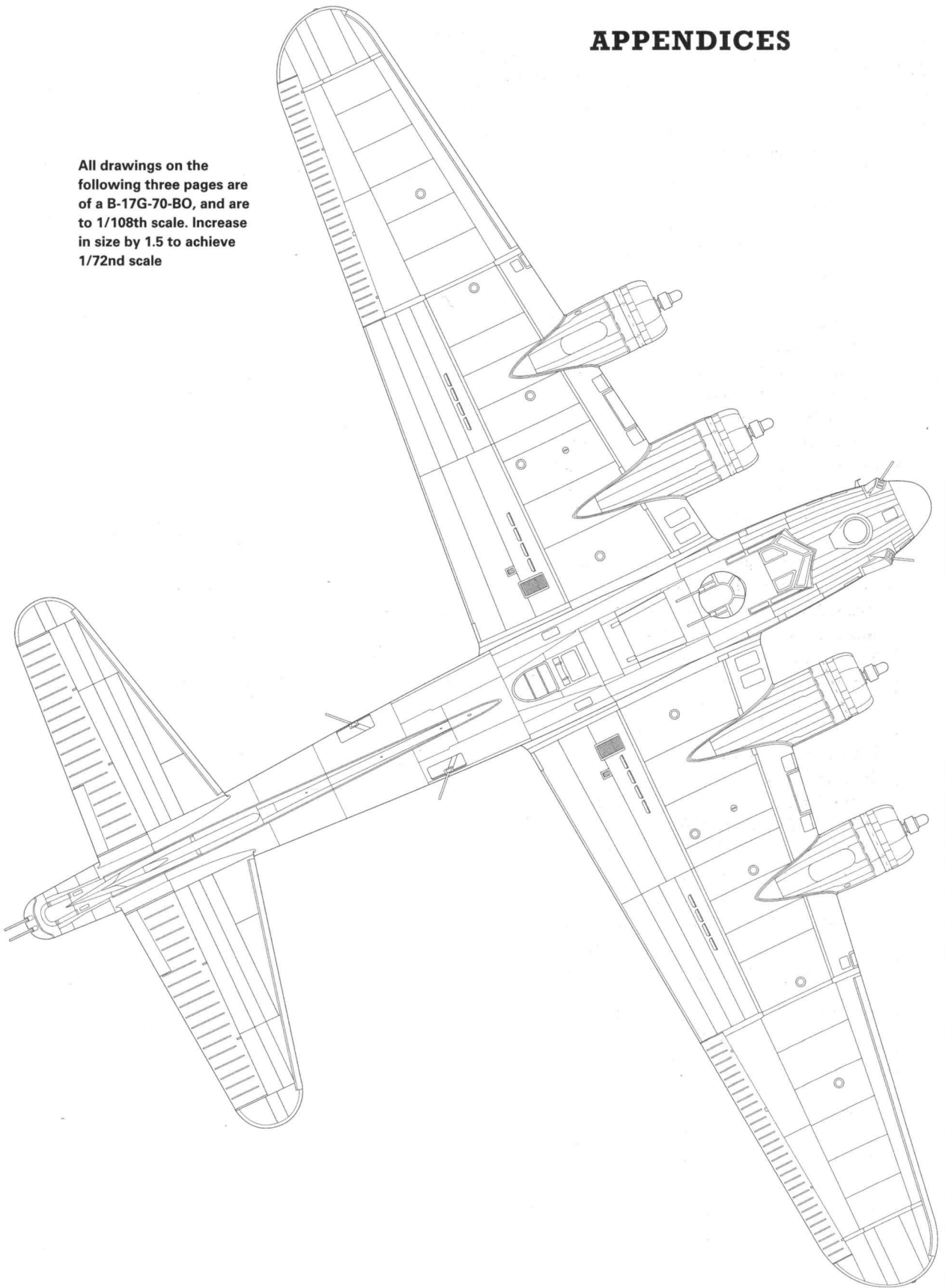
The 5th BW had been the pioneers in strategic bombing in the MTO, its crews creating a gallant and proud record for themselves with the B-17. Tragically, due to a total lack of publicity at the time, their names, and the names of the targets they attacked, are not nearly as well known as their brother crews in England. However, for those who remember names like Vienna, Ploesti, Steyr, Blechhammer, Budapest and Odenthal, they know, and will never forget, the flak and fighters that they met there.

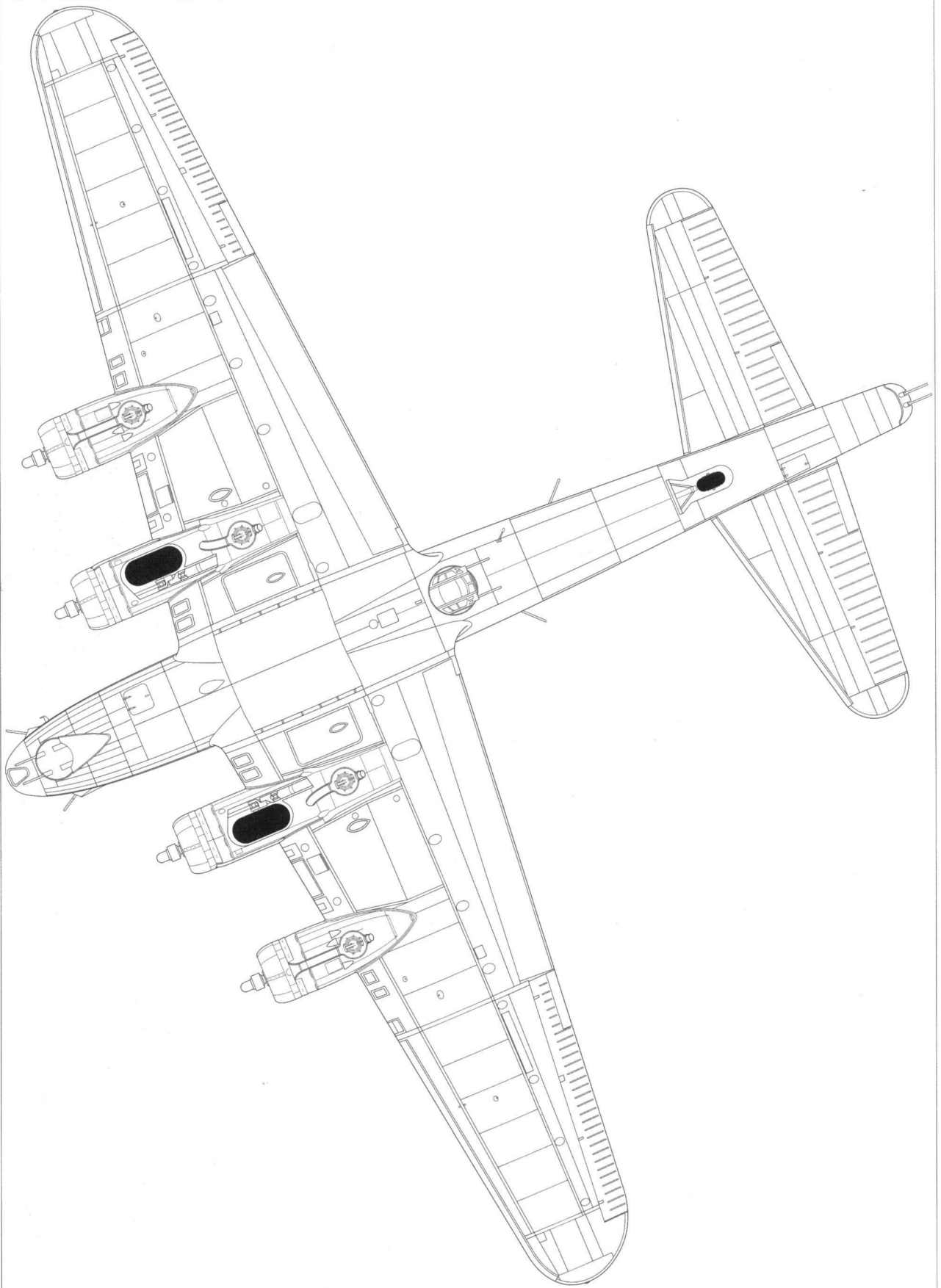
GROUP MISSIONS AND COMBAT LOSSES

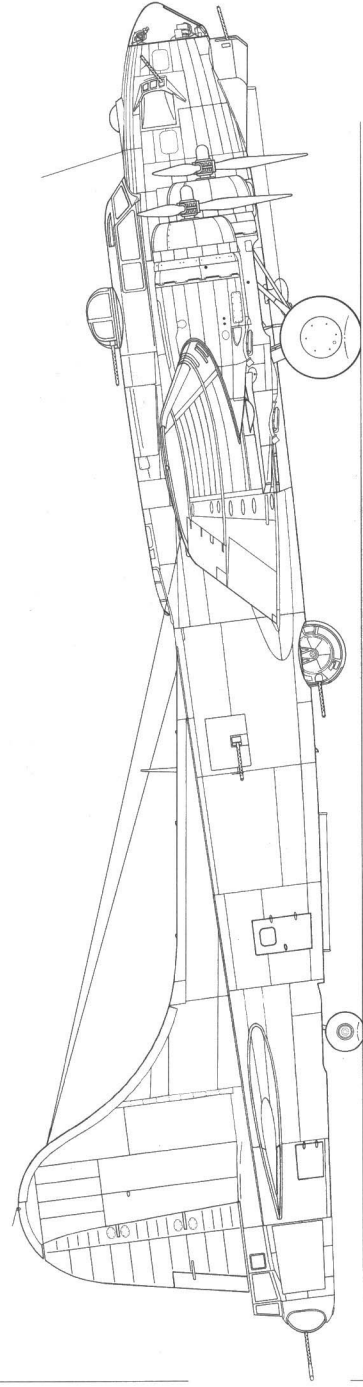
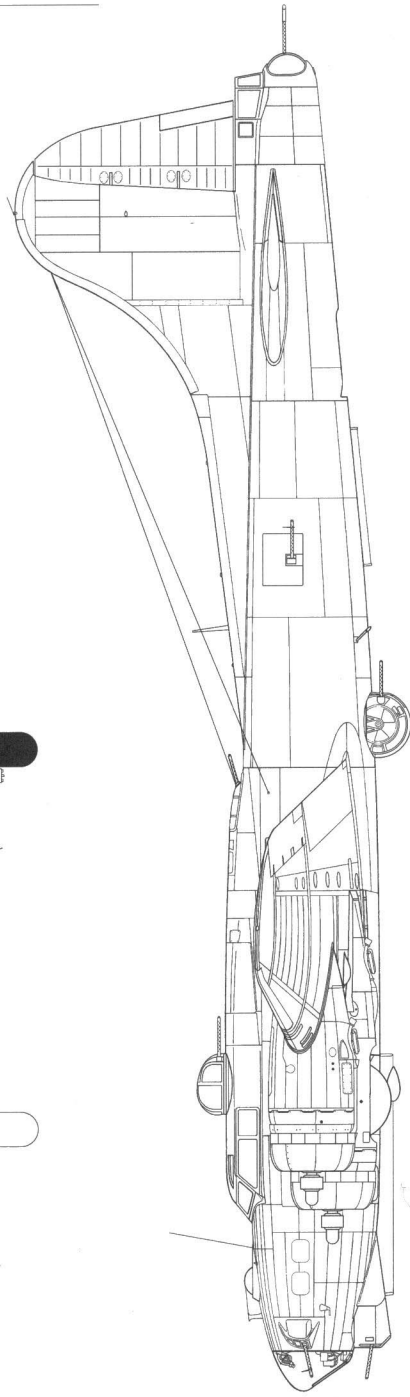
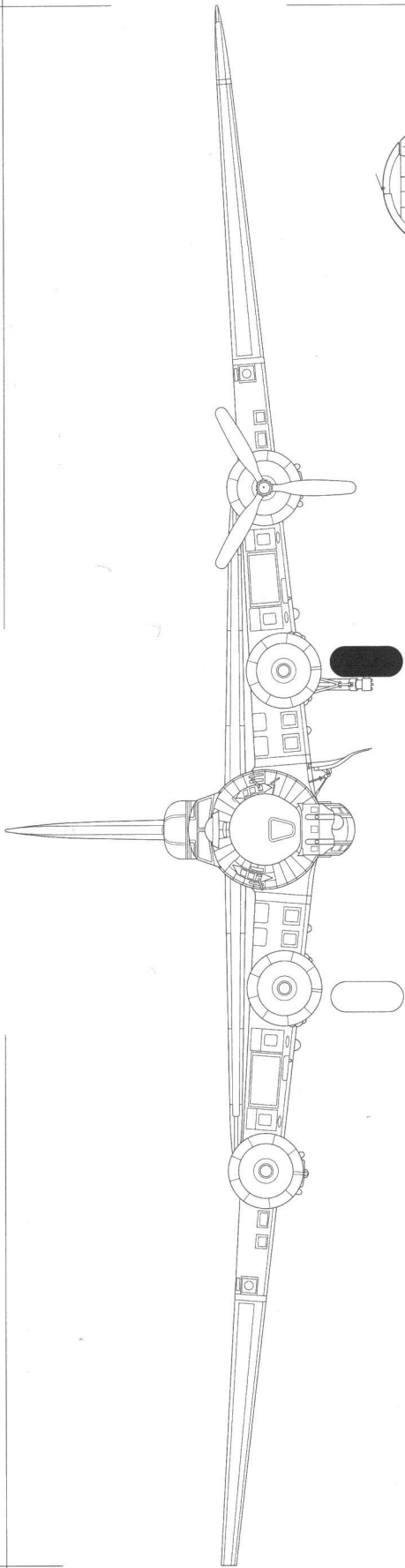
<i>Group</i>	<i>Missions</i>	<i>Combat losses</i>
2nd BG	406	146
97th BG	467	110
99th BG	395	69
301st BG	478	132
463rd BG	222	91
483rd BG	215	75

APPENDICES

All drawings on the following three pages are of a B-17G-70-BO, and are to 1/108th scale. Increase in size by 1.5 to achieve 1/72nd scale







COLOUR PLATES

1

**B-17F-1-BO 41-24378 *War Eagle* of the 342th BS/
97th BG Tafaraoui, Algeria, October 1943**

The 5th BW assumed operational control of the 97th and 301st BGs on 14 January 1943, both bomb groups having deployed from England to North Africa to lend heavy bomber support to Operation *Torch*. As the pioneer USAAF bomb group in the ETO, the 97th BG had deployed from the USA in mid 1942 with B-17Es, although these had soon been replaced by more combat-durable B-17Fs. One of the original F-models issued to the group at Polebook in August 1942, *War Eagle* was flown to North Africa by Lt Marvin Waldroup on 13 November. It went on to fly a total of 125 missions with the 97th BG, becoming only the second Fortress in the group to pass the 100-mission mark after B-17F 41-24370 *The Berlin Sleeper II*. The bomber is seen here carrying an early 5th BW group marking in the form of a white triangle, thus denoting its assignment to the 97th BG. This geometric marking system was introduced in June 1943, and the other groups within the wing were assigned a circle (2nd BG), diamond (99th BG) and square (301st BG) respectively. The individual squadron markings within the 97th BG were consisted of a white or yellow number below the radio call number (an abbreviated version of the serial number) on the fin, 0, 1, 2 and 4 for the 340th, 341st, 342nd and 414th BS respectively – this marking related to the last digit of the squadron number. The bars and red surround to the whole national insignia were added on 29 June 1943. Groups were instructed to replace the short-lived red outline with insignia blue on 14 August 1943, but many units left the marking unchanged until year-end. *War Eagle* is depicted with 11 fighter kills beneath its mission markers, which is how it appeared at the time it passed the 100 missions milestone. At that time the aircraft was assigned to pilot Melvin W Collin and his crew, namely co-pilot Daniel R Raider, bombardier Paul T Spalla, navigator Charles J Dellert, engineer Louis Gonzales, waist gunner Alvie Alvin Ashcraft, tail gunner James J Nimmo, assistant radio/ball turret gunner Phillip J Langlois, radio operator/gunner O H Griffiths and assistant engineer/top turret gunner Everette L Moore. This crew initially flew with the 97th BG as part of the Eighth Air Force in England, and had completed seven missions by the time they transferred to the Fifteenth Air Force. The Collins' crew flew a total of 50 combat missions, 47 of which were unescorted – the mission requirement for crews in the MTO was double that of those in the ETO. One crew member did not survive his tour, tail gunner Alvie Alvin Ashcraft contracting scarlet fever mid-way through his time in the MTO. Falling behind his original crew in terms of his required number of missions, Ashcraft was transferred to another bomber in order for him to reach his 50-mission tally. Soon after changing crews,

Ashcraft was lost when the bomber he was flying in collided with an oncoming formation after his own group had aborted and turned back when confronted with bad weather. *War Eagle* was eventually transferred to the 99th BG in November 1943, with whom it flew a further 12 missions. The bomber's 137th, and last, combat sortie was completed on 5 April 1944, and it returned to the USA on 18 May. 41-24378 was salvaged in May 1945.

2

**B-17F-1-BO 41-24380 *SUPERMAN* of the 340th BS/
97th BG, Chateaudun-du-Rhumel, Algeria,
Summer 1943**

Originally assigned to the 92nd BG in Bangor, Maine, on 24 June 1942, this aircraft was damaged in a landing accident just 48 hours later. Eventually repaired and sent to England, 41-24380 was transferred to the 340th BS/97th BG on 26 July 1942. Assigned to Lt Roy Nielson and his crew, the bomber was flown on to North Africa by them on 10 November 1942. The B-17 is depicted here after it had completed 40 missions with the group, and its gunners had been credited with three fighter kills. The bomber displays early North Africa 5th BW theatre markings prior to the introduction of specific group markings, and it also has yellow-ringed national insignia. This latter was developed expressly for Operation *Torch*, and it remained on many USAAF aircraft in North Africa until the introduction of the national insignia seen on the B-17 in the previous profile. *SUPERMAN* returned to the USA in November 1943, but records show that it was then sent back to Italy in 1944, although it is not known if the bomber returned to combat. 41-24380 was salvaged on 30 November 1945.

3

**B-17F-5-BO 41-24407 *The GOON* of the 32nd BS/
301st BG, Oudna, Tunisia, August 1943**

Originally assigned to the 32nd BS/301st BG in the USA on 13 July 1942, *The GOON* is depicted here as it appeared after completing 45 missions with the group, during which time it was credited with the sinking of two ships. The bomber features the early 5th BW geometric tail marking of a white square, denoting the 301st BG. In October 1943 the 97th and 301st traded all their B-17Fs without 'Tokyo tanks' to the 2nd and 99th BGs, receiving their longer range aircraft in return. As an unmodified B-17, *The GOON* duly joined to the 346th BS/99th BG, completing 34 missions with its new unit to add to the 48 it had flown with the 32nd BS. The bomber returned to the USA in May 1944 and was sold for scrap in December of the following year. *The GOON's* nose art was applied by prolific brushman Sgt Gene Townsend of the 32nd BS. The first aircraft he painted was 41-24363 *The Bad Penny*, and by the war's end, Sgt Townsend had painted over 40 aeroplanes, including all the following B-17s – 41-24350 *Dumbo*, 41-24361 *Wabash Cannon*

Ball, 41-24408 *PLUTOCRAT(E)* (profile 4), 41-24409 *Playboy*, 41-24418 *Special Delivery II*, 41-24369 *Special Delivery*, 42-3343 "*Slick CHICK*" (profile 7), 42-3391 *Georgia Peach*, 42-5131 *Hun Pecker*, 42-5137 *Lead Foot/Carol Jean IV*, 42-5145 *THE GREMLIN* (Back Cover), 42-5233 *RIGOR-MORTIS* (profile 8), 42-5350 "*Skinhead*"/*Nosey* (profile 10), 42-5836 *Hot Cock*, 42-97165 "*sleepy-time GAL*" (profile 30), 42-97906 *Miss Tallahassee Lassee*, 42-30333 *Sandman*, 42-31886 "*amazin' MAZIE*" (profile 27), 44-6347 *Princess O'Rourke* and 44-6362 *Jack HALEY'S COMET* (profile 34).

4

B-17F-5-BO 41-24408 *PLUTOCRAT(E)* of the 32nd BS/301st BG, Biskra, Algeria, December 1942

PLUTOCRAT(E) was assigned to the 32nd BS/301st BG in the USA on 10 July 1942, in turn being allocated to Lt David Bishop and his crew. The bomber was named for 'Pluto' the puppy, which the crew adopted as a mascot soon after arriving in England. The canine had been found near the group's Chelveston home, and it was duly transported to North Africa in 41-24408 when the 301st headed south in November 1942. Amongst the bomber's crew was one of the 32nd BS's lead ship bombardiers, Capt Robert E Black, who was credited with single-handedly sinking four enemy ships and sharing in the destruction of the Italian heavy cruiser *Trieste* on 10 April 1943. Four days earlier, Black had been awarded the DFC for his participation as lead bombardier in a raid that spectacularly sank a munitions ship off the Tunisian port city of Bizerte. He flew 49 of his 50 missions in *PLUTOCRAT(E)*, during which time the bomber lost 22 engines, had its vertical fin and horizontal stabilisers replaced and a replacement Plexiglas nose fitted. The aeroplane completed 65 combat missions with the group before transferring to the 49th BS/2nd BG in October 1943. Later still it went to the 483rd BG on 29 April 1944, where it remained until returning to the USA in December of that same year. Having survived the war, 41-24408 was eventually scrapped in Albuquerque in June 1945. The bomber's nose art incorporated the Walt Disney character 'Pluto' sitting on a yellow bomb. Seen here early in its career, the B-17's mission log (applied on said yellow bomb) shows just eight sorties completed. Its mission tally was represented in standard fashion on the port side, together with three fighter claims. At this time there were no group markings in use, and the bomber also has the yellow surround to its national insignia.

5

B-17F-27-BO 41-24618 *Lil Jo* of the 352nd BS/301st BG, Tafaraoui, Algeria, Spring 1943

Lil Jo was originally flown to North Africa from England in November 1942 by Lt Charles Paine's crew. One of the early F-models that had factory-applied medium green camouflage splotches daubed over its standard Olive Drab upper surfaces, the bomber is depicted here early in its career with

the 352nd BS. Therefore, it features no group markings and still boasts early style national insignia. The bomber was transferred to the 49th BS/2nd BG on 14 November 1943, by which time it had completed 60 missions. 41-24618's combat career lasted until 24 February 1944, when it was shot down by enemy fighters during Mission 150 – an attack on the Daimler-Puch aircraft components factory in Steyr, Austria, as part of the USAAF's 'Big Week' offensive. *Lil Jo*, flown by Fit Off George Durney, was leading the ill-fated 49th BS on this day, the unit losing all seven of its B-17s to either flak or fighters during the course of the mission. 41-24618's crew baled out and were all taken prisoner. The 2nd BG as a whole lost 14 aircraft on 24 February, with 27 crewmen being killed and 113 captured.

6

B-17F-10-DL 42-2981 *SNOOZIN' SUZAN* of the 414th BS/97th BG, Chateaudun-du-Rhumel, Algeria, 8 May 1943

SNOOZIN' SUSAN was assigned to the 97th BG on 30 January 1943 at Chateaudun-du-Rhumel (now Chelghoum El Eid) airfield. It is depicted here after its crew had completed 25 missions, claimed five fighters shot down and sunk a ship. At this time the group used the last two digits of its serial number, painted in either white or yellow on the nose, as an aircraft identifier. *SNOOZIN' SUSAN* was transferred to the 348th BS/99th BG in mid November 1943 and was then badly damaged in an accident on 1 May 1944, by which time it had completed a further 15 missions. 42-2981 was not repaired until late September 1944, and was duly scrapped in May 1945.

7

B-17F-50-DL 42-3343 "*Slick CHICK*" of the 32nd BS/301st BG, Lucera, Italy, January 1944

In December 1943 all four groups controlled by the 5th BW moved to new bases on the Foggia plain in Italy. The wing would eventually occupy five sites located within a 12-mile radius of Foggia, namely Lucera (301st BG), Amendola (2nd and 97th BGs), Tortorella (99th BG), Celone (463rd BG from March 1944) and Sterparone (483rd BG from April 1944). "*Slick CHICK*" appears here in profile just after the 5th BW's transfer to Italy, by which time the aircraft had been retrofitted with later style cheek and waist gun positions. The bomber had originally been assigned to the 32nd BS on 14 June 1943, and it went on to fly a total of 78 missions with the 301st BG. 42-3343 was eventually converted into a weather ship in the summer of 1944 and salvaged in July 1945.

8

B-17F-40-BO 42-5233 "*RIGOR-MORTIS*" of the 32nd BS/301st BG, Ain M'Lila, Algeria, January 1943

"RIGOR-MORTIS" was assigned to the 32nd BS/301st BG on 31 December 1942, and went on to fly 95 missions with the group. Its original crew

comprised pilot Don Brazee, co-pilot Randrup, navigator Burt Lewis, bombardier Emory Cook, engineer Farrell, radio operator Willoughby, ball turret gunner Lovelace, waist gunner Wall and tail gunner Kelly. "RIGOR-MORTIS" was transferred to the 96th BS/2nd BG on 14 November 1943, with whom it completed a further 18 missions before transferring to the 346th BS/99th BG on 28 March 1944. Never flown operationally by the latter 99th, the bomber was quickly reassigned to the 817th BS/483rd BG upon the latter group's arrival in the MTO three days later. "RIGOR-MORTIS" was returned to the USA in July 1944 and scrapped four months later.

9

B-17F-50-BO 42-5346 THE RELUCTANT DRAGON of the 414th BS/97th BG, Depienne, Tunisia, 9 October 1943

THE RELUCTANT DRAGON was assigned to the 414th BS/97th BG on 31 December 1942 and is depicted here after it had completed 68 missions with the group. By then the bomber's crews had also been credited with downing two enemy aircraft and sinking two freighters. *THE RELUCTANT DRAGON* was transferred to the 347th BS/99th BG on 14 November 1943 and then to the 483rd BG on 31 March 1944. The veteran bomber returned to the USA in July 1944 and was scrapped in September 1945.

10

B-17F-50-BO 42-5350 "Skinhead"/Nosey of the 32nd BS/301st BG, Oudna, Tunisia, September 1943

The dual named "Skinhead"/Nosey was assigned to the 32nd BS/301st BG on 21 January 1943, and is seen here after it had flown 52 missions with the group. Fifteen missions later, the bomber was transferred to the 429th BS/2nd BG (on 14 November 1943), with whom it flew a further five sorties. The B-17 was then passed on to the 347th BS/99th BG on 28 March 1944, and it flew a solitary mission with the group before being given to the 816th BS/483rd BG on the 31st of that month. The bomber was returned to the USA on 8 July 1944, and was sold for scrap in August 1945.

11

B-17F-50-BO 42-5388 NEVER SATISFIED of the 348th BS/99th BG, Tortorella, Italy, March 1944
NEVER SATISFIED was assigned to the 348th BS/99th BG on 11 May 1943, and is seen here after completing 90 missions, and with seven fighter kills credited to its gunners. The bomber features the early 5th BW geometric marking of a white diamond, denoting the 99th BG, on its tail. Beneath this is an earlier version of the same marking which has been crudely painted out – a change seen on many of the group's early F-models. The white roman III represented the 348th BS, the 99th BG's 346th, 347th BS and 416th BSs being assigned I, II and IV respectively. March 1944 also saw the bomber transferred to the 817th BS/483rd

BG on 31 March, the 99th receiving a brand new B-17G in its place. 42-5388 would duly complete a further 14 missions with the 817th BS, and it was eventually salvaged in November 1945.

12

B-17F-55-BO 42-29473 YANKEE DOODLE of the 347th BS/99th BG, Tortorella, Italy, February 1944

YANKEE DOODLE was assigned to the 347th BS/99th BG on 2 February 1943, and is depicted here having completed 49 missions and been credited with 11 fighters destroyed. The bomber also features the legend *DANGER ZONE* painted below its starboard waist window. The B-17 is marked with the early 5th BW geometric white diamond, denoting its assignment to the 99th BG, as well as the white roman II of the 347th BS. 42-29473 was transferred to the 483rd BG on 31 March 1944 and eventually wound up with the 342nd BS/97th BG on 22 April 1944. The latter unit gutted the aircraft and used it as an unarmed weather ship from June of that year until VE-Day. The veteran bomber was subsequently scrapped in March 1946.

13

B-17F-55-BO 42-29485 Miss Fury of the 840th BS/483rd BG, Tortorella, Italy, April 1944

The 483rd BG arrived in the MTO with its factory-fresh B-17Gs in March 1944, and the group completed its in-theatre training with the battle-seasoned 99th BG. The latter unit was in turn given permission by 5th BW HQ to exchange its combat-weary F-models with the 483rd's new G-models, the trade taking place on 31 March. Many of the older aircraft involved in the swap had flown over 100 missions, and they were hastily retired over the next few weeks as more replacement B-17Gs arrived from the USA. *Miss Fury* was one of those aircraft handed over to the 483rd BG, the bomber having originally been assigned to the 416th BS/99th BG on 20 February 1943. The 840th BG flew an additional seven missions with 42-29485 prior to it being badly damaged on 31 July 1944. Duly repaired, and stripped of its armament, *Miss Fury* was issued to the 772nd BS/463rd BG as a weather ship. It was eventually scrapped in October 1945. Depicted in profile as the bomber appeared in the spring of 1944, *Miss Fury* boasts a bomb log that totals 105 missions and six fighter kills, and the red tail control surfaces that had just been introduced to improve group recognition. Another addition to the horizontal stabilisers at this time was the repetition of the group markings (in this case the star Y) on both upper surfaces. No marking denoting individual squadrons within the group was used until coloured cowlings were introduced during the final weeks of the war. The previous 99th BG diamond is still clearly visible, and the circle-3 (only used during March-April 1944) represented the 99th's 'third group' status within the 5th BW. All four groups within the wing at that time were assigned a number, with 1 representing the 2nd, 2 the 97th, 3 the 99th and 4 the 301st, but only the latter group continued its use

after April – the 463rd and 483rd BGs were never assigned such a number. The number-in-a-disc style marking was used as both a squadron and group identifier at various times by the different units within the 5th BW during the war, and its random application, coupled with the high number of aeroplane transfers in the MTO, has led to previous misidentification of the wing's units. Although in this instance the previous markings remained from the bomber's time with the 99th BG, some attempt had also been made to obliterate old markings with either medium green or black paint. They were still discernible nevertheless. *Miss Fury* also featured a naked blonde on the starboard side of the fin in amongst the various group/squadron markings.

14

B-17F-55-BO 42-29507 "LADY LUCK" of the 773rd BS/463rd BG, Celone, Italy, October 1944

Depicted when it reached the century mission mark, "LADY LUCK" had also by that time been credited with the destruction of no less than 13 fighters. 42-29507 was yet another veteran F-model that was transferred from the 99th BG to the 483rd on 31 March 1944. Originally assigned to the 416th BS/99th BG on 20 February 1943, it went from the 840th BS/483rd BG to the 773rd BS/463rd BG in September 1944. Having survived the war and returned to the USA, the bomber was scrapped in July 1945. The B-17 features full late war 463rd BG markings, including the pie slice Y and yellow tail control surfaces, the latter having been adopted during the summer of 1944. The aircraft's crew chief whilst with the 463rd was T/Sgt Ralf Pixler.

15

B-17F-55-BO 42-29509 "BAD PENNY" of the 840th BS/483rd BG, Tortorella, Italy, April 1944

"BAD PENNY" was originally assigned to the 416th BS/99th BG on 20 February 1943, and it flew 114 missions with the group. Transferred to the 840th BS/483rd BG on 31 March, the bomber went on to complete a further 12 missions. It is depicted here soon after joining the 483rd, having flown 116 missions and claimed 14 enemy fighters destroyed – the bomber's nose art and bomb log were completely repainted when with the 483rd BG. Unusually, its star Y marking has been applied in black. The group symbol was supposed to be sprayed in white on camouflaged aeroplanes and black on all-metal B-17s. It also has a single white engine cowling, which was the late war identifier for the 840th BS.

16

B-17F-55-BO 42-29513 "EL-DIABLO" of the 346th BS/99th BG, Oudna, Tunisia, August 1944

EL-DIABLO (The Devil) was assigned to the 346th BS/99th BG on 23 February 1943 and flown to North Africa by group CO, Col Fay R Upthegrove. It went on to complete 114 missions with the group, and was one of the few F-models that was

not reassigned to the 483rd BG on 31 March 1944. Upthegrove assumed command of the B-24-equipped 304th BW in the autumn of 1944, and he took his B-17 with him to Cerignola, where he used it as a personal transport! *EL-DIABLO* is depicted after 66 missions, by which time its gunners had claimed ten fighter kills. The B-17's nose art was repeated on the port side as well. Finally, the bomber is marked with the early 99th BG geometric white diamond and 346th BS white I.

17

B-17F-65-BO 42-29696 Fort Alamo II of the 840th BS/483rd BG, Tortorella, Italy, October 1944

This aircraft was originally assigned to the 416th BS/99th BG on 11 May 1943, with whom it flew 114 missions. Transferred to the 840th BS/483rd BG on 31 March 1944, the bomber was eventually declared War Weary on 15th October and salvaged in Italy. The B-17 is depicted as it appeared with the 483rd at the very end of its long combat career, with all 131 missions marked on the aircraft's nose. The bomber is also adorned with full late war group markings, including the white engine cowls of the 840th BS. The star Y fin symbol has been applied in white, which was standard for camouflaged aeroplanes. Still visible on the fin is the painted over white diamond of the 99th BG, as well as the white IV of the 416th BS.

18

B-17F-75-BO 42-29907 Rhomar II of the 49th BS/2nd BG, Massicault, Tunisia, September 1943

Assigned to the 96th BS/2nd BG B-17F on 30 April 1943, 42-29907 wears the early 5th BW/2nd BG white circle marking. The group also used a geometric system for its individual squadrons, the 304th BS using two horizontal bars, the 49th BS a V, the 96th BS a T and the 429th BS a split arrow. The regular pilot of *Rhomar II*, Lt Earl W Fitzpatrick, chose the name (partly his mother's and partly his girlfriend's) for the bomber, but it was never painted on. The crew were a little unhappy about the name, as they would have preferred the usual pin-up rather than *Rhomar*. The bomber received two direct flak hits on a bombing mission to marshalling yards in Bologna on 5 October 1943, causing the No 2 engine to run away before being feathered. The No 4 engine then quickly followed suit. The No 1 engine eventually began to lose oil before bursting into flames, and it too had to be feathered. The No 2 powerplant was then brought back on line, but the No 3 engine caught fire minutes later and had to be feathered, so the No 4 had to be powered up again. The aeroplane was then being kept aloft exclusively by two runaway engines, and its fate was sealed when an estimated ten fighters attacked. By the time Fitzpatrick gave the order to bale out, the bomber gunners claimed to have shot down either five or six enemy fighters during the aerial battle. All the crew escaped from the bomber except for the tail gunner, who was killed during the fighter attacks. The men were circled by German fighters after

their parachutes opened, but were not fired upon. *Rhomas II* flew on crazily for some time, before eventually crashing into a mountain and bursting into flames. The crew landed near Pescia, pilot Lt Earl W Fitzpatrick, co-pilot Lt John M Carlson, top turret gunner T/Sgt Stanley J Austin, ball gunner Homer H Hutcheson and left waist gunner Willis I Sheldon evading capture for about two months before splitting up. Austin, Carlson and Hutcheson were later captured. Navigator Lt Thomas F Berschig, Radio Operator T/Sgt Joseph A Chilek, right waist gunner, Joseph R Hunt and bombardier Lt R D McCain were all wounded prior to baling out of the bomber, and they were quickly taken prisoner and treated for their injuries. Tail gunner William K Guilfoil was buried by the villagers of Serra Pistoiese, in Cimitero Laserra, Italy.

19

B-17F-95-BO 42-30267 *Hustlin' Huzzy* of the 414th BS/97th BG, Amendola, Italy, February 1944

Hustlin' Huzzy was originally assigned to the 96th BS/2nd BG on 27 July 1943, and then transferred to the 341st BS/97th BG on 14 November that same year. It was brought down, along with the Lt Fleener crew, by Rumanian fighters on a mission to Ploesti on 23 June 1944, crashing near Bucharest. The bomber is shown as it looked after flying six missions with the 97th BG, the group's triangle and 414th I having been painted over the 2nd BG's circle and 96th BS's T. The name *Gus* appears on the starboard cheek gun position. *Hustlin' Huzzy's* undersides are stained with mud and dust reflecting the poor state of the airfields around Foggia during the winter months.

20

B-17F-100-BO 42-30384 *SIROCCO* of the 340th BS/97th BG, Amendola, Italy, April 1944

SIROCCO was originally assigned to the 347th BS/99th BG on 29 March 1943, and was transferred to the 340th BS/97th BG on 14 November 1943. The bomber was eventually returned to the USA in April 1944 and eventually scrapped in July 1945. Unusually, its name was applied both to its nose and tail, and it is seen here after completing 40 missions, and claiming eight fighter kills. The 99th BG's diamond marking is still visible beneath the newly-painted triangle Y of the 97th BG. The arrival of the 483rd BG in April 1944 led to a revision of all group markings, with the 97th's being modified so that the 5th BW's Y appeared within the triangle.

21

B-17G-15-VE 42-97508 *JUANITA* of the 96th BS/2nd BG, Amendola, Italy, February 1945

On 28 March 1944 the 2nd BG traded all of its B-17Fs to other groups within the 5th BW. The 2nd then became the first unit in the wing to be exclusively equipped with B-17Gs. One of those machines brought in from another group was *JUANITA*, which had originally been assigned to the 416th BS/99th BG in January 1944. It is depicted as

it appeared with the 2nd BG near war's end, with the group's white tail control surfaces, blue wing bands edged with white and white T representing the 96th BS. The aeroplane also wears the 2nd BG's late war marking, incorporating the 5th BW's Y within the group circle. *JUANITA* survived the war and returned to the USA, where it was scrapped (at Walnut Ridge) in January 1946.

22

B-17G-20-BO 42-31452 "*FIFTY PACKIN MAMA*" of the 20th BS/2nd BG, Amendola, Italy, March 1944

"FIFTY PACKIN MAMA" was assigned to the 20th BS/2nd BG on 25 December 1943. It survived in the frontline until 22 July 1944, when the bomber's No 3 engine was hit by flak on a mission to Ploesti and the aircraft crashed at Zimicea, Rumania. Only three of Lt Austin's crew managed to bale out. 42-31452 is depicted having completed 15 missions, wearing full 2nd BG late war markings including the circle Y, together with a blue wing band edged with white and two horizontal bars for the 20th BS. The circle 1 was a short-lived 5th BW marking that represented the unit's 'first group' status within the wing. The name "*LOONEY*" appears near the port cheek gun position.

23

B-17G-25-BO 42-31684 *JOKER* of the 774th BS/463rd BG, Celone, Italy, May 1944

JOKER was assigned to the 774th BS/463rd BG on 9 March 1944, and the bomber survived until 7 July, when it was downed, along with the Lt Doran crew, by fighters over Blechhammer, crashing near Vicany, Germany. The B-17 is depicted after completing 41 missions, by which time it had a replacement Cheyenne tail gun position fitted, which was left unpainted.

24

B-17G-25-BO 42-31759 *THE HUSTLIN' GAL* of the 774th BS/463rd BG, Celone, Italy, April 1944

42-31759 was assigned to the 774th BS/463rd BG on 24 February 1944 and flown by Lt Anthony Naniotka's crew. Exactly three months later, on 24 April, they were attacked by fighters over Ploesti and the bomber exploded, although five parachutes were seen, with a Bf109 circling the survivors. The crew in full were pilot Anthony Naniotka, co-pilot Robert Masneri, navigator John G O'Keefe, bombardier Roy B Meyer, tail gunner Howard E Schuh, radio operator Alexander Spears, waist gunners Louis G Smith and Harry J Majchrzak, engineer Jordan F Bell and ball turret gunner Haskel Smith.

25

B-17G-25-BO 42-31836 *PIG CHASER* of the 772nd BS/463rd BG, Celone, Italy, June 1944

Delivered to the 463rd BG in February 1944, *PIG CHASER* was crewed by pilot Lt Arnold Watrous, co-pilot Clarence Bose, bombardier Don Wise, navigator Paul Moore, top turret gunner/flight engineer Floyd Crow, left waist gunner Howell T

MacFarland, right waist gunner Robert A Pherson, radio operator Merle Crawfoot, ball turret gunner John Zdunik and tail gunner Richard Hammond. Don Wise first flew in *PIG CHASER* when it was brand new, but it did not take long for the missions to begin leaving tell-tale holes and scrapes all over its body. On one sortie the aircraft had a hole blasted through its right wing the size of a derby hat, the damage being caused by an 88 mm flak shell. It was a miracle that the round did not explode, for if it had done so the bomber would have gone down in flames. On the 18 May 1944 mission to Ploesti, the 463rd was led by Maj James Patton, CO of the 772nd BS, in lead bomber 42-38114 *The Atoner* (named for its pilot, James H Toner). The weather was absolutely abysmal, and the groups were eventually recalled. The 463rd BG did not receive the recall, however, and when the crews came out of the clouds, with Ploesti just ahead of them, they looked around and saw that their 28 aeroplanes were alone. They made their bomb run anyway through formidable flak, and then turning off the target they were savagely attacked by 100 fighters. The gunners put up a gallant fight, and it is estimated that 30 fighters were either damaged or destroyed before USAAF escorts showed up, but by then seven bombers had been lost. The unit received a DUC for the mission. On this day Lt Watrous's crew were flying B-17G 42-97550 *Lassie & Her Lads*, and they had been joined by a new crewmen that had just arrived from the USA – experienced crews would take along new crewmen to break them in. The newly-arrived navigator, Lt Henry H Wamble, was rolled up in a little ball during the engagement, scared to death, yet he went on to become the navigator for 44-6262 *Miss Pan Am*. Wise operated the twin 0.50-cal guns mounted in the chin turret immediately beneath him during the mission, and he saw that he was putting tracer bullets into an oncoming Bf 109. The fighter (he could see the winking of the guns on its wings and the cannon in the nose) then hit the magazine for the guns under him, causing it to explode. The floor came up and blew his left boot off and crushed the left side of his foot. The waist gunners reported that as the fighter went past, it was smoking, so Wise was credited with its destruction. *PIG CHASER* is depicted after 25 missions, in June 1944.

26

B-17G-25-BO 42-31844 *THE SWOOSE (1944 Model)* of the 772nd BS/463rd BG, Celone, Italy, September 1944

Originally assigned to the 463rd BG on 28 March 1944, *THE SWOOSE* was piloted by group CO Col Frank Kurtz. It was the second Fortress to bear this name, the original *SWOOSE* being B-17D 40-3097 assigned to the 19th BG in the Pacific. The name was derived from a popular Kay Kyser song 'Alexander The Swoose (Half Swan-Half Goose)', and referred to the fact that this particular B-17D was constructed from various salvaged aeroplanes. Originally named by one of its first pilots,

Lt Weldon H Smith, the first *THE SWOOSE* was flown by Kurtz as a transport for Lt Gen George H Brett. When the Colonel later flew with the 463rd BG (which he nicknamed 'The Swoose Group'), he named his lead ship *THE SWOOSE (1944 Model)*. Kurtz's daughter was born on 6 September 1944, and he named her Swoosie after his B-17! Swoosie Kurtz is now a well-known Hollywood actress. Unusually, *THE SWOOSE (1944 Model)* had its nose art duplicated on the rear fuselage, as did the original *SWOOSE*. This aeroplane has a replacement fin section, with the previous radio call number painted over and the late war yellow rudder used by the 463rd BG, but it lacks this colour on the horizontal stabiliser. The bomber survived the war and was eventually salvaged on in May 1945.

27

B-17G-30-BO 42-31886 "*amazin' MAZIE*" of the 32nd BS/301st BG, Lucera, Italy, April 1944

42-31886 was originally slated to go to the 709th BS/446th BG but was instead assigned to the 32nd BS/301st BG on 5 February 1944. It was named by Maj Edwin F Harding Jr for his wife Maizie Ann Harding. The bomber's crew chief, T/Sgt William R 'Speedy' Wadlington, helped ensure that the aircraft flew 68 consecutive missions without a turn back due to mechanical failure, although not without incident. On its third mission the aircraft was damaged over Regensburg and was one of only two B-17s from the squadron that got back to base. It had to have a wing changed, along with all four engines and propellers, a new chin turret, fitted landing flaps and a completely new tail. Three missions later flak caught the main spar in the right wing, necessitating a replacement. It took two days to carry out the repairs before the bomber flew again. It then came back with the wings riddled, so a new set was put on by 'Speedy' and his crew. Luck prevailed for a month, as his bomber made every mission with no trouble. But this run did not last, for the aircraft returned with gaping holes in the wing tanks, so for a fourth time the wings were dropped. Several missions later there was yet another wing change and, on its 55th mission all four engines were hit and the left wing for the sixth time had to be replaced. The veteran bomber's luck finally ran out, however, on 7 August 1944 over Blechhammer, when it was hit by flak and downed by fighters, crashing in Austria. The entire Gerald Bauer crew baled out and became PoWs. The bomber is seen here marked with the revised (as of April 1944) 301st BG square Y and white circle 1, which was the group's squadron numbering system between June 1943 and April 1944, but which was not applied to many of its aeroplanes. The squadrons numbers were 1, 2, 3 and 4 for the 32nd, 352nd, 353rd and 419th BSs respectively. This latter marking was replaced by a letter code, and all aeroplanes were given a white circle 4 to represent the 301st's status as the fourth group within the 5th BW.

28**B-17G-35-BO 42-32044 *GOOD DEAL* of the 815th BS/483rd BG, Tortorella, Italy, January 1945**

This was the last camouflaged B-17 to leave the Boeing Seattle plant, being assigned to the 483rd BG on 13 March 1944. *GOOD DEAL* was piloted by Lt Paul Ray, whose crew named the bomber and flew it from the USA. It wears the late war 483rd BG white star Y marking, as well as red tail control surfaces, whilst the blue engine cowlings denote the 815th BS. The B-17 survived the war and was finally scrapped in the USA in December 1945.

29**B-17G-30-DL 42-38201 *2nd Patches* of the 346th BS/99th BG, Tortorella, Italy, May 1944**

On 31 March 1944 B-17F 42-29856 *Patches* of the 346th BS/99th BG effectively 'switched' places with B-17G 42-38201 of the 815th BS/483rd BG. The newer G-model was appropriately named *2nd Patches* by the 99th BG. The latter aircraft is seen here with a replacement wing panel, fin and crew access door. It carries 20 mission symbols and wears 99th BG late war markings, with the addition of a shark-toothed chin turret. The black diamond Y represents the 99th BG and the I the 346th BS. *2nd Patches* crashed on take off on 24 August 1944 and was salvaged, whilst the original *Patches* only survived until 31 March 1944, when it was brought down by flak over Wiener Neustadt, along with the Scranton crew, two of whom were killed and remaining eight made PoWs.

30**B-17G-40-BO 42-97165 "*sleepy-time GAL*" of the 353rd BS/301st BG, Lucera, Italy, June 1944**

This aircraft was assigned to the 353rd BS/301st BG on 16 March 1944, and it lasted less than four months before being lost due to mechanical failure – it crashed near Lesach on a mission to Munich on 19 July 1944, with the McGill crew all being made PoWs. The B-17 is shown in late group colours, with the white square of the Y wing marking still being used at this time. The white circle of the 4 group marking has been dropped, the 4 denoting the 301st BG's status as the fourth group of the 5th BW. The C represents the 353rd BS, with the letters A, B, C and D being assigned to the 32nd, 352nd, 353rd and 419th BSs respectively. These letters replaced the white circle and number system in April 1944. The previous 1, 2, 3 and 4, representing the 323rd, 352nd, 353rd and 419th BSs, were all replaced with the group's circle 4 in April 1944.

31**B-17G-35-DL 42-106995 *Anthony J* of the 348th BS/99th BG, Tortorella, Italy, May 1944**

Originally assigned to the 816th BS/483rd BG on 10 March 1944, *Anthony J* was transferred to the 99th BG on the last day of that same month. Its brief combat career lasted until 23 June, when it became yet another victim of the Ploesti defences. Fighters hit two of the bomber's engines and it

went down with the Lt Brazier crew, crashing at Balsh. The name *Anthony J* is flanked by three green shamrocks. The black diamond Y represents the 99th BG and the I the 348th BS.

32**B-17G-35-DL 42-107143 *SPORT* of the 840th BS/483rd BG, Sterparone, Italy, January 1945**

Assigned to the 483rd BG on 23 April 1944, this B-17 wears the full late war markings used by the group – a black star Y with red tail control surfaces, including the white cowls representing the 840th BS. The aircraft carried no nose art, and simply had its name written on its nose in black. The bomber survived the war and was eventually scrapped at Kingman in December 1945.

33**B-17G-50-DL 44-6283 *Mary Lou/Betty Lou* of the 773rd BS/463rd BG, Celone, Italy, March 1945**

This aircraft was flown to Foggia in July 1944 by Capt Woodrow 'Woody' J Wiley and crew. At that time *Mary Lou* did not actually carry her name, simply having a Varga pin-up on the tail. Upon arrival at Foggia another crew took the aeroplane over, and they were responsible for naming it *Betty Lou*. By this stage of the war the 463rd had discontinued the use of the Y marking, and only carried the yellow-coloured tail control surfaces to denote the group. This aircraft, flown by Lt Tubman, was one of 29 'heavies' lost by the Eighth and Fifteenth Air Forces over Berlin on 24 March 1945, and was one of ten bombers to be claimed by Me 262s from JG 7.

34**B-17G-50-DL 44-6362 *Jack HALEY'S COMET* of the 32nd BS/301st BG, Lucera, Italy, January 1945**

Originally assigned to the 483rd BG on 26 July 1944, this B-17 was reassigned to the 32nd BS/301st BG on 12 August 1944. It is seen in late war markings, including a green rudder adopted in the closing weeks of the war. The 4 represents the fourth group of the 5th BW and the A denotes the 32nd BS. By this time the white square had been discontinued, leaving the simple Y to mark the group. The aircraft survived the war and was finally scrapped at Kingman in December 1945.

35**B-17G-50-DL 44-6405 *BIG YANK* of the 840th BS/483rd BG, Sterparone, Italy, March 1945**

Assigned to the 483rd BG on 17 August 1944, this aircraft is depicted after completing 30 missions. Its crew chief, T/Sgt Irvin Davis, commissioned the portrait of President Franklin Roosevelt, which was painted on the nose by a local Italian artist. On the mission to the Daimler-Benz tank works in Berlin on 24 March 1945, Lt William Strapko's crew flew 'tail end Charlie' in this aircraft, and his gunners were credited with three Me 262 destroyed – two by top turret gunner Howard Wehner and one and a probable by tail gunner Lincoln Broyhill. It is known that three JG 7 fighters were indeed shot down that

day, but two fell to USAAF fighters. This aircraft was eventually converted into an Air-Sea Rescue mount, equipped with a lifeboat and based at Pisa. It carries full late war 483rd BG markings, including a black star Y, red tail control surfaces and white engine cowlings, representing the 840th BS. The names *Ken/Jack-D* appear on the chin turret. The bomber survived the war and was eventually scrapped at Walnut Ridge in late December 1945.

36

B-17G-50-DL 44-6407 *Miss BeHavin'* of the 32nd BS/301st BG, Lucera, Italy, March 1945

This bomber was assigned to the 301st BG on 17 August 1944 and is depicted in full late war markings, including a green rudder. On 14 March 1945 the Lt Walter Podasek crew flew this B-17 to bomb the marshalling yards in Komaron, Hungary. They encountered heavy flak before reaching the target and were forced to salvo their bombs due to a loss of power. With one engine out and two others on reduced power, they attempted to reach Russian-held territory in Poland. The crew lost altitude and eventually the pilot put the aeroplane on auto-pilot and the crew baled out at 1500 ft near Myslenice, south of Cracow. As they came down they were shot at from the ground by Russian troops, captured and jailed, the communists believing them to be German paratroopers. The pilot spoke Polish and was able to arrange their release, and they then made their own way to Odessa, where they boarded a freighter and were eventually returned to their unit. Although the crew believed that their aeroplane had been destroyed in the crash, recent research has shown that 44-6407 continued to fly crewless for 300 kilometres, and had belly-landed in a field between Krotoszyn and Ostrow, south-east of Poznan.

37

B-17G-55-DL 44-6542 *542* of the 429th BS/2nd BG, Amendola, Italy, December 1944

With the advent of the B-17G, nose art went into decline in the 5th BW. This was due to a shortage of aircraft caused by losses or damage, so groups took to assigning crews to any aircraft available, and the personal attachment of crews to a particular machine was lost. With it, new editions of nose art were lost as well. For example, this aircraft has a replacement fin taken from an Olive Drab 301st BG machine, the previous serial number and group markings having simply been painted over. Full late war 2nd BG markings are carried – dark blue rudder tail control surfaces and a black wing stripe, the 429th BS being represented by the split arrow and white rudder band. It also has a blue fin cap, which may also have been a late war addition to squadron markings, as 20th BS aeroplanes also carried yellow fin caps. The B-7 forced landed with three engines out at Prakos, in Yugoslavia, on 1 April 1945, the Cope crew returning by C-47. The aircraft was repaired and later returned to the unit. Originally assigned to the group on 3 October 1944, *542* was finally scrapped at Kingman in December 1945.

38

B-17G-50-DL 44-6544 "*KWITURBITCHIN II*" of the 414th BS/97th BG, Amendola, Italy, March 1945

In the last weeks of the war the 341st and 414th BSs introduced red-coloured tail control surfaces, red checkerboards and diagonal stripes respectively. As with *542*, this B-17 also has a replacement fin with the previous serial number painted over. It has the standard late war group marking triangle Y and the circle 4 representing the 414th BS. The bomber also has a single fighter kill carried above its name. Originally assigned to the group on 11th October 1944, the Fortress survived the war and was eventually scrapped at Kingman in January 1946.

39

B-17G-55-VE 44-8247 *Leading Lady* of the 772nd BS/463rd BG, Celone, Italy, February 1945

Leading Lady, like many PFF ships in the MTO, was finished in overall medium grey, although the reason for this remains unknown. It wears the full late war group markings, including the yellow tail control surfaces. The bomber's name was written on the fin fillet in the style of its crew chief's handwriting (T/Sgt Ralf Pixler). The significance of the 3 on the tail is unknown at this time. All the guns are fitted with early style flash suppressors. Originally assigned to the group on 18 October 1944, *Leading Lady* survived the war and was finally salvaged by the Ninth Air Force in Germany in May 1946.

Back Cover

B-17F-35-BO 42-5145 *THE GREMLIN* of the 32nd BS/301st BG, Oudna, Tunisia, Summer 1943

Originally assigned to the 301st BG on 11 January 1943, this aircraft went on to fly 62 missions with the group. It was transferred to the 96th BS/2nd BG on 14 November and eventually shot down by enemy fighters over Padua whilst still serving with the group on 11 March 1944 – pilot Lt William Peters and five of his crew survived the incident. *THE GREMLIN* is depicted after completing 22 missions with the 301st BG, the bomber being marked with the early 5th BW geometric white square, denoting its group assignment, but it has no marking to denote its squadron.

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**B-17 FLYING FORTRESS UNITS OF THE MTO**

Although the Fifteenth Air Force was dismissed as 'minor league' by the Eighth Air Force, strategic bombers from this outfit did a 'major league' job on Axis targets in southern Europe following its formation in Italy in November 1943. Flying Fortresses had first seen action in North Africa in October 1942, flying with the Twelfth Air Force against the *Afrika Korps*. These early missions involved units posted in from the 'Mighty Eighth' in England, and by June 1943 the number of B-17s in-theatre had increased to three

groups – the 97th, 99th and 301st BGs. Targets switched to Italy following the surrender of Axis forces in Tunisia, and by year end it had been decided that control of all heavy bombers in-theatre would be passed onto the newly-created Fifteenth Air Force. 'Heavies' would now undertake strategic strikes on targets in northern Italy, Germany, Austria, France and countries in the Balkans and eastern Europe. At its peak strength, the Fifteenth's B-17 force comprised six groups of four squadrons each, all controlled by the 5th Bomb Wing.

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