

# **'COURAGE ABOVE THE CLOUDS: THE TRUE STORY OF THE HEROIC CREW OF B17 'MI-AMIGO'.'**

## **INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR**

This is a true story – of young men, in aerial combat, displaying extraordinary courage and fortitude. The crash of B17 'Mi-Amigo' in Endcliffe Park, Sheffield, on February 22<sup>nd</sup> 1944, returning badly damaged from a mission over Occupied Europe, with the crew sacrificing themselves to save lives on the ground, is truly heroic. Here, using newly-released material from military archives, the story of that fateful day is told fully for the first time. It also recounts in detail the fate of another crew from the 305<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group, and also tells what happened to two other crews, downed that day to the mission to Nazi-occupied Denmark. Thank-you for your interest; I hope you find their story both inspiring and humbling, as I have done.

This book is dedicated to the crews captained by Lt John Kriegshauser ('Mi-Amigo'); Lt Charlie Barnes ('Liberty Run'); Lt Bob Wolf ('Hot Rock') and Lt Bill Lavies ('Pot O'Gold') whose Flying Fortress bombers never returned home that fateful day. Their spirit lives on, their sacrifices remembered with gratitude.

Their story also includes material from the Luftwaffe Archives on the German airmen who engaged the bombers in battle above the clouds, and identifies for the first-time the young Me109 pilot whose attack led to the ultimate tragic demise of the 'Mi-Amigo' ... while also costing him his life.

Paul Allonby  
Chesterfield, UK.  
June 2014.

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Previously published, in part, as a series of six short books under the title 'The Ten Amigos'. This edition amalgamates the volumes and includes fresh additional information. Illustrated Paul Allonby, 2014. Cover photo of the crew of the 'Mi-Amigo' supplied by the Curtis family. **Book formatting by Amazon Kindle Publishing.**

## CHAPTER ONE: DILEMMA

THE dilemma facing B17 pilot Lt John Kriegshauser was acute. His Flying Fortress, nicknamed 'Mi-Amigo', badly damaged by an enemy fighter, with crewmen onboard needing urgent medical attention, and with engines fading fast, desperately needed somewhere to land.

Below were clouds – a grim British day of low cloud, complete with a mixture of rain and snow. The situation was dire. They'd followed the recommended mission track back from Nazi-occupied Denmark, and should by now be over England.

But fate was to play the cruellest of hands to Lt Kriegshauser, 23, as the young pilot, with 15 bombing missions to his name, peered out to find a landing place that would offer salvation.

He began to descend cautiously, and suddenly came out through the clouds low over a major city – Sheffield, in South Yorkshire. Ahead were houses, roads, trees and a splash of green: Endcliffe Park, a public play area, complete with a river, woods and a bandstand, in the picturesque Hunter's Bar district. The aircraft thundered low over the stone and brick built houses, tightly lined-up beneath her wings. Looking up, witnesses could see the olive-drab painted aircraft's unit markings .... a large black letter G in a white triangle on the tail fin, and her fuselage identification letters, WF-V, showing the 'Mi-Amigo' was from the 364<sup>th</sup> Bomber Squadron, 305<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group – part of the Mighty 8<sup>th</sup>: the 8<sup>th</sup> United States Army Air Force, based in England and waging daylight bombing raids against the Germans.

As Lt Kriegshauser used every bit of his skill and experience, at least one engine began to cut out. Seeing only the grassed area of the park ahead, a split-second decision was needed.

Later, a senior USAAF at the 8<sup>th</sup>'s headquarters in High Wycombe, would write the following citation: "Displaying consummate skill, he piloted the aircraft back to England. Although bad weather conditions were prevalent, Lt Kriegshauser attempted to locate a field in which to land.

"Engines became inoperative over a heavily built-up area and he was forced to crash-land.

"An English home was directly in the path of the bomber, but Lt Kriegshauser, exhibiting an exemplary devotion to duty, manoeuvred the crippled aeroplane over the dwelling.

"It crashed approximately 100 yards away. The courage, coolness and skill displayed by Lt Kriegshauser reflect the highest credit on himself and the armed forces of the United States of America."

The citation was for the posthumous award of the US Distinguished Flying Cross to Lt Kriegshauser, already the holder of the Air Medal with oak leaf clusters in recognition of missions flown over Occupied Europe.

For, sadly, none of the crew of 10 of the 'Mi-Amigo' survived the crash into mature woodland in the park, just a couple of minutes after 5pm on Tuesday, February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1944. Their aircraft smashed into a hillside at great speed, disintegrating and then exploding. They made the ultimate sacrifice.



The crew of 'Mi-Amigo'. Back row, from left: Melchor Hernandez, John Humphrey, Lyle Curtis and John Glennon Kriegshauser. Front row, from left: Maurice Robbins, Bob Mayfield, Harry Estabrooks; Vito Ambrosio (with Lyle Curtis' dog Peanuts); Charlie Tuttle and Maurice Williams. Photo taken Geiger Field, Spokane, Washington, USA in October 1943.

(Photo courtesy of the Curtis family)

## CHAPTER TWO: 'CAN DO'

LT JOHN Kriegshauser was already a member of the US Army Air Corps when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, catapulting the United States into World War Two. He'd actually joined up in August 1940 when his interest in short-wave radio led to him deciding to quit his home city of St Louis, Missouri, in search of a new career after previously working in a warehouse.

He started off as an enlisted man, working as a radio operator, and became a Sergeant instructor. However, his talent for clear thought, mechanical aptitude and good decision making marked him out as a potential pilot, so when America entered the war, he was selected for flight training, becoming an Officer and a Gentleman, when he was commissioned as a Lieutenant.

He was destined to join the 305<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group – stationed at Chelveston aerodrome in Northamptonshire in the English East Midlands.

The 305 were known as the 'Can Do' Group – as proudly stated on the unit's coat of arms. They were the group who played a key role in developing daylight bombing, under the leadership between June 1942 and May 1943 of Colonel Curtis LeMay, who played a key role in moulding bombing strategy, from World War Two through to the Vietnam War.

Comprising of three daylight bomber squadrons – 364, 365 and 366 Bombardment Squadrons, and a specialist night-flying B17 unit 422 Squadron – the 'Incredible 305' as they were known to the public were THE unit American personalities like aviator Eddie Rickenbacker, comedian Bob Hope, British and American senior politicians, and the King and Queen of England visited.

They were the unit which fired the imagination of war correspondents, who took to the skies to report on missions over Europe. The unit also inspired a post-war movie Twelve o'clock High, starring Gregory Peck, which followed a wartime film, Target Wilhelmshaven, which showed the 305 in real combat action, not the Hollywood reconstructed variant.

The 305 was awarded a Distinguished Unit Citation in April 1943 for missions over Occupied France, and again in January 1944, for daytime raids over Germany.

However, the price of daylight bombing was a high one for the crews of the 305, who between 1942-1945 flew 480 missions with the loss of more than 750 aircrew and 168 B-17s.

It was in to this heady atmosphere in November 1943 that Lt Kriegshauser and his crew stepped.

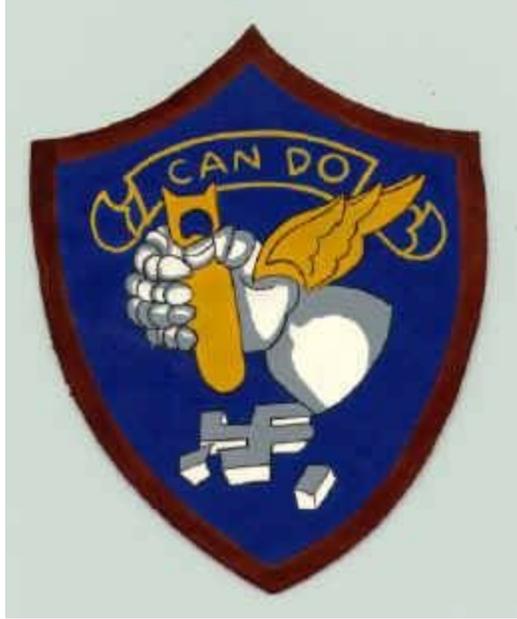


PHOTO captions (above): 305<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group badge (courtesy of the US Army Archives). Below: 364 Sqn's badge (courtesy of US Army Archives)



### CHAPTER 3: NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK

ARRIVING as combat replacements following losses suffered by the group in the Autumn of 1943, the crew of Lt Kriegshauser were already familiar on paper to the Operations Staff of the 305, and the Group's commanding officer, Colonel Ernest Lawson, who also was posted to Chelveston in November 1943.

Colonel Lawson, regarded very much as a 'hands-on' leader who would himself be killed in a combat mission in June 1944, eased back in his chair and read through the Form 66/1 personnel files on the Kriegshauser crew:

Co-pilot: 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Lyle Curtis, married, aged 23, a member of the Mormon Church, who hailed from Idaho. Previous occupation: rancher. (Lyle's wife Erma was pregnant with a daughter when he shipped out overseas. He received the news while based at Chelveston.)

Navigator: 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt John Humphrey, 23, from Indianapolis. Previous occupation: farmer. Devout member of the Roman Catholic Church.

Bombardier: 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Melchor 'Rey' Hernandez, born in El Paso in 1921, latterly living in Los Angeles. Previous occupation: student draughtsman. Colonel Lawson grinned – 'Rey' was a man of many talents, not least his prowess doing the jitter-bug on the dance floor at unit socials.

Flight engineer/top turret gunner: Staff Sgt Harry Estabrooks. Born 1922, from Kansas.

Radio operator: Staff Sgt Robert Mayfield, 21, from Illinois.

Ball turret gunner: Sgt Charles Tuttle. From Kentucky. Born 1923.

Right waist gunner: Sgt Vito Ambrosio, married, aged 24, from Brooklyn, New York.

Left waist gunner: Master Sgt Malcolm Williams, 23, Oklahoma. Sipping his coffee, Colonel Lawson noted Sgt Williams was a talented guitarist. "One for the unit band," he thought. By then, 305 already had its own march, composed to put a spring into the step of dancers at the weekly aerodrome hop.

Rear gunner: Sgt Maurice Robbins, 20, from Texas. His file noted him as an excellent shot. His brother, Sgt Ray Roberts, was also with the 305 as a radio operator.

All the Sergeants had come from skilled pre-war employment or student backgrounds, and had meshed together with the officers to form a good, solid crew.

"A typical snapshot of young America," noted Col Lawson. "A fine group of young men, dedicated to the cause, from a cross section of backgrounds, ranging from big city boys to small-town kids."

They'd flown together since being marshalled to the same heavy bomber training base at Geiger Field, Washington, where they practiced formation flying, navigation, and other essential tasks, while gelling together as a crew. And they weren't the only new kids on the block. Arriving at the same time was the crew of Lt Charles Barnes, whose fate was to be intertwined with that of the Kriegshauser crew.

PHOTO captions (below): Lyle Curtis and his wife Erma. And: Lyle, pre-war, with his dog drawn farm trolley. (Both photos courtesy of the Curtis family)



## CHAPTER 4: INSPIRATION AND EXAMPLE

THE missions came thick and fast for the Kriegshauser crew, who eventually got their own aircraft, B17G 42-31322, which had been manufactured by Boeing at its Seattle plant in October 1943.

They named her 'Mi-Amigo', with her nickname painted on the front of the fuselage, next to where Lt Hernandez, who picked the name, sat. Her name meant 'my friend' in Spanish, and was painted in yellow to contrast against her olive drab colour scheme.

Their aircraft had arrived in the UK in January 1944, and – having initially been earmarked for another Group – found her way to Chelveston on January 30<sup>th</sup> 1944 as a replacement bomber within the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force, destined to be part of America's war in the air against the Germans.

On February 20<sup>th</sup> 1944, the 305 was selected to take part in a 700-strong raid to Leipzig, Germany, as part of a week-long joint campaign code-named Operation Argument, which involved US bombers attacking by day, and Royal Air Force bombers striking by night. The aim was to attack the Nazi aviation industry, and Luftwaffe bases.

Flying that day was Lt William Lawley, captaining B17G 42-38109, nicknamed 'Cabin in the Sky', a squadron colleague of John Kriegshauser.

Over the target, Lt Lawley faced a major problem – the bombs would not release. And then, seconds later, they were under head-on attack by enemy fighters, with the first salvo killing his co-pilot, Lt Paul Murphy, instantly and shattering the aircraft's windscreen.

One engine was also on fire, and the body of Lt Murphy was slumped across the controls, forcing the bomber into a near-vertical dive from 10,000 feet.

Lt Lawley had to scramble to leave his seat to move his colleague's body enough to take control of the plummeting aircraft, and he was able to level out at 1200-feet. He next ensured the engine fire was extinguished, feathering the propeller. It was then he realized that, as he began wiping blood from his face, that he had suffered a serious facial injury.

And, radioing around the crew, he discovered many others were injured, with two being badly hurt. The bombardier, Lt Harry Mason, was able to work on the release of the bombs and, eventually having done so, then joined Lt Lawley on the flight deck. He lashed the co-pilot's body firmly away from the controls, and asked Lt Lawley if he wanted any help. The injured pilot refused – and then passed out, leaving Lt Mason, who had limited flying experience, in control of the aeroplane.

As they approached the English Coast, one engine then stopped working and another caught fire. They were now down to flying on a single engine.

Lt Mason then spotted an RAF base at Redhill in Surrey, and was able to shake Lt Lawley awake long enough for the pilot to re-take the controls. It was then that the pilot found that the undercarriage would not come down, so, firing warning flares to indicate an aircraft in distress and with wounded aboard, Lt Lawley was left with no choice but to execute a forced-landing, to save his crew, which he achieved in an expressive massive shower of sparks.

For his heroism, he was later awarded the Medal of Honour. And his inspirational exploits were, that night, the talk of the Group's offices and the Officers' Club alike.

Photo caption (below): B17s on a daylight mission (US Air Force photo)



## CHAPTER FIVE: DATE WITH DESTINY

BRIEFING over, the four officers of the 'Mi-Amigo' headed out to the hardstand where she was parked, heavy with bombs, in the dull grey morning. "Another fine day in Good Olde England," navigator John Humphrey said to bombardier Melchor Hernandez. Lt Hernandez, born in Texas and raised in Los Angeles, concurred. "Yep, you're not wrong." One colleague had noted already "we fly in weather here that in the States would lead to the entire group being grounded". It was Tuesday, February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1944.

Arriving by truck at the same time were the rest of the crew, swaddled in warm flight clothing essential when flying missions at altitude. All the crew had with them their protective equipment, too....flak helmet, and flak jacket.

Devised by Colonel Malcolm Grow, chief surgeon of the Eighth Air Force and manufactured in the UK by London's Wilkinson Sword Company, the flak jacket had come into being when Dr Grow calculated 80 per cent of combat wounds were caused by low-velocity missiles, splinters of flak or fragments of bullets.

Starting in December 1943, 13,000 had been issued to bomber crews of the 8<sup>th</sup>, leading already to a 58 per cent reduction in injuries.

Now, as the gunners, radio operator and engineer smoked and chatted, was the time to hand over any items deemed contraband – cinema tickets, bus tickets, those tell-tale little items, may be souvenirs of a three-day leave pass to London, that could be of use to enemy interrogators.

Also, any rings or chains – nobody wanted to risk frost burn injuries from such items when they were flying at 21,000-feet (as they were tasked today) where the temperature was minus 35 degrees. Rings would stick to fingers, causing agonizing injury and seriously impairing a crew member's ability to function.

The items would be kept safely for the crew upon their return home.

Second pilot Lt Curtis – quiet, pious, a teetotaler – clambered up into the 'Mi-Amigo', squirming through the hatch below the cockpit area, to commence pre-flight checks.

The pilot, John Kriegshauser, chatted quietly with the aircraft's crew chief as he and the ground crew leader inspected the 'Mi-Amigo' from the outside, while other aircrew members went aboard to carry out their own checks at work station and gun turret.

All satisfactory, and everything running smoothly, the pilot signed the paperwork to take charge of the aircraft from the ground crew. Name: J G Kriegshauser, rank 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant, serial number O535000; signature.

He then clambered aboard to take his place in the pilot's seat, sat to the left of Lyle Curtis.

Below them, in the nose of the bomber, Lt Hernandez stowed his pistol. The only crew member to carry a firearm, the gun was to be used to destroy the then still secret Norden bombsite, should the aircraft make a forced landing in enemy territory.

Behind him, Lt Humphrey, prepared his maps and charts, with rendezvous co-ordinates, mission plan out, mission plan return, diversion airfields in Yorkshire on the route back, all neatly recorded in his notepad.

PHOTO caption (below): A US 8<sup>th</sup> Army Air Force aviator with protective equipment necessary for long-distance, high-altitude bombing missions over Occupied Europe. Behind the airman is a B24 bomber. (Photo courtesy of David Mason)



## CHAPTER SIX: 'HOTSHOT'

ALSO readying themselves were flight engineer Harry Estabrooks, dependable, slightly-built. His niece, then aged eight, remembers him clearly, 70 years later. "He was a fun guy."

Radio operator Bob Mayfield, equipment finely tuned, gave Harry the thumbs-up. Both had other duties as gunners, with Harry manning the top turret and Bob a single machine gun in the roof of the radio shack.

Down in the depths was the ball-turret, slung beneath the aircraft, rotatable, where Charlie Tuttle would work in isolation, covering the skies beneath the aircraft in defence against enemy fighters. A vulnerable position, and claustrophobic, it wasn't a place for the faint-hearted.

Standing back-to-back while the aircraft was aloft were the dapper duo – waist gunners Malcolm 'Pert' Williams, the talented guitarist who'd appeared on radio and record, and brash New Yorker, newly-married Vito Ambrosio, complete with his trademark pirate's moustache.

And then, finally, there was Maurice 'Hotshot' Robbins, the tail gunner, already slated with destroying one enemy aircraft. His job, from his vantage point behind the aircraft's lofty tail-fin, involved not only watching for the enemy, but also giving the bombardier a run-down on how the bomb strike looked as they left the target.

Engines rumbling, brakes off, the 'Mi-Amigo' moved slowly forward, to prepare for take-off. Flying alongside them would be the 'Liberty Run', piloted by Lt Chas Barnes from Texas, co-pilot Frank 'Bud' Hopko, an upstate New Yorker from Russian Orthodox stock, whose father had been gassed in World War one while serving as an infantryman in France with the US Army.

The 'Mi-Amigo' finally arrived at her place, ready to rumble down Chelveston's concrete runway before then climbing, at first aching slowly, heavy laden with bombs, fuel and men, up into the breakfast-time sky.

John Kriegshauser contacted Chelveston's control tower. "Liftboy Victor to John Burn One-Zero-Five ready for take-off."

A voice, sounding metallic through his earphones, responded to aircraft Victor of squadron Liftboy, using Chelveston's code-name and base number.

"John Burn One-Zero-Five to Liftboy Victor, message received and permission granted. You are cleared for take-off. Good luck."

An Aldis lamp double-clicked from the end of the runway. It showed the path was clear for the pilots, with Harry Estabrooks perched between them, monitoring the aircraft's instruments, to push forward the throttles, the Wright Cyclone radial piston engines responding magnificently, powering the aircraft off the runway, upwards, and onwards.

## CHAPTER 7: 'ALARM!'

THE formation of B17s, 60-strong, from the 305<sup>th</sup> Bomber Group and from the 92<sup>nd</sup> Bomber Group, based at Podington airfield, Bedfordshire, rendezvoused over Louth in Lincolnshire shortly before 10am. It was going to be a long haul, out over the cold North Sea, then over Denmark to attack the highly fortified Luftwaffe airfield at Aalborg.

The 92<sup>nd</sup> Bomber Group, the longest-serving such unit in the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force, was nicknamed 'Fame's Favoured Few' and – like the 305<sup>th</sup> – had a proud operational history, with a Distinguished Unit citation awarded for its prowess in a raid over Germany in January 1944. One of its pilots, John Morgan, had already received a Medal of Honour for bringing back a damaged B17, with a seriously wounded pilot, under extreme circumstances. The 92<sup>nd</sup> was also the first bomber group to fly non-stop from the USA to the UK, and was to lead the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force's final mission, on April 25<sup>th</sup> 1945 against an armaments factory in German-occupied Czechoslovakia.

Known from the unit's tail-fin marking as the aircraft from Triangle B, the formation that day included 'Hot Rock' flown by Lt Bob Wolf (325<sup>th</sup> Bomber Squadron), call-sign Sandpiper Nan, fuselage marking NV-N; and 'Pot O'Gold' flown by Lt William Lavies (327<sup>th</sup> Bomber Squadron), fuselage marking UX-U, call-sign Davey Uncle, neither of which were destined to get back safely home.

The 305<sup>th</sup> and 92<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group aircrews were tasked as a diversionary force, and some aircraft equipped with radar-jamming devices.

It was hoped that by heading towards Denmark this would hold a number of enemy fighters in northern Germany, and would make it hard for the Luftwaffe to detect the main formation of bombers until after it had formed over England.

Sadly, however, the plan did not go as anticipated. The diversionary force was indeed spotted, but Luftwaffe commanders still dispatched German-based fighters towards the main bomber stream.

At the bases of Luftwaffe fighter units making up the Jasta Heligoland segment of a chain of defensive fighter units known as Defenders of the Reich, the scramble alarm sounded.

Rising up from their airfield in Norway were Me-109s from fighter squadron 11/JG11. Based at Lister, and led by the highly competent Oberleutenant Herbert Christmann, the unit flew a mark of Me-109 called an Me-109T2, which had originally been developed for use aboard a proposed German aircraft carrier. When the carrier project did not materialize, they were shipped out to JG11.

The 109s were vectored, along with Aalborg-based FW 190s, to intercept the incoming bombers. Already in the air was Oberleutenant Hans Muller, aged 23, already credited with over a dozen 'kills'. He was based with a night fighter squadron, NJG3, flying JU88s out of Grove in Denmark. His duty was to attack and to also observe, as the new variant B17s, the B17G, now had beefed-up defensive capability, in the shape of a twin-gunned chin turret, operated by the bomb aimer.

He was soon in action, downing two B17s from the 92<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group in two minutes. One, 42-97494 'Hot Rock', flown by 1<sup>st</sup> Lt Bob Wolf, from the 325<sup>th</sup> Bomber Squadron, was intercepted at 16,500 feet and last seen heading in the direction of Sweden, trailing smoke and flame, before crashing into the sea. There were no survivors.

A second, B17 42-31377, nicknamed 'Pot O'Gold', from the 92<sup>nd</sup>'s 327<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron, was also attacked. The crew were able to bail out and nine of them were taken prisoner after the aircraft crashed in farmland near the Danish village of Hoerdum. Unfortunately, the pilot, Lt Bill Lavies, did not survive and his body, parachute still attached, was found in a frozen lake.

The formation had been thwarted by the fact that Aalborg was covered by dense cloud. The crews made three passes over the aerodrome but, rather than bomb blind, the formation headed out over the sea to jettison its bombs safely. They were also heavily engaged by radar-controlled anti-aircraft guns, with the aircraft of the 305<sup>th</sup> Bomber Group being bracketed, in pauses between the waves of fighter attacks.

Damage was caused to 42-39992, nicknamed 'You've Had It!' from the 366<sup>th</sup> Bomber Squadron; and to 42-31328 from the same unit. Both were able to return safely to Chelveston, although 42-31328 was lost in combat 3 days later over Zweibrucken, Germany, with six crewmen captured and four killed in action.

Also damaged was 'Leading Lady', 42-39948, code WF-M, from the 364<sup>th</sup>. She went on to become the first aircraft in the 305<sup>th</sup> to complete 100 missions, and finally clocked up 122 missions in a career spanning 18 months before surviving the war. German anti-aircraft gunners lodged a claim for one B17 destroyed, but all four which failed to return were shot down by defending fighters.

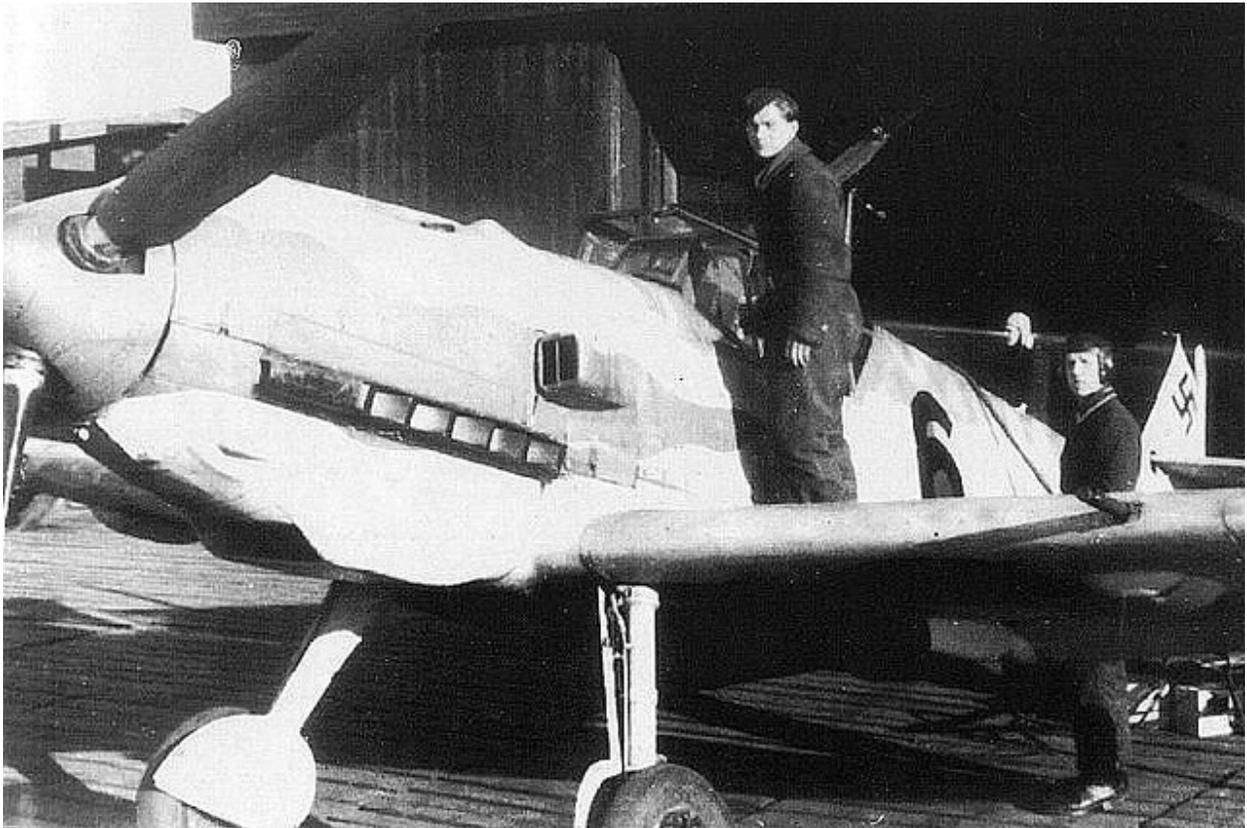


PHOTO caption: Squadron commander Christmann at Lister Airfield, Norway. (Photo courtesy of Francis Marshall)

## CHAPTER 8: DEATH OVER THE SEA

HERBERT Christmann, four 'kills' to his name, was delighted with his new wingman, Unteroffizier Erich Naujokat. He had only joined 11/JG11 on January 12<sup>th</sup> 1944, but was already creating a good impression. Today, February 22<sup>nd</sup>, would be his baptism of fire for the 21-year-old Naujokat as he was flying his first interception mission.

Ten minutes out from the Danish coast, they manoeuvred behind the B17s of the 305 as they headed out to sea on their return journey. Christmann lined up behind 42-31409, 'Liberty Run', and opened fire. The 'Liberty Run' was soon ablaze, leaving the crew of Lt Barnes with no option but to bail out over the sea, although the number of airmen abandoning the aircraft varied between six and nine, depending on the vantage point of the observer. She crashed into the sea.

Sgt John Kettman, a gunner on another 305 BG aircraft, wrote later in his diary: "It was a horrible sight seeing them go down in flames. Even that they did bail out, they landed in the sea about 40 miles from land."

He also recorded what it was like to be in the thick of the action, with his colleagues working hard to fight off the attackers, which also included Me210 twin-engined fighters. His diary entry read: "We had a long one today; our wing pulled a diversion while the rest of the 8<sup>th</sup> went into Germany. We were to bomb a large air base in the upper part of Denmark. We were over the North Sea most of the time, when we got to Denmark it was quite covered in cloud.

"They hunted for some time for the target but didn't find it. On our way back the fighters started in on a few stragglers. They were 109s and 210s; one B17 went down in flames. I saw six chutes come out, someone else saw nine. One of the other straggling Forts knocked down a 109. A 210 was hit right in front of us; I got a burst in on a 109, so did Pete and Logan. It was a 1000-mile trip and we didn't have any fighter escort." The B17 that "knocked down" a 109 was the 'Mi-Amigo', according to German records. Oberleutenant Christmann wrote in his combat report: "Erich Naujokat carried out an extremely courageous attack, concentrating on a single bomber, making every effort to destroy it.

"However, he received tremendous return fire from the bomber, which disabled his aircraft. He dived vertically through the clouds below, none of the Staffel seeing the final plunge."



PHOTO caption: 'ALARM!' A Luftwaffe Me109 pilot scrambles. (Bundesarchiv)

Naujokat was reported missing. A radar operator logged his aircraft as having crashed in to the sea about 30 kilometres from Stenbjerg on the west coast of Denmark. His body was washed ashore in Sweden a month later. His aircraft, serial number 7757, was not found. He is buried in Gothenburg. A second German pilot, Gefreiter Kurt Schwarz, aged 19, also failed to return after his Me109, serial number 7732, was hit by return fire from the B17s. His body was recovered from the sea a fortnight later, and buried in Denmark. In the US records there is a reference to witnesses believing his Me109 could have collided with one of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Bomber Group aircraft brought down that day.



PHOTO caption: Gun camera shot of B17s under attack (Bundesarchiv)

## CHAPTER 9: NO PLACE TO LAND

THE 'Mi-Amigo' then began her long journey home. For a time she was accompanied by another B17, but eventually, due to the bad weather, the aircraft got separated. The B17 pilot's manual, then a secret document, called for all jettisonable equipment to be thrown overboard, to lighten the load in circumstances like these.

Injured crewmen would be given first-aid, including pain-killing injections. One danger was that although blood would freeze on exiting a wound when the temperature was -33 degrees, wound packing would be needed to staunch free-flowing blood.

The 'Mi-Amigo', despite damage to wing and fuselage, continued pushing slowly on over the North Sea, the crew working hard to keep her aloft and broadly on track.

Marked on Lt Humphrey's map were emergency landing bases at Carnaby, in East Yorkshire; Binbrook, near the Lincolnshire coast; and Lindholme in South Yorkshire. Other aerodromes, primarily RAF Bomber Command bases in Yorkshire, were also marked. The emergency bases, particularly Carnaby on the Yorkshire Coast, were chosen because of the extra-long runways, important for crews coaxing a badly damaged aircraft in to land.

However, the English countryside was carpeted with cloud, down to 500 feet. 'Mi-Amigo' was heard flying overhead, her course plotted by Observer Corps staff on the ground as she headed inland, preparatory to turning southwards to head back home. And then she was seen again, emerging from the leaden clouds above Sheffield, badly damaged and trailing smoke from a wing, at exactly the same time the rest of the 305's crews began landing 100 miles south at their home base of Chelveston.

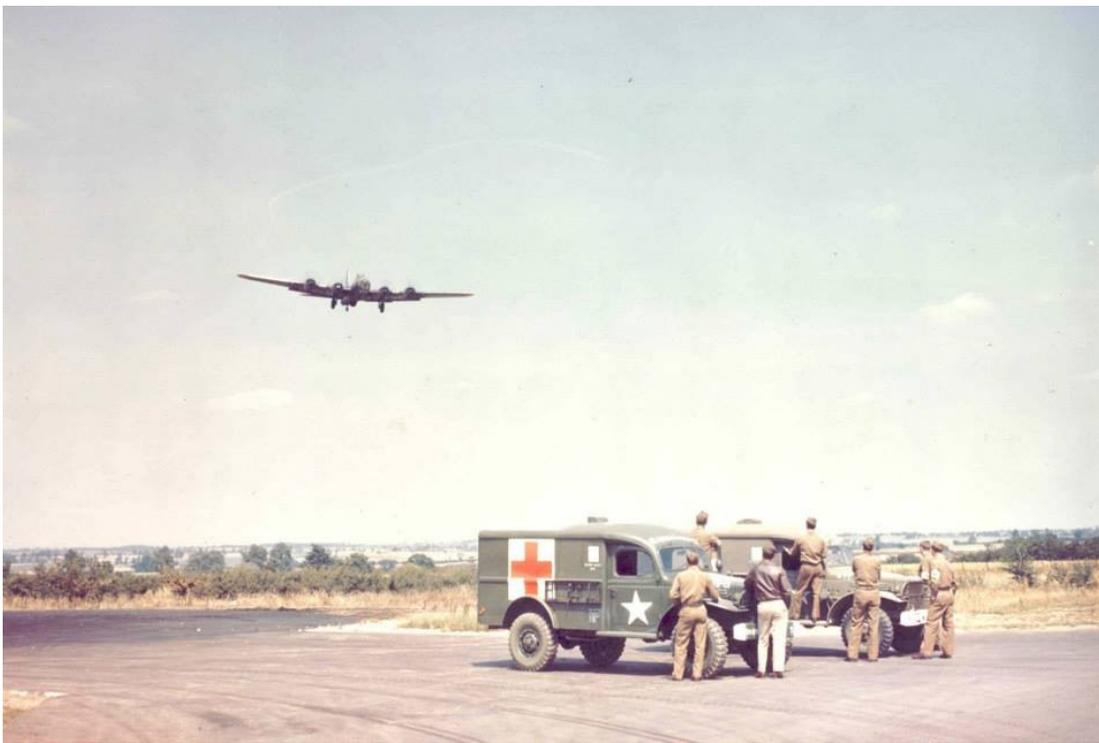


PHOTO caption: Above – a B17 comes in to land. (US Air Force)

Below – a National Fire Service fire engine (National Emergency Services Museum, Sheffield)



## CHAPTER 10: HEROISM IN A CITY PARK

THE FIREMEN of National Fire Service station 3A1U had a sense of foreboding. Working outside Sharrow Vale wartime emergency fire station in Sheffield at 5pm on Tuesday February 22<sup>nd</sup> 1944, a typically grim British February afternoon, drizzle with occasional snow mixed in to make outdoor work bone-chilling, the firemen saw a badly damaged, olive green painted B17 Flying Fortress bomber appear out from the low cloud.

Standing outside the wartime base – at the corner of Sharrow Vale Road and Cowlshaw Road (now occupied by a furniture and collectables shop) – was Section Officer Cooper. He wrote in his NFS report: “We saw that the bomber was in difficulties and, as we busied ourselves in readiness for action, we had a spotter out on the street before we heard the explosion as the plane crashed.

“Then we set off in the direction of where the smoke was coming from. It was a big pall of smoke, coming from woodland in nearby Endcliffe Park.”

Would-be rescuers were also already running towards the crashed aircraft which had come down on a wooded hillside, behind a Tudor-style building in the park called The Old Pavilion.

They found trees uprooted and crushed beneath the wrecked bomber, with wreckage strewn across the hillside. The aircraft had split into two, with the front section already alight.

Flight Sergeant Clem Toyne, on leave from the Royal Air Force, said in his witness statement: “From the front window of my home, I had a clear view of the scene and at once dashed over the recreation ground and over the stepping stones.

“With the help of another man, I was able to drag the rear gunner clear, but I could tell he was dead. “It was clear to me from the extent of the damage to the aeroplane that those onboard must have died instantly. It was my conclusion that there was no chance of there being survivors, but I assisted the NFS with firefighting operations.”

The fire engines had sped across the parkland, bells jangling. Water from the nearby Porter Brook was used on the fire, but a pit had to be dug within the riverbed to increase suction for the hoses.

Additional fire appliances were requested with two foam units and a salvage tender supplementing the initial two responding fire engines. In total there were soon some 20 firefighters working hard, for more than an hour, to defeat the flames.

Other steel-helmeted emergency personnel also raced to the scene, including squad cars from the local “D” Division police station at Hammerton Road, Hillsborough, and senior officers from the Sheffield City Police headquarters in Castle Green, Sheffield city centre. Sadly, as the initial witnesses had observed, the severe impact and raging fire had left the crew of the ‘Mi-Amigo’ with no hope of salvation.

Section Officer Cooper, of the N.F.S., said: “Work to free the crew continued all night. The last two to be removed were the pilots. Ropes and specialist equipment were used to prize the wreckage apart so we could reach the crew, including having to move the aircraft’s shattered wings so we could get inside.” The scene was lit by acetylene flares as the firemen and heavy lifting rescue workers laboured to retrieve the trapped bodies. Most of the crew were found in their designated crash-landing position,

gathered together in the vicinity of the radio operator's position, as instructed in the B17 aircrew manual.

Their bodies, when freed, were taken by ambulance to a nearby hospital to await positive identification by US specialist military personnel. All were certified as "killed in action as a result of engagement in military aviation against an enemy power".

## CHAPTER 11: WITNESSES TO COURAGE

POLICE and soldiers had quickly sealed off the hillside, and later the park, to await the arrival of US Army Air Force investigators and military recovery personnel.

A police photographer took photos of the scene. Part of the bomber's tailplane was suspended 20-feet from the ground in a tree, several other trees were uprooted and one remained upright, the aircraft embedded around it.

Local newspaper staff also attended the crash site, with one account referring to the fact that children had been playing locally, and commended the crew for their sacrifice.

Smoke was still coming from the wreckage the next day, with the crashed bomber finally being removed by engineers from the US Army Air Force's Second Strategic Air Depot from RAF Little Staughton on the Saturday. It was then transported to their base on a low-loader, the wreckage shrouded in tarpaulins. Meanwhile, another witness, local resident William Griffiths of Stainton Road, said in his statement: "I was having tea when my wife informed me an aircraft had just crashed in the park.

"I ran out in my slippers, and was in such haste that I did not put my coat on. I waded across the Porter Brook, and approached the aircraft which was on fire. A member of the Armed Forces was already present, and I was the second person to arrive.

"The front of the aircraft was blazing but the heat was too fierce for us to get near. I observed the body of an airman on the ground who appeared to have been thrown clear from the wreckage. We carried him away from the wreckage, but it was apparent he was dead."

The men used pieces of wood from a demolished tree to try to lever a hole into the aircraft's fuselage but could not make much progress. A witness, a decorator, Arthur Hayes, who had been working nearby, stated: "I heard the crash and looked out. I immediately ran across the park to where the aircraft was. As I approached I saw two other men were already there, one in uniform.

"I saw a hatchet on the ground which appeared to have come from the aircraft. I worked with the other men to hack a hole into the badly crushed rear section of the aircraft but when we were able to see inside, there was nobody there.

"However, we observed some ammunition which I removed to prevent the risk of explosion."

None of the rescuers knew that the aircraft was not carrying any bombs, and at least one witness made reference to ammunition exploding. Many people saw the aircraft as it flew low over Banner Cross and Greystones, heading for the park. One young girl, living in Blair Athol Road, said: "The aircraft flew right over our house, going directly along the road towards the city centre. It was really loud and then there was a huge bang from Endcliffe Park."

Many others, even now, remember the aircraft crashing. One said: "We went to the scene, but were not able to get close as space was needed to let the emergency services do their work. Even to this day, in my mind's eye, I can see the aircraft's tail fin standing upright in the wood."

Detectives under the command of the City of Sheffield Police force's Chief Constable, Mr George Sydney Lowe, compiled a file of witness statements for the US authorities. The Chief Constable aged 50, already a veteran of aerial warfare through serving previously as the senior officer with the Plymouth Police Force, on England's south coast, at a time when the naval dockyard was bombed by the Luftwaffe. He personally attended the scene of the crash of the 'Mi-Amigo', striding towards the wreckage in his trademark overcoat and trilby hat.

From the police file, correlated and technically cross-checked by air crash investigators from the Eighth Air Force, a report was put forward recommending Lt Kriegshauser for a posthumous Distinguished Flying Cross. On the grounds that his last-second actions, based on unflinching sacrifice, led to lives clearly being saved on the ground.

Other awards were suggested, but not acted upon by the UK civil authorities, for the would-be rescuers who had dashed towards danger to try to save the trapped crewmen.

Until word was received via 8<sup>th</sup> Army Air Force headquarters in High Wycombe that the 'Mi-Amigo' and her crew would not be returning home, the base radio operator at Chelveston had kept hope alive. "John Burn One-Zero-Five to Liftboy Victor, reply, over? John Burn One-Zero-Five to Liftboy Victor, can you hear me? Any reply please. John Burn One-Zero-Five....."



PHOTO caption: A downed B17 (US Army Air Force)

## CHAPTER 12: 'WE NEVER GIVE UP HOPE'

FRANK Hopko was the co-pilot of B17G 'Liberty Run' – a Flying Fortress from 364 Bomber Squadron, also lost on the fateful mission to Aalborg on February 22<sup>nd</sup> 1944. He, along with his nine crewmates, were reported missing – and even when declared 'presumed dead' by the US military authorities, his family back home in New York State still refused to give up hope that the men were, somehow, still alive....

'Bud', as Frank was known to his friends, was born on February 29<sup>th</sup> 1920. His father, also called Frank, was a World War One US Army veteran who was gassed whilst serving in France. Although his injuries healed enough for him to work as a postman, and become a father-of-three, he died prematurely in 1945.

Having a military dad probably shaped Bud's destiny. Popular at high school and a good sportsman, Bud, from a small town called Auburn, spent 3 years in the US National Guard before signing on the dotted line to become a career soldier with the US Army in January 1941.

After completing basic training, he was stationed for a year at Fort Jay. His duties, as someone already regarded as an experienced soldier, involved working as a driver for the local base commanding general. However, Bud had loftier ambitions and in April 1942 was successfully enrolled as an aviation cadet in the US Army Air Force.

He underwent pilot training, initially on Steerman bi-planes, before gaining his coveted silver 'wings' in January 1943.

During his training, his career took him further afield than he'd ever been before – Maxwell air base and Napier Field, Alabama; Cochran Field in Georgia, and a base in Bennettsville, South Carolina, as he learned the skills necessary to fly aircraft which eventually became newer and faster as training progressed.

His success as a pilot saw him commissioned as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant, designated a fighter pilot at Dutham airbase, Alabama. However, the US Army Air Force needed bomber pilots – and Bud was transferred to be trained at Grand Island, Nebraska, to fly multi-engined aircraft.

By November 1943, he and his crew-mates were in the 364<sup>th</sup>. The officers lived eight to a hut, while the crewmen lived in barracks. It was a Britain of wartime austerity, of windswept days and cold nights, primarily eating locally-sourced food, in a winter marked out by extreme cold, heavy rain, and on an airfield which at times seemed a sea of mud.

Officers and men alike were given one Friday off a month on a rota basis, otherwise it was the grind of work....missions, aborted missions, sitting in a drafty briefing room way before dawn, waiting for the senior officers to tell them the target for today.

Bomber crews were rotated back to the States after 25 missions, but the average lifespan of a career was cruelly shorter – they usually only lasted 15 missions.

## CHAPTER 13: FATEFUL 15TH

FEBRUARY 22<sup>nd</sup> 1944 was the 15<sup>th</sup> mission for Bud Hopko. His crew that day were pilot Lt Chas Barnes from Frio, Texas; navigator 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Rowland Gaunt, from Rhode Island; bombardier Lt John Maguire, from Indianapolis; and flight engineer/top-turret gunner Sgt Delbert Mann, also from Indiana.

These were the guys in the front of their B-17G for the day, an aircraft nicknamed 'Liberty Run' with a serial number 42-31409.

Adorning the aircraft's side were the code letters WF-O ('WF' for 364 Sqn, 'O' as the Seattle-built aircraft's own identification code), on the olive-drab painted long-distance bomber, replete with a large letter 'G', black on a white triangle, as its parent unit symbol on wing and tail-fin.

Further back in the aircraft were five more airmen – all Sergeants: radio operator J.F. Albright from Oklahoma; belly turret gunner Bill Baynes, a Californian; waist gunners Peter Sfikas (another Rhode Islander) and Bob Earp (from New Mexico), with Californian George L. Walker manning the rear gunner position. Young men all aged 21 to 26.

Before taking off, Bud completed a letter to his folks back home. In it, he put: "Yesterday was a long one, an 18-hour day. We returned with just two engines operating. I am tired, so very tired, but I am still up for the challenge."

At least one regular member of the crew was in hospital with injuries from a previous combat mission, and four of the 'Liberty Run' crew that day had already been awarded 'Purple Heart' medals for injury in the line of duty...Rowland Gaunt; John Maguire; Delbert Mann, and J.F. Albright.

It was to be their last flight together. As related in Chapter 8, the 'Liberty Run' was attacked by Luftwaffe fighters and sent crashing in to the sea. The German squadron commander radioed the aircraft's location to Air-Sea Rescue services, but despite a search by seaplane and boats, no trace was found of the missing crewmen.

Then, on March 9<sup>th</sup> 1944, the same day as the families of the crew of the 'Mi-Amigo' were receiving their bad news, a Western Union telegram arrived at the home of the Hopko family. Bud's brother and sister were both in the Navy and his brother Leon was on leave that day when the message arrived to say Bud was Missing in Action.

"We remain hopefully that Frank and his fellow colleagues are still alive," Mr Hopko told his local newspaper, the Auburn Citizen-Advertiser. "We never give up hope. We are encouraged by the fact some US airmen have gotten to Sweden, either crash-landing there or with help on the ground, and every day we expect to hear Frank is one of them."

Word, however, never came. In October 1945, the wife of Lt Gaunt wrote to the Danish authorities:

"All 10 men on the 'Liberty Run' were reported "missing in action". After a year had elapsed, in February 1945, they were continued "missing in action", even though our Government usually makes a report that they are "presumed dead" after a year, because there were so many chances that they might be safe.



PHOTO caption: A propeller from the 'Liberty Run' (courtesy of Hantsholm Military Museum)

## CHAPTER 14: 'I FEEL SO STRONGLY HE IS SAFE'

"AFTER V-E day and the liberation of Europe, we had great hope that our men would turn up, because we had heard so many reports about the strength of the underground resistance movement in Denmark. This month, October 1945, the Government notified all of the families that these men are "presumed dead" because of the lapse of time and the fact that no information about them has been received, but I just cannot give up.

"I feel so strongly that somewhere my husband is safe. We had hoped for so long that perhaps some fisherman had picked our men up and that they were being hidden in Denmark, because it seemed so strange that out of a crew of 10 men no one had been heard from, dead or alive. Of course it happened in February when the sea is cold, but we clung to the hope that maybe there were islands there or that ships passing through might have rescued them."

She added: "I thought I would write to you on behalf of all of the families of these men, hoping that there might be some way to get information. Perhaps inquiry might be made through some group in Aalborg. I don't know how it could be done and perhaps it seems like a remote possibility, but you can understand the anxiety we have lived under for 20 months and we grasp at every opportunity for news.

"Anything that you might do or suggest that I might do would be appreciated and, of course, I would be more than happy to pay for any expense that would be incurred."

Danish authorities – the military, coastguard and police – carried out extensive searches for clues, but nothing was ever found of the missing airmen.

However, in 1990, 1995 and then 1996, three propellers – identified as being from the 'Liberty Run' – were found by fishermen trawling off the Danish coast. The Royal Danish Air Force retained two, while the third is now displayed in a military museum in Hantsholm.

All 10 crew of 42-31409 are honoured at the US Military Cemetery in East Anglia, with plaques marking them as "Missing in Action".

After the war, the family of Bud Hopko were presented with an Air Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster. Lt Colonel H.P. Gallagher stated in a letter: "It is the opinion of the undersigned that your son's courage, coolness and fine character were displayed by his meritorious achievement while participating in aerial flight over enemy occupied territory."

As late as 1947, family members of some of the crew remained convinced the men were still alive.

## CHAPTER 15: MEMORIES OF SACRIFICE.

THE crew of the 'Mi-Amigo' were laid to rest at the American Military Cemetery at Madingley, near the university city of Cambridge.

After the war, families were asked if they wanted to have their loved ones returned to the States. The families of Harry Estabrooks, Charlie Tuttle and Maurice Robbins elected to leave their fallen airmen on English soil. The bodies of the other crewmen were shipped home.

The parents of Lt Kriegshauser were presented with his DFC nearly a year after his death by a senior officer at an airfield near their home. The other crewmen were each recognized with the Air Medal for the missions they had flown together, in the cause of freedom.

The mission over mainland Germany on February 22<sup>nd</sup> 1944 cost the Americans more than 40 bombers. It formed part of what was later to be dubbed 'The Big Week'. The bombers heading to Germany were hampered, like their colleagues heading to Denmark, by heavy cloud cover, and from being harried by Luftwaffe pilots. Tragedy struck when a group of bombers, mistaking the Dutch city of Nijmegen for a German target, dropped their bombs onto the city centre, killing more than 800 civilians. And a unit of Russian bombers, confused also by bad weather, accidentally bombed Stockholm in neutral Sweden, causing some injuries.

A memorial to the 305<sup>th</sup> now stands in Chelveston. And, in Endcliffe Park, there is a roughly-hewn boulder, positioned in 1969 as a memory to the crew of the 'Mi-Amigo'. Behind, on the hillside, where even now no vegetation grows at the site of the crash, is a grove of American oak trees, specially-planted.

Viewing the crash site from across the green of the playing area from Ecclesall Road, it is possible to see – by studying the difference in the height of the trees - where the bomber crashed. In front of the site stands The Old Pavilion – now a cafe popular with families, joggers, dog walkers and visitors. This is the building referred to in the DFC citation.

An annual ceremony, held close to the crash date, arranged by the Sheffield branch of the RAF Association, is attended by representatives of the United States Air Force, latterly from the Menwith Hill base in North Yorkshire, plus delegates from veterans' associations, the emergency services, and other organizations who recognize the crew's courage with an act of remembrance, including wreath-laying, at the memorial, and then with a service at nearby St Augustine's Church.

Relatives of the crew have attended down the years, and the service still draws local people who witnessed the crash, and want to pay their respects.

A Sheffield-based band, Bones Park Rider, have written a tribute song entitled 'Mi-Amigo' and local creative artists have also been inspired to capture the spirit of 'Mi-Amigo' in poetry, paint and sculpture.

The cover of the Bones Park Rider shows Endcliffe Park from above. Although the weather was far from sunny that fateful day, the image of the shadow of the bomber crossing over what is basically a pocket handkerchief of grass in a highly-built-up suburb of a major city has an endearing quality.

Visiting the scene of the crash, in June 2014, there is an air of peaceful calm, with only playing squirrels, scampering up trees, making any sound. The children playing on the grass, or families chattering over coffee and cake in The Old Pavilion, even though just 100 yards away across the Porter Brook, could be a million miles away.

In February 2014, on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the mission to Aalborg, TV stations and newspapers in Denmark carried a special report to commemorate the day young US servicemen, despite the peril of their mission, risked life and limb to draw out the Germans in aerial combat, high above the Danish farmlands, and then over the bitter cold North Sea. It was a mission not all were destined to survive.

Meanwhile, the 305<sup>th</sup> is still flying, operating KC-10 tankers and C-17 cargo aircraft, from McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst Air Bases, New Jersey. The unit's name is now the 305<sup>th</sup> Air Mobility Wing, having eventually swapped bombers for tankers after a long period of dedicated service in the US Air Force's Strategic Air Command, their badge still proudly bears the motto: 'Can Do'....but now without the wartime, crushed, swastika.

And, since the end of World War Two, the 92<sup>nd</sup> Bomber Group has also seen action in later conflicts. It is now stationed at Fairchild AFB, Washington, flying KC-135 refuelling aircraft under the banner of the 305<sup>th</sup> Operations Group.



PHOTO caption: The memorial to the crew of 'Mi-Amigo' in Endcliffe Park, Sheffield. (Courtesy of Krystyna Haywood)

## CHAPTER 16: FLYING HIGH: A GUIDE TO FURTHER READING:

- 'Eighth Air Force' by Professor Donald L. Miller, Simon & Schuster Ltd, New York (2006).
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- 'The Brotherhood of Courage' by Walter Thom, published by the 305<sup>th</sup> Bomber Group Memorial Association (1986).
- 'The 305<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group in Action' by John V. Craven, published by the 305<sup>th</sup> Bomber Group Memorial Association (1980).
- 'Combat Diary & Squadron Memoir of Captain Joseph L. Lasater, pilot, 364<sup>th</sup> Squadron' compiled by Carol Auslander, Army Air Forces Historical Association.
- 'The Incredible 305<sup>th</sup>: The "Can Do" Bombers of World War Two' by Wilbur H. Morrison, Duell Sloan & Pearce (1962).
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- 'Army Air Force Medical Services in World War Two' by James S. Nanney, US Air Force History & Museums (1998).
- '..Or Go Down In Flame' by Prof W. Raymond Wood, Casemate Books (2013).
- 'LeMay: the Life and Wars of General Curtis LeMay' by Warren Kozak, Regnery Publishing (2009).
- 'Sea Eagles: Story of the Me109T' by Francis Marshall, Air Research Publications, Surrey, UK (1994).
- 'Messerschmitt Bf109T: the Luftwaffe's Naval Fighter' by Marek J. Murawski, Kagero Books, Poland (2007).
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- 'Wing Ding: Memories of a B17 Tail Gunner' by Gene T. Carson, Xlibris Corporation (2001).

'The Mighty Eighth in World War Two: A memoir,' by Brigadier General J. Kemp McLaughlin, University Press of Kentucky (2000).

'The City of Sheffield Police – the Way Ahead,' by GS Lowe, Chief Constable, Sheffield Police Watch Committee Papers, 1944.

Also....'Twelve O'Clock High' (1949) (available on DVD, Twentieth Century Fox).

Another major work of reference is 'The Mighty Eighth: A History of the US 8<sup>th</sup> Army Air Force' by Roger A. Freeman, The Military Book Society of London (1970).

#### THANK-YOU:

The author offers grateful thanks to the following organizations: The US Air Force; the US Army; The 305<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group Memorial Association; the National Archives of the United States and the UK; The 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force Historical Society; Friends of the Eighth; the German National Archives; the Danish Interior Ministry; the Hantsholm Museum, Denmark; the Danish, German and Swedish Ministries of Defence; the National Emergency Services Museum, Sheffield; South Yorkshire Police; the Sheffield Libraries Archives Service; Sheffield Parks Department; the RAF Association, and the staff of the American Military Cemetery, Madingley, UK.

Also, to the Editors of local newspapers in the USA, Denmark and the UK who published my letters seeking relatives, eye-witnesses, and information, and The Star, Sheffield, which supplied the copyrighted front cover photo of the crew of 'Mi-Amigo'.

And the Public Affairs Office of the 305<sup>th</sup> Air Mobility Wing, and the Editor of the European edition of 'Stars and Stripes'.

#### INDIVIDUALS:

The families of Lt Curtis; Lt Hernandez, Sgt Estabrooks; and Lt Gaunt (USA). When I wrote, advising I had identified the German pilot who fought in combat with 'Mi-Amigo', one relative wrote back: "Thank-you for letting us know. We now feel we have complete closure."

One family also requested a small tub of soil from the site where the 'Mi-Amigo' came to rest.

Historians: Sincere thanks indeed to the extremely helpful Soeren Flensted (Denmark) and to Luftwaffe specialist historian and author Francis Marshall (Germany); also to Anne Tomlin (New York); Carol Auslander (Los Angeles), and Patricia Dugdale (US Army Records Centre, Fort Knox).

Also, many grateful thanks to my soulmate Emily Hancock; my children – Richard, Helen and Steve, and grandson Harrison – for their love and support. A debt of gratitude is also owed to Rev Gordon Unsworth of Sheffield RAF Association who presides over the 'Mi-Amigo' Remembrance Ceremony; photographer Krystyna Haywood; my friend David Granville, of Books on the Park, 749 Ecclesall Rd, Hunter's Bar, Sheffield S11 8TG for his on-going interest, encouragement and support, and to HM Coroner for Sheffield, Chris Dorries, for his interest in the original research project which led to the writing of this, my first-ever book.

For their valued contributions, I would like to thank Norma J. Weeks; Kevin Hale; Doug Adams, Ken Mettam, Raymond Howard, and Rhonda Stoffer.

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'War Eagles: A bird's eye view of the 305<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group and the US 8<sup>th</sup> Army Air Force' by Dr Michael Norwood McDowell, North Carolina University (2005).

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Military documents consulted included mission reports, mission map for the Aalborg raid, missing air crew reports, unit log books and personal papers (USA). Mission reports, Orders of battle and combat reports (Germany). Many of these were secreted in deep vaults. Effort, perseverance, and professionalism, particularly from the US military archivists and research staff, was more than appreciated. Their unstinting help, along with that of their counterparts in the Luftwaffe Archives, helped immeasurably. The facts published in 'The Ten Amigos' are based on evidence gathered using established academic research methods. Many of these documents had not been made public before, with some released under the US Freedom of Information Act. Initially, when a history of the USAAF in England was written some 40 years ago, the details of the Aalborg mission were erroneously folded into the primary mission that day to the Junkers Aircraft factory in Aschersleben, Germany. This caused some confusion around that time.

Eye-witness recollections can sometimes be problematic, especially after the passage of 70 years, but the witnesses I spoke to – four of whom had never been previously interviewed – dovetailed into the detail also recorded in the police witness statements taken at the time. All statements quoted in 'The Ten Amigos' have been factually cross-checked and verified. The clarity of recollection, especially from one now elderly lady, of the eye-witnesses, bore testament that they had all witnessed a very special act of courage.



PHOTO caption: The JU88 flown by Hans Muller on February 22<sup>nd</sup> 1944 (courtesy of H.H. Muller)

## CHAPTER 17: ENEMIES REUNITED.

THE Luftwaffe pilots at the centre of the action over Denmark that fateful day in February 1944 included Hans Muller. Unlike his fellow ace, Herbert Christmann (shot down later in 1944), he survived the war after flying no fewer than 241 operational missions. He joined the German Air Force after the war, when Germany became part of NATO, and retired as a Colonel.

In 2012, Herr Muller met Sgt Lester Schrenk, who had been the ball turret gunner in one of the two B17s the German pilot shot down on the February 22<sup>nd</sup> mission.

Mr Schrenk recorded his thought for the Danish military website [www.airmen.dk](http://www.airmen.dk):

“On the 22nd of February, 1944 I was flying my 10th bombing mission out of Podington, England, in a B-17 named Pot O' Gold (serial number 42-31377) to bomb the airfield at Aalborg in Denmark. There were about 30 B-17 airplanes in our part of the formation.

“We did not have any fighter escort and we were repeatedly attacked by German ME-109 and JU88 fighter aircraft.

“A B-17 flying just to our right was hit ('Hot Rock') and crashed into the sea.

“There were no survivors. Two minutes later our plane was also hit by a JU88 twin engine fighter. There was a very loud explosion coming out of the right wing fuel tank and we were on fire. I heard the navigator telling the pilot that we were 20 minutes dead east from the nearest land. I knew right away that we were going down.

“Our pilot, Lieutenant William Ralph Lavies lowered the landing gear. This was a sign that we were surrendering. This was a universal sign. We were escorted to land by the JU88 that had opened fire on us. Lt Lavies was looking for a place to make a forced emergency landing. For the next 20 minutes there was one explosion after another coming out of the right wing, with only seconds between the explosions. We were trailing fire of about 25 feet. None of us thought that we would make landfall. If we had gone down over water, none would survive in the cold North Sea water in February.

“We did manage to reach landfall. All 10 of our crew bailed out over Thy in the Jutland area of Denmark. “After we bailed out, the right wing blew off and our plane swerved around and crashed at where, I would later learn, was the farm of Koustrup Mollegaard, Sønderhaa. Unfortunately our pilot Lieutenant William Ralph Lavies lost his life. On bailing out as he landed in Lake Ove, breaking through the very thin ice that covered the lake. ”

He added: “Lt Lavies was an exceptional pilot. I owe him a deep debt of gratitude.”

Les Schrenk visited Denmark 60 years later to view where the 'Pot O'Gold' had crashed, and was able to recover some pieces of wreckage buried at the impact site. He also decided to try to trace the JU88 pilot who he found after a quest lasting well over three years.

“It was very interesting hearing his version of shooting us down. I found that the reason I had not seen his JU-88 airplane was because he had attack us from behind and above and so he was not visible to me as I was located in the ball turret under the B-17. I never got a chance to shoot at him.

“Also, I learned that just before our crew of 10 bailed out that he was ordered to completely shoot us down as his the fighter controllers thought we would fly to neutral Sweden.

“He said that he did again fire at us but stopped as soon as he saw us bail out. Until I had talked to him 68 years later, I did not know this. He remembered clearly what had taken place that day and talked about it at length.”

The airmen reminisced at length over the military careers, with Herr Muller explaining how he had himself been shot down and injured during the war. Les added: “It was very fulfilling meeting him and I am so glad that I could do so. Just as soon as we met it felt like meeting an old friend.”

Herr Muller said the Luftwaffe pilots were full of admiration for the US bomber crews. “We nicknamed the heavy bombers as furniture wagons, because of their size, but these wagons had a powerful sting.” He flew his first combat mission on April 27<sup>th</sup> 1941, and his last mission – with 16 recorded ‘kills’ later – on April 30<sup>th</sup> 1945.

Another man who also met Herr Muller was the son of the ‘Pot O’Gold’ navigator, Lt Francis ‘Bud’ Peacock. “He could have finished my father’s aircraft off over the North Sea but waited until they were over land to engage it again,” said Lt Peacock’s son, also called Francis.



PHOTO caption: Les Schrenk (left) meets Hans Muller. (Photo courtesy of TV-Midvest-Denmark)

The crewmen who survived bailing out of the stricken 327 Squadron bomber spent the remainder of the war as prisoners of the Germans. They were 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Elijah Vaughn; 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Francis Peacock; 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Robert S. Shuman; S/Sgt John Walcott; T/Sgt Neil Byers; S/Sgt Schrenk; S/Sgt Peter Guastella; Sgt William Harman, and S/Sgt Vernon Swindler.

Both the crews of ‘Hot Rock’ and ‘Pot O’Gold’ had arrived in the UK at the same time as the Kriegshausen and Barnes crews....

The bodies of the crew of ‘Hot Rock’ were never found. Commemorated by the American Battles Memorial Commission as Missing in Action were:

2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Robert Wolf, pilot, from Oklahoma. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt William J. Montgomery , co-pilot (Texas); 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Jesse W. Price, navigator (North Carolina); Captain Morton T. French, bombardier (Baltimore); S/Sgt Anthony D. Verrico, radio operator (Michigan); S/Sgt Richard H. Gilmore, flight engineer (Greene County, Missouri); S/Sgt Howard A. Jones, ball turret gunner (Georgia); Sgt Kenneth A. Happe, right waist gunner (Pennsylvania); S/Sgt Glenn Arthur Asp, left waist gunner (Dickinson County, Michigan), and Sgt Harold Cooper Ellis, rear gunner (Benton County, Arkansas).

The Commission records Lt Wolf, Air Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster and Purple Heart, as being commemorated at the US Military Cemetery in the Netherlands. The rest of the crew, all awarded Air Medal and Purple Heart, are commemorated at Cambridge.

Below, are some additional photos as a thank-you to those who contributed to my research.

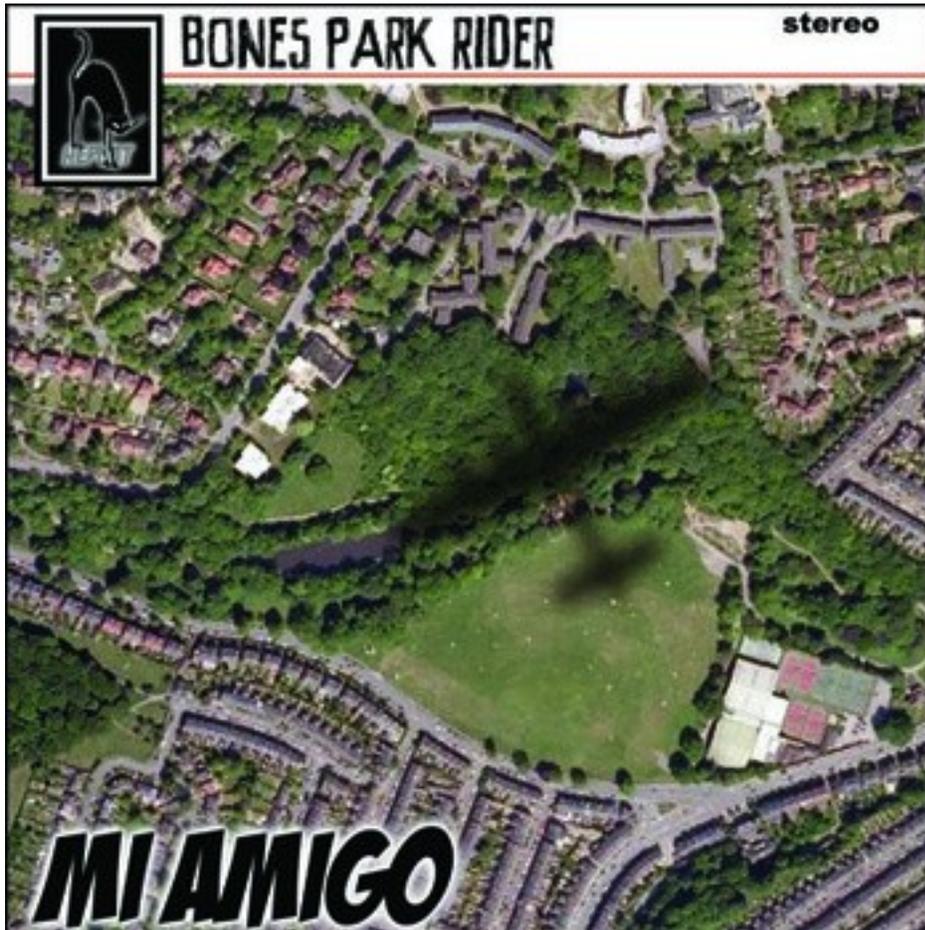


PHOTO caption (above): This CD cover, by Sheffield rock band Bones Park Rider, of a tribute son sums-up to me the spirit of the 'Mi-Amigo' story.

PHOTO caption (below): An extract from the comic strip 'Shorty Gordon', about a B17 gunner from the 305<sup>th</sup>. The last frame refers to him failing to return from a mission over Occupied Europe. But return he did, six escape attempts later, making him the first USAAF airman to escape from a Prisoner of War camp and make it back to England. He was shot down in February 1943, and returned to England via France a year later. His exploits led to him receiving the Silver Star, and he remained in the post-war USAF serving in Korea and Vietnam.

WHEN SHORTY'S PLANE GOT BACK TO ITS BASE, THEY HAD TO CARRY HIM OUT.

WHAT'S THE MATTER, SHORTY, AREN'T YOUR LEGS LONG ENOUGH TO TOUCH THE GROUND?

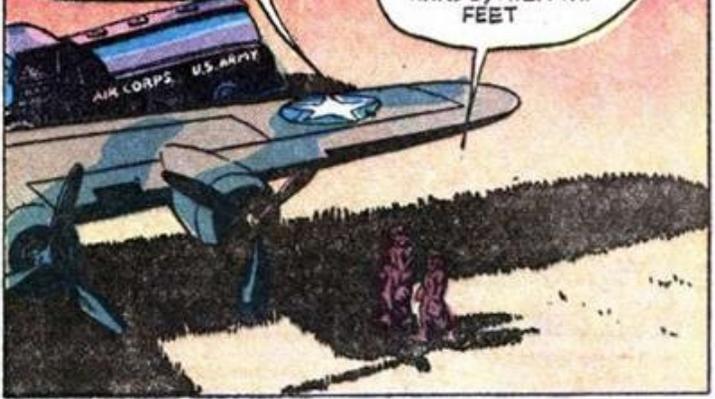
I DON'T THINK YOU'LL BE ABLE TO FLY WITHOUT ME. I'M GOING UP NEXT TIME.



AND THE NEXT TIME HIS PLANE PREPARED TO TAKE OFF, SHORTY WAS READY!

GLAD YOU WERE ABLE TO MAKE IT, SHORTY.

I WONDER WHAT'S LEFT FOR ME TO FREEZE, FIRST MY HANDS, THEN MY FEET



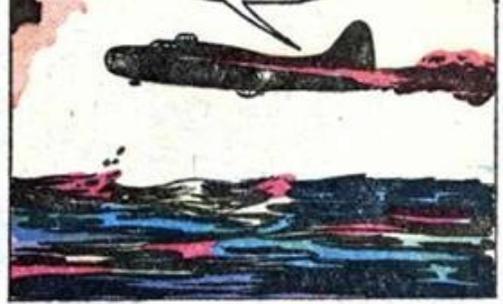
THIS TIME THE FIGHTERS WERE BUSY AND SHORTY'S PLANE TOOK A BEATING

WE'RE PRETTY BADLY CRIPPLED. WE'D BETTER HEAD FOR HOME.



CRIPPLED AS IT WAS, SHORTY'S PLANE GOT BACK TO THE NORTH SEA.

KEEP GOING, BABY, WE'RE GETTING NEAR HOME. DON'T QUIT NOW.



AS WE GO TO PRESS, SHORTY GORDON HAS BEEN REPORTED MISSING IN ACTION IN A RAID ON GERMANY, BUT THE SPIRIT THAT CARRIED THIS PLUCKY LITTLE BELLY GUNNER THROUGH FLAK, ENEMY ATTACKS, FREEZING TEMPERATURES WILL NEVER BE REPORTED "MISSING IN ACTION"!



The author with the crash site in the background. Photo by Krystyna Haywood.



**USAAF B-17 42-31322 'Mi Amigo', Endcliffe Park, Sheffield**

By Ian D B ★ Favorite 14 comments