

The insignia that started the search for details of Sgt. Hill. Crew wings, Purple Heart and (reversed) the Air Medal. (Merle Olmsted)

IT IS PERHAPS, a normal progression, for some aviation history writers and enthusiasts, to be attracted to the small artifacts of aviation's past. True, many historians, professional and amateur, never develop any interest in these elements, preferring to limit themselves to the documentary and photographic aspects.

For the author, items from the past proved an irresistible attraction. With the purchase of a small item of military aviation insignia, twenty years ago, I was launched into the world of the collector, in addition to retaining an interest in historical research and writing.

It seems that the two compliment each other quite nicely, with the artifacts providing a closer relationship with the men and events of the past.

The acquisition several years ago of two US military medals at a collectors show, triggered a lengthy search for information on the original recipient. The medals themselves, a Purple Heart and an Air Medal, are common enough, and of no great monetary value. They were intriguing as they were obviously a pair, with the same man's name engraved on the reverse of both. It was these basic facts that prompted this search for an airman - which eventually led to the deadly skies of North Central Europe, in the summer of 1944.

The name, as engraved on the reverse of is Air Medal and Purple Heart, was Sgt Golden B. Hill, Air Corps. The search for Sgt Hill began with the Federal Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Missouri, but also met a dead end there due to the restrictions of the Federal Privacy Act.

In an attempt to get around this restriction, the U.S. Air Force Office of Information was queried, requesting any information on Sgt. Hill. Their prompt reply indicated they might be of assistance if they had Hill's service number. Since this was unknown at the time, this possible source also proved a dead end.

With the press of other business, the matter lay dormant for over a year. Still, the matter nagged in the background, the feeling persisting that the combination of Purple Heart and Air Medal might be an indication that Sgt Hill had been one of the thousands of unfortunate casualties of the War.

With that in mind the Military Records Section of the National Archives were contacted requesting a search of the Missing Aircrew Reports (MACRs) from the war years. This approach paid off, with the Archives providing the much hoped for data. MACRs are often a rich source of information on airmen who went missing, providing aircraft serial numbers, units, the where and when and sometimes the why. Also usually included are the serial numbers

The B-17 is forever linked with the daylight bombing campaign against Hitler's Germany. Merle Olmsted looks at the tragic demise of an unsung airman, who fought the enemy from the cramped and isolated confines of a B-17G Sperry ball turret.

The Search for Sgt Golden Hill

of the installed machine guns. Admittedly, this latter bit of gen is of little use even to the diehard researcher!

Sgt Golden B. Hill had been a ball turret gunner in the 614th Squadron, 401st Bombardment Group, of the Eighth Air Force, and he had, indeed, died in action.

After the MACR was received, the mission report for the 401st BG for the date in question was also obtained from the same source. Contact was then made with the present day 401st BG Association, and it's secretary, Ralph Trout, promptly supplied the current addresses of two of Hill's former crew mates. Both of these gentlemen, Mr Parker Finney and Mr Dale Scott, kindly answered questions and supplied much information on that traumatic day in their lives.

As this raw information began to flow in, the desire increased to find and record more information on the fortunes of the 401st on the day that Golden Hill met his death. This date was August 24 1944. The 401st lost three B-17s that day and the MACRs for the other two B-17s were acquired.

What follows is the story of mission No.132 of the 401st Group on August 24 1944, as extracted from forty year old reports and the memories of some of the men who were aloft that day over North Central Europe.

The village of Deenethorpe, in the county of Northamptonshire, gave its name to the nearby airfield (see the April 1984 edition) home station for the 401st Bombardment Group. It, like most other 1st Bomb Divi-

sion units, was clustered together in the midlands in the vicinity of Northampton and Peterborough, while 2nd and 3rd Division bases occupied the eastern-most coastal areas of East Anglia.

Operational since November 1943, the Group was to end the war with the second highest record of bombing accuracy in the Eighth Air Force. (Roger Freeman's *Mighty Eighth* lists the 467th BG with the best record of bombing accuracy). It was to fly 255 missions, losing 95 aircraft. On August 24, 1944, it flew mission No. 132, putting a high percentage of its bombs on the target.

That target was Weimar, a small town southwest of Leipzig, said to have been manufacturing parts for V-weapons. The 401st supplied a complete 36 aircraft wing, including two pathfinders, or Mickey Ships for the lead box, and a spare for each of the



three boxes.

The 94th Combat Bomb Wing was the 401st's parent unit, and on this date the Group was designated as the 94th 'B' CBW and was to fly the fifth position in the 1st Division formation. The mission leader was Lt Col W.T. Seawell, who, the following January, was to become the Group Commander.

The 36 Fortresses were to form in three boxes, Lead, High, and Low, twelve each. Assigned to fly the right wing position in one of the three-ship elements of the lead box, was a B-17 with the unlikely name of DOWN-N-GO. Serial number 42-102394, 614th Squadron code 'IW-C'. The previous B-17, code 'IW-C' was lost on June 19.

In the left seat was pilot 1st Lt. Parker Finney. Finney had been promoted to 1st Lt. the previous day, but would not know of it for a long time.

Besides Finney as pilot and aircraft commander, 2nd Lt Virgil Price was in the co-pilot's seat. Forward of the flight deck, Flight Officer Dale Scott, a bombardier, was at the navigator's table, due to a shortage of men in that trade. Manning the chin turret was S/Sgt Brown A. Bralley, the only man not part of the regular crew. The luckless Sgt. Bralley was flying the 25th, and last mission of his tour.

T/Sgt Woodrow Snyder was riding the top turret, and amidships TSgt Edward Smith was at his post in radio room, whilst Sgt Golden B. Hill was to occupy the ball turret. S/Sgt William Duling was, as usual, at the tail guns. The waist positions were undermanned, common at this time period, with S/Sgt Burton Miller handling both guns. All of these men, except Sgt Bralley, had been together since assignment at 3rd Air Force Replacement Depot, Tampa, Florida, in March of that year.

Finney had flown one mission with another crew, and then with his own crew on 1 August. By the 24th, they were veterans with seven missions.

It was 0705 when the lead box cleared Deenethorpe's runway, with high and low boxes following in good order. A last minute change in assembly altitude from 8,000 to 4,000 feet due to low cloud, caused some minor difficulty, but the 401st had no problems finding the 94th 'A' CBW (actually the 457th Bomb Group), and moving

Left: Sgt. G.B. Hill, ball turret gunner of 'Down-N-Go'. (Parker Finney)
Below: 614th Squadron 'Mickey Ship' 42-97947 flown by Lt. Elmer Mercer. (Ralph Trout)

into position behind them.

The mission track chart shows a neat dog leg route, departing the English coast at Louth at 0846, across the North Sea, turning southeast one hour, forty minutes later, and crossing enemy coast midway between Cuxhaven and Bremerhaven. The mission summary reports that "southeast of Hamburg enemy fighters made attacks from the rear and knocked down one from the lead, and two from the low. A third from the low was knocked out of formation, but reached England." (The aircraft from the low box which was badly damaged by fighters, but returned to base, was 42-31591, code IN-J. It was originally a spare, but flew the mission when 42-31863 (Shackleford) aborted).

By August, 1944, allied fighters had achieved air superiority over the German homeland, and Luftwaffe fighters generally avoided combat with US fighters, preferring to conserve their dwindling, but still potent strength to deal with the bombers. Luftwaffe fighter controllers had long since learned to watch for, and take advantage of any gaps in US fighter cover, and this appears to have been the case here.

Freeman, in his *Mighty Eighth War Diary*, shows 121 P-51s as escort for 1st Division B-17s. These P-51s claimed four enemy aircraft shot down for no losses, indicating there was little fighter versus fighter combat. It is clear, however, that errors in timing left a gap when the 401st was without escort and it was at this time Luftwaffe fighters made their pass.

A 612th Squadron history (origin unknown) reports that the Group had encountered no fighter opposition since May 28 mission to Dessau, when six B-17s were lost.

At this time DOWN-N-GO was lagging behind. It had always been slower, when loaded, than other B-17s. A new wing, recently installed, had not helped. Finney and Scott discussed the situation and decided to drop two of their ten 500 pounders in hopes this would enable them to regain formation. The bombs were held, however, until they crossed inland, in the hope that they might do some damage.

The release of the two bombs did improve performance, but not enough to regain their slot in the lead box. Dale Scott remembers: "We knew then that they should have dropped the whole load, but by then it was too late. At that period of the war, if you were flying a real tight formation, the Luftwaffe would not bother you. It was the stragglers that were dead ducks, as we were soon to find out!"

'394 was still straggling when tail gunner Bill Duling called in "Fighters at 5 o'clock high". Woody Snyder in the top turret replied that he had them in sight, and that they were coming in. Parker Finney recalls that there were about thirty of them, attacking in elements of three. They were some 30 miles south east of Hamburg over an hour from the target. The time was 1120.

Up in the nose, navigator/bombardier Scott started for the side mounted cheek guns, but before he could get there, the aircraft had been hit heavily amidships, with minor damage to the nose area. The chin turret gunner, Sgt Bralley, fell backwards from his seat, knocking Dale Scott off balance.



It is, of course, not possible to describe the damage to the aircraft, but the centre fuselage had taken numerous 20mm hits. A raging fire began immediately in the left wing root and the radio room area, where R/O Smith had apparently been killed, as he was seen amidst the fire, not moving. Waist gunner Burt Miller reported later that the ball turret did not fire, or rotate after the first pass, and he was attempting to rotate the turret with the hand crank to assist Hill, when the B-17 exploded, throwing him clear.

With the gunfire damage and a big fire in the mid fuselage area the intercom would have been destroyed, and thereby, any chance of inter-crew communication. To Dale Scott, in the nose, this was not immediately apparent, and he attempted to return to the navigators table to plot a course home if the pilot should request it.

Scott recalls: "I was still trying to figure out a heading home when I glanced behind me and saw the co-pilot Pete sitting with his legs dangling out the forward hatch, with a dazed look on his face. Pilot Finney was right behind him and gave him a shove and then followed him out. I remember thinking, there ain't nobody driving this machine so I'd better get out of here, to hell with the heading".

"The crew later said the wing was on fire and flames going clear back to the tail, but I never saw any of that, I suppose I had my eyes shut as I went out".

Sgt Bralley later reported that he was the last one to bail from the nose area, and the aircraft was burning when he left.

Luftwaffe fighter pilots had long ago learned that when attacking bombers from the six o'clock position, the tail gunner should be their first target. In this instance, they failed in this, and one of their number paid for it. Parker Finney recalls that "My tail gunner, Sgt Duling, advised me later on the ground that he had destroyed at least one of the FW-190s that blew up as it was approaching his tail. This was later confirmed for me by a fellow member of the 614th Bomb Sqn who was shot down months later, and told me that he had watched me go down and had seen the destruction of one FW-190. So far as I know, no official note of this was made in Army records."

Fighter opposition is discussed at some length in the mission summary, which indicates fighter attack by thirty to fifty aircraft, mixed '109s and '190s, of which the former predominated. Colours are described in the usual general terms. Some were described as jet black, others greyish with white bellies, white spiral noses, black crosses with white centres, and black wing tips with invasion stripes. Others were grey with red bands behind cockpit. The mission summary claims "four or five fighters, in one pass alone, were definitely observed to be knocked down in flames by our gunners". Oddly enough, no specific claims for enemy aircraft destroyed, are made.

As described, Dale Scott had gone out the forward hatch, probably with his eyes closed. He admits now that he never paid much attention to parachuting lectures, for the age old reason that he did not believe it would happen to him. Scott continues: "I fell for what seemed to be a long time, looking over my shoulder at the ground, trying to decide if it was time to pull the rip cord. About

that time I saw two other chutes above me open, so I gave my cord a jerk". Despite efforts to avoid it, he landed, quite gently, in a grove of trees.

There was little chance for 8th Air Force crewmen to evade and escape that deep in hostile country. Scott managed to evade search parties for awhile, but Luftwaffe records indicate he was captured three days later, on the 27th.

As we have seen, six of the nine men aboard DOWN-N-GO bailed successfully and survived as POWs. Sgts Woodrow Snyder (top turret), Ed Smith (radio operator), and Golden Hill (ball turret) did not get out. From testimony of survivors, it is certain that all were killed at their stations on the first fighter pass. The next day, some of the survivors were shown the wreckage with three bodies in it.

The lead box had lost only one aircraft, Finney's DOWN-N-GO, which was out of formation and straggling. The high box lost none. As was often the case, the low box, consisting of twelve aircraft, nine from the 613th, and three from the 615th, was the most vulnerable, and suffered the most casualties. In the low box, the low squadron, often referred to as Purple Heart Corner, was hardest hit.

By the time the force reached the target area, only three B-17s remained in the low squadron, two having been shot down, and one severely damaged, which jettisoned its bombs and returned to Deenethorpe. All three of these were 613th Squadron machines.

The first of these to go, and lost during the same fighter pass which hit DOWN-N-GO, was Lt. Melvin Fish's 43-75511, squad-

ron code "IN-G". As in Finney's B-17, most of the damage on the first fighter pass, occurred in the tail and amidship.

Tail gunner Sgt James Huff was killed at this time, while Sgt William Cook in the ball turret was wounded and exited his turret. Cook, also on his first mission, then returned to his turret, as the fighters made another pass, this time wrecking the ball turret, and again wounding Cook. Radio Operator Melvin Warren and waist gunner John Hanchak, attempted, without success, to free Cook from the wrecked turret.

On the flight deck, Fish's intercom was knocked out on the first pass, although co-pilot Leslie Hauss retained contact with some crew stations. Hauss had apparently left his seat during, or after the second pass. Determining that the No.4 engine and wing were on fire, he then returned to the nose and said "hit the silk, ships on fire". Hauss then bailed out through the nose hatch, followed by pilot Fish, navigator Eugene Cramer, bombardier Ken Lucas, and top turret gunner Sgt Warren Smith.

A tail gunner in another B-17 reported later that the aircraft was on fire, rolled and went straight down. With the B-17 now totally out of control, Hanchak and Warren abandoned their efforts to free the ball turret gunner, who had died during their rescue attempt, and bailed out the waist, the last two to leave the stricken Fortress.

All who bailed out survived except co-pilot Leslie Hauss. His body was not found by the Germans until August 27, three days later. The cause of his death is not known, although the top turret gunner later reported he thought he saw a chute on fire. The

others landed safely, but Lt. Cramer, and Sgts Hanchak and Smith spent several weeks in the same German hospital recovering from injuries.

Luftwaffe reports say the aircraft, which crashed near the town of Little Tondorf, was 90% destroyed, although it is difficult to imagine anything less than total destruction.

With Fish's B-17 gone from the formation, the second section of the low squadron, low box, was reduced to Lt. Chester Cain's 42-97931 leading, and Maxwell Cain's 42-97344 (613th Sqn code 'IN-P') on Kuta's left wing. (One other aircraft from the low box, Carson's '591, who was left wing in the first section, may have been out of formation by this time).

The force had turned due south, at about 26,000 feet, at 1145 hours and was north east of Magdeburg when the second fighter attack occurred. The situation regarding friendly fighter support is not clear at this point. The 357th Fighter Group arrived and rendezvoused with the bombers north east of Magdeburg at 1211, at 25,000 feet and escorted its assigned bombers through the target area. The 357th mission leader reported no contact or sightings of enemy aircraft at that time, the P-51s remaining

with the bombers until 1430 hours. At 1350 hours, almost two hours later, 357th Mustangs shot down two '109s in the Brunswick area.

There was, apparently, another fatal gap in the escort for at least fifteen minutes prior to the arrival of the 357th Mustangs, and this allowed a small number of enemy fighters to slip in and strike the low box again. The fact that more B-17s were not lost may indicate the arrival of the 357th, or other friendly fighters in the area.

Gain's vulnerable position in the low squadron perhaps made it inevitable that '511 would receive the brunt of the attack. A tail gunner in another aircraft later reported five or six '109s made a pass from six to eight o'clock position at Cain's B-17, after which No.2 engine was feathered and was seen to be smoking.

Unlike the other two losses of the day, all crew members bailed from the stricken aircraft, although Robert Barron, ball turret gunner had been hit in the shoulder. Barron, who had completed six missions, did not survive, and one report says he was killed trying to escape on the ground. Bombardier and chin turret gunner Corporal Donald Byers was the other fatality. Other crew members reported he had frozen in the for-

ward hatch and was pushed out, his chute failing to open.

Other than the three lost, eight aircraft received varying degrees of damage from flak, with two crew members wounded aboard Lt. Robert Callaway's 42-31983.

Two B-17s were damaged by 20mm projectiles during the fighter attacks, both in the low box. Kuta's 42-97931 was hit in the left wing, but completed the mission with the remainder of the group.

Lt Frank Carson's Homesick Angel, 613th Sqn code 'IN-J', received enough damage to require immediate return to base. Although one formation chart shows Carson's 42-31591 in the high box, other documents agree that it was No.2 in the low box, on Kuta's left wing, and was probably hit at the same time that Kuta was.

This was almost surely at the same time that Finney and Fish were shot down, at about 1100 hours, Homesick Angel leaving formation at this time and heading home.

The low squadron, low box, was living up to its reputation, as Purple Heart Corner. It was common practice at this time for crippled bombers to call for Little Friends to provide close escort on the return flight. Whether this was the case with Carson is unknown, but Homesick Angel touched down at Deenethorpe at 1445, with No.2 engine feathered, blowing a main gear tyre on landing. The crippled B-17 caused the runway to be closed briefly, but it was cleared before the mission returned about thirty minutes later.

There was one more fatality to add to those in the three lost aircraft, and this was Carson's radio operator, S/Sgt William C. Matthies, apparently killed during the fighter attack.

Various comments of crew members were recorded at the post-mission briefing and these opinions remain with the mission report. Frank Carson's navigator, Lt. Harris Lawless, expressed the opinion that '591 should not have been on the mission as it's nose and ball turret guns were inoperative, and was the tail gunner's intercom. With the advantage of hindsight it seems a valid complaint.

On the lighter side, the crew of Lt. Leland Hayes, B-17 '7872, are recorded as stating they would rather not have hot cakes for breakfast!

So ended mission NNo.132 for the 401st Bomb Group, with three aircraft lost and twenty seven men missing in action, with one known dead. The bombing was reported as having good results, with most bombs falling within a thousand feet of the MPI.

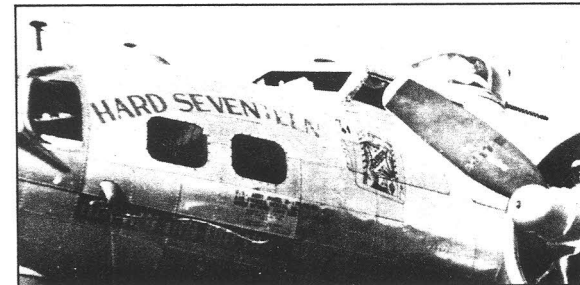
The search for information on the events of 24 August, 1944, over north central Europe, as experienced by crews of the 401st Bomb Group, was ended. A fairly clear picture had emerged, but the language of the mission report, and the missing aircrew reports, could not adequately express the excitement and the terror of air combat.

Nor could it capture the pain of the wounded, and those who died, or the fortitude and courage of the survivors. However, the knowledge of those events had added meaning to Sgt. Golden B. Hill's Air Medal and Purple Heart.

They hold an honoured place among this author's possessions, and serve as a small memorial not only to Sgt Hill, but to the other men of the 401st who died on mission No.132.



The crew at McDill, Spring 1944, 1 to r: Snyder, Miller, Duling, Campbell, Smith, Hill, Brown, Price, Finney, Scott. (Brown and Campbell were not on the last mission.) (Parker Finney) Right: Deenethorpe based B-17Gs, led by another 'Mickey Ship'. (via Dave Smith)



614th 42-102659 'Hard Seventeen' flew the August 24 mission in the lead box. It returned undamaged. (Ralph Trout)

