

Fred Gentry, Lovable Scoundrel or Cool, Professional, World War II Bomber Pilot? A Son's View

by David J Gentry

I am eternally indebted to Darren Jelley, 493rd Bombardment Group Researcher. With mostly original sources, Daily Diary, many welcome photos, patient explanations to my innumerable questions, descriptions of my father's missions, and passionate devotion, Darren has enabled me to learn about my father's war. What I have learned is invaluable to me and I hope will be of interest to my family and others.

Debra Kujawa, Managing Director/Editor 8th Air Force News, has given me some of her vast knowledge, and she referred me to Darren Jelley. Debra, you have been priceless to me, also. Thank you.

Darren Jelley sent me a couple of crew photos of a man who looks like Dad. Thanks to Darren we know that Dad flew as a member of the 493rd Bomb Group of the Eighth Air Force in World War II.





When I saw the first photo, my eye immediately went to the young man standing on the far right. I observed my wife's eyes as she looked, and her eye immediately went to the same person.

The bottom photo shows an officer who looks like Dad. He is standing second from the left in just about the same pose, his right hand in his pocket, and it is unclear where his left is but probably in his pocket, also. The give-away that it's Dad is his hat tilted way to the right. Dad's face is not as clear as on the top photo, but I think it is him.

Look at the photos again, especially the clearer one. Could this man be a highly skilled, composed, steely-eyed bomber pilot? Could he be the one who keeps his head while all around him are losing theirs? He looks like he's sticking his finger in the eyes of the army! Look at him! He's almost slouching! Look at that hat! He's saying, "Army? What army? I'll show them what I think about their insane rules and idiotic procedures!"

So here he is. Nonchalant, both hands in pockets, the only man that way. His hat rakeshly tilted to one side. Wearing a half smile, as if not wanting to commit to a full one.

But was he one of those rogues who somehow made it onto an aircrew? One of those who was sloppy and careless, who was always goofing off? That pose in the photo does show a large part of him. He was always ready for a party. He always was the life of the party!

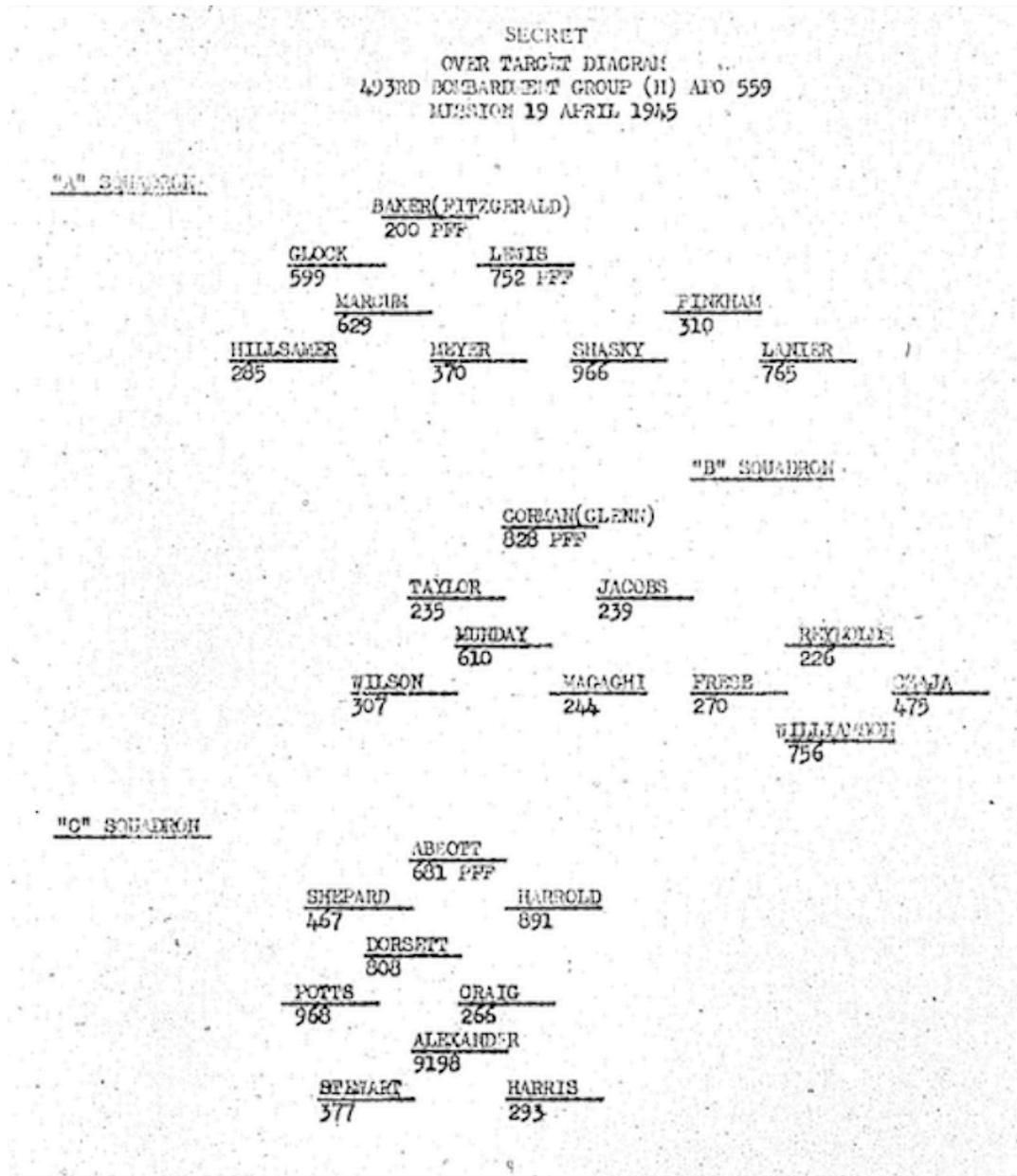
There was another side to him.

Once we were still-fishing along a steep bank on Lake Okeechobee in Florida. We had cast our lines and left the rods near the water's edge. I was about nine. It had rained the night before, it was cold, and the bank was slippery. Dad was sitting on top of the bank, and I was down on lake level. One of the rods began slipping into the lake. Dad could see the situation developing, and yet he did not yell out. That might have discombobulated me. Better to project calm. To be unruffled. I was several feet away from the rod, and I went to grab it thinking I had to be careful not to go into the lake. My foot slipped and both feet were in the lake. I was sliding deeper. "What the heck!" I didn't know how to swim. I was losing my balance. My brain froze. I glanced up at Dad. He did not move a muscle, and he had a smile as if to say, "Well, what are you going to do now?" I was angry. "Why doesn't he help! I'm just a kid!" Then I thought of what he often said, "Don't panic!" My brain started working again. I arrested my slide and carefully crawled out of the lake.

Then there was the day high above Germany when Dad found himself one of two pilots of a four-engine, heavy bomber, the largest bomber the U.S. had at this time. Dad was helping his First Pilot fly a B-17 as close as they could to a B-17 slightly ahead and to their right. The goal was to tuck your right wingtip just behind the left wing of the leading bomber without crashing into it! Tight formations provided concentrated firepower against devastating German fighters. It took constant attention and constant working of the controls. Dad and Gordon Potts probably took turns handling the controls while the other focused on watching, always watching for enemy fighters.

It may help visualize action, or maybe not, by looking at the "Over Target Diagram" for the 493rd for this day, April 19, 1945. The diagram shows each B-17 by its number and name of First Pilot. There are three squadrons shown, and they would fly over the target with the "A" Squadron, called the Lead, flying over first, then the "B" Squadron, the High, since it was higher than the Lead, then the "C" Squadron, the Low, since it

flew lower than the Lead. Dad was flying as Copilot of aircraft "968" with "Potts" as First Pilot in the "C" Squadron.



The three-plane element led by "Abbott" was always in Dad's view, with the "Shepard" aircraft flying almost directly in front of Dad's aircraft.

The mission for Dad's group this day was to bomb railroad marshaling yards in Aussig, Czechoslovakia, to interrupt the flow of military equipment, manpower, and supplies. It was a deep penetration raid lasting eight hours and forty-five minutes. By the end of it, every man would be exhausted. I read a report of one mission in which, upon returning, a pilot's fingers needed to be pried off the yoke.

Victor Kramer, the Ball Turret Gunner of the "Shepard" aircraft almost directly in front of Dad's, describes what happened for the 493rd Bomb Group's Diary.



"We were 'jumped by Jerries' and the air was thick with the machine gun fire that was lacing the air all about us from the German fighter planes, from our fighter escorts, and

even from the other B-17s in our squadron, because we were flying as tightly as we could, trying to keep the formation to maximize our fire power.” Dad’s whole formation of 28 B-17’s was under attack.

Here is how Robert Morgan, First Pilot of the famous B-17, “Memphis Belle,” describes a fighter attack. “Memphis Belle” is famous for being the first B-17 and crew to survive 25 bombing missions which completed the crew’s tour of duty.

“Onrushing Nazi planes were everywhere — above, below, to our sides, behind us, and in front of us, slashing suddenly out of the sun. A speck in the distance, then a shape, then a mass of ugly swooping wing and tail, blazing its guns at us in those evil orange flickers. Then gone. All in the space of maybe four seconds. Then another one. Or two. Or three. Then another. And another.” [“The Man Who Flew the Memphis Belle,” page 123]

This was only the third combat mission for Dad’s crew, and especially inexperienced crews could be expected to be terrified by fighter attacks. In one of the early missions of “Memphis Belle,” and in the middle of a fighter attack, Robert Morgan says his Tail Gunner began screaming:

“Chief, the tail is hit, the whole back end is shot off! Chief, it’s blazing! The whole tail is leaving the plane!”

“I told Quinlan to calm down and let me know exactly what the damage was.” [“The Man Who Flew the Memphis Belle,” page 161]

If anything similar happened to Dad’s airplane, I can readily hear Dad calmly saying the same thing to one of his crew.

The tail of “Memphis Belle” was mangled, but Morgan, an excellent pilot, demonstrated his skills in what he says was one of the most, if not the most, serious situation faced by the crew in its 25 missions. Morgan was able to keep up with the formation and land successfully. He credits the ruggedness of B-17’s as one of the reasons the crew survived. Time after time during the war that ruggedness and pilot skills brought crews home.

Although Dad’s ship was not severely damaged on this day, or any other day, still I am glad he flew a B-17. I can hear you saying, “That was a silly statement.” I know I am being irrational. I admit it. Maybe I am just proud that Dad flew one of the most rugged bombers we had. I doubt we would know if Dad’s airplane suffered less than severely; many B-17’s came back with what was considered minor damage.

Two German fighters of the models that attacked Dad's group:



ME-109

ME 262; note jet engine under each wing.

The jet fighter carried four cannon; it was the first jet propelled, combat airplane in the world. The ME 109 was the workhorse of German fighters. Its armament varied; one configuration was two machine guns under each wing and a cannon firing through the propeller. All of this firepower was formidable.

To continue Victor Kramer's story, "Suddenly there was a loud explosion within the plane! The whole plane shook! Then the pilots voice came over the interphones with the dreaded words...

'Pilot to crew...pilot to crew! Prepare to bail out. Prepare to bail out. But do not bail out till I give the word.'

"Reacting as trained with guns pointing straight down I rolled my turret to the exit position. I reached up, twisted the entry-escape hatch locks, stood up on my seat and propelled myself up and out of the turret and reached for my chest-'chute. As I was about to clip on my chute Steve [Sherman] (the replacement radio op) came running past me to the rear door of the plane and started kicking it, trying to get it open. He was too crazed with fear to just reach down to the handle and twist it open... (which, in the long run, saved his life). I was the first to see what he was doing and it registered on me that he didn't have his 'chute on. As I ran to him the door swung open. Just as he was about to jump out the door I shoved my right hand thru one of his 'chute harness straps and jammed it onto the door frame. By that time the waist gunner and the tail gunner were there with me and Steve was dangling outside the plane unable to fall because my wedged arm was holding him to the plane. Junior

grabbed my 'chute from my other hand and between Vaughn and himself managed to clip it on Steve's harness. Try as we did tho', we just couldn't pull him back into the plane because the slipstream was so strong. With both of them holding my chute harness I reached down and grabbed his 'chute ring. With their help we were able to dislodge my right hand from the door frame and out of Steve's harness strap. As my hand came out, Steve was instantly pulled away by the wind.

"When they got me away from the door, my right wrist was bleeding from the deep gash the metal door frame had made, but in my left my fist was firmly holding the 'chute ring. Looking below and to the rear of the plane we could see an open 'chute and Steve's body swaying below it so we all felt a sense of accomplishment in knowing that no matter what followed, at least Steve was kept from plunging to his death from our plane!

"In the brief time that all that had taken place, the flight engineer had found that the explosion occurred when the emergency life raft, which was stored in the roof of the radio room directly over the radio operations' head [that is Steve Sherman's head!] had been hit by enemy gunfire and the inflation canister inflated the raft which then EXPLODED out of its hatch, was ripped away from the plane and took part of the radio room roof away with it as it flew away from the plane. It was easily understandable why Steve reacted the way he did. Anyone would, with all the explosion, roar and the ripping and rending accompanying noises directly over his head.

"Fortunately, that was the worst thing that happened to us. We sustained several bullet holes about the aircraft but nothing serious.

"Our fighter escort and the combined firepower from our formation drove Jerry away and we were able to complete our mission.

"This mission was definitely NOT a milk run.

"We subsequently learned Steve had landed safely on a German farm and was rescued by a small group of resistance fighters and eventually spirited back to our base in England, where he heard what had actually happened that eventful day."

The 493rd's base was Debach, England, pronounced "Deb-itch" for the Americans among us.

Even this is not the end of the story! After the war in 1948, Victor returned to Brooklyn and had a need for a machine shop. He remembered that Steve's father had a machine shop in Brooklyn. Victor called the number in the Yellow Pages, and Steve answered! Not much work was accomplished the day Victor visited the Sherman and Son Machine Shop. Victor says, "When I got there his father met me at the door, hugged me, and with tears in his eyes thanked me for saving his son."

In the middle of being “jumped by Jerries” it was Dad’s job to remain calm and unfazed and in control. If it was his turn to fly the plane, he had to concentrate harder than he ever had to keep his aircraft flying straight and level and tightly in the formation. Flying a B-17 was a physical as well as a mental task. A pilot’s yoke and foot pedals were connected to control surfaces by cables and pulleys. There was no power assist. A useful analogy may be driving a truck without power steering while considering that a truck operates in two dimensions while an airplane travels in three. Mom said that when Dad got home from the war he was all muscle. The efforts required to fly the plane and its complexity allude to why two pilots were necessary, in addition to having a backup should one pilot become incapacitated.

Each man in the nine man crew had his job to do and often more than one. Describing all of the jobs would take more space than necessary here. Under attack by enemy fighters, it was the Bombardier’s job to operate the machine gun chin turret. There were a Navigator, a Radio Operator who also served as a Waist Gunner, a second Waist Gunner, a Tail Gunner, a Ball Turret Gunner (beneath the fuselage), and the Top Gunner who was also the Flight Engineer. If Gordon were flying the aircraft, Dad’s job might have been to communicate with the crew, perhaps reminding them to check their oxygen flow or look sharply for enemy fighters. Dad may have been reporting fighter attacks, everyone’s job, as well as performing any other task that he or Gordon saw needed doing.

Here is a photo of the actual aircraft Dad flew as Copilot on this mission, SONOF-A-BLITZ. The wife of the Copilot of the regular crew for this aircraft had just given birth to a boy; hence, the name.



There is even more documented action concerning enemy fighters: “493rd Bomb Group Operational Report Narrative” and the “Combat Report.” To aid readability, I have made slight alterations.

“Due north of Chemnitz, 2 ME 109’s were seen flying in formation at 9 o’clock high, paralleling the group’s magnetic heading of 209 degrees. They attacked the group ahead, the 490th, and shot down one B-17. One parachute was seen.

“One enemy aircraft then turned and made an 8 o’clock high pass at the High Squadron of the 493rd. Attack was aggressive. [The High Squadron was immediately in front of Dad’s squadron which, remember, was the Low Squadron.]

“The same ME 109 then got into an attack position on the 493rd Group at 12 o’clock low. Lt. Delmar Mineard [Bombardier on the James Lewis crew flying aircraft 752] opened fire on the ME 109 with 50 rounds from the chin turret as the ME 109 closed to 300 yards and broke away to his right, smoking and diving straight down. The pilot was seen to bail out.”

Later it was learned that this was the last German fighter shot down by the Eighth Air Force.

In addition to the fighter attacks, the three groups sent to Aussig, Czechoslovakia, (Dad’s group, which was the 493rd, plus the 490th and 34th, each with about 30 B-17’s) were shot at by ground fired rockets and anti-aircraft guns known as 88’s. The shells of these guns were 88 millimeters in diameter, 3.46 inches, and each weighed 16 pounds. They could be fired up to about 25,000 feet. On this mission, Dad’s group flew at 19,000 to 20,000 feet. Explosions of the 88’s were called flak and were seen by air crews as flashes of red and puffs of black smoke. There was moderate flak approaching and over the target.

Here is a photo showing flak, the black smudges against the white clouds. It appears innocuous until you read the comment. One direct hit could down a B-17 if the round hit a sensitive spot such as a fuel tank, and there were fuel tanks in the wings.

The photo is from the David Conger Collection, 493rd Bomb Group Museum. It was not taken on the April 19 mission to Aussig but rather on an earlier mission to Merseburg; however, the flak Dad saw would have looked like this.



A six Gun Battery has your altitude
now and you see shiny jagged holes
appear in your wings.

Fortunately, no crews were lost on this day from Dad's group. But, in addition to the one B-17 shot down from the 490th group as noted above, three other B-17's of the 490th were shot down out of about 30 that had been sent on this mission. Four out of 30 lost. On one day. On one mission. Maybe on the next mission it would be Dad's group that loses four of thirty. At this stage of the war, each B-17 had a crew of nine to eleven men; thus, about 40 men became casualties out of about 300 airmen in the 490th group. They would be listed as Missing In Action. Some became Prisoners of War. There would be empty places in the mess hall and empty beds.



I can imagine this painting being the forward compartment of Dad's B-17 on the mission to Aussig. John Quinn, the Bombardier, is giving the thumbs up sign showing his pleasure after reporting "Bombs Away!" He believes he hit the target, the railroad marshaling yard. The Navigator, Bob Deming, is double checking the new heading to the Rally Point before he gives the heading to Dad and Gordon. The Rally Point is where the B-17's will form up upon turning on the homeward bound heading.

The painting is by Gil Cohen, and it is called "Mission to Regensburg."

What were the bombing results of this mission for the 493rd Bomb Group?

According to the official "493rd Bomb Group Operational Group Narrative," the Lead and High Squadrons did not do too well. Their bombs hit 1500 to 2500 feet east of the target center, but Dad's squadron, the Low Squadron, had 6-10 hits "in the yard with fair results." The lead Bombardier's report says that the relatively poor results were due to prop wash and turbulent air caused by groups ahead of the 493rd.

Were the bomber groups spaced too closely, and, if so, why? Could the prop wash and turbulent air have been avoided? I don't know.

"But the results were enough if the movement of enemy troops and supplies could be halted for even just one day helping the allied forces that little bit more." [Darren Jelley]

There was no place on this combat mission, or any other, for a lovable scoundrel. As second-in-command of a B-17, Dad took his responsibilities seriously. His long training period, almost two years, was focused on the West Point system of training army officers and its motto of Duty, Honor, Country. These were not platitudes to him and to the B-17 crews who faced pain, maiming, and death at -30 to -50 degrees Fahrenheit in the skies over Europe. Only the front compartment of a B-17 got some largely ineffectual heat. I think of these young men when I hear of some of today's young people disdaining our country. What would the B-17 crews think of them and of the elites who endeavor to inculcate the young with the dreadful mistakes Americans have made instead of acknowledging these mistakes and remembering the enduring greatness of the American experiment.

Dad was both a lovable scoundrel and a good combat pilot. He died in 2000. His terror during fighter attacks and flak and rockets easily could have infected his crew, but he did not let it. His composed demeanor communicated his confidence that each crew member would do his job, putting aside debilitating fear. His bravery and that of many other young people of his age turned back and defeated the Nazi scourge, at great cost. May we be worthy of them.