

# The Mission

An account as recorded by Archie Bower, pilot on aircraft s/n 42-97457

"Straight Shot's" last mission, February 25th 1944



The Crew - left to right

Sgt. Jesse J. Hirschberg (waist gunner)  
Sgt. John Woskovich (tail gunner)  
Sgt. Joe Snyder (waist gunner)  
Sgt. Joe Popowitz (radioman)  
Sgt. Frank S Giardano (engineer)

Sgt Wesley Schneider (ball turret gunner)  
Kneeling:  
Lt. William Baxendale (copilot)  
Lt. Archie F. Bower (pilot)  
Lt. Richard W. Cooke (bombardier)  
Lt. Lee E. Hoskins (navigator)

*(wg) waist gunner*

*(bt) ball turret gunner*

*(cp) copilot*

*(tg) tail gunner*

*(e) engineer/gunner*

*(b) bombardier*

*(r) radioman*

*(p) pilot*

*(n) navigator*

This is the account of Archie Bower, Pilot of 42-97457, "Straight Shot".

---

The 26th of February is my birthday and Capt. William Smith, our Squadron Operations Officer had put the crew of "Straight Shot" on stand-down and made reservations for us in London. The crew, however, wanted to fly another mission before we went on leave and asked that we volunteer for the Augsburg mission.

I talked to Capt. Smith and he assigned us the number two position in the mission to Augsburg on the 25th of February. At daybreak, Capt. Smith drove his jeep alongside us as we taxied to the runway. We waved. I never saw him again. (In 1945, while I was at a reception center in California, I read of Col. William Smith's death when he crashed in a B-25 into the Empire State Building.)

On the bomb run we encountered heavy flack. Number two engine was hit and lost oil pressure rapidly. Bill Baxendale (cp) pushed the feathering button and the prop started to feather but the oil pressure dropped further. The prop suddenly went into flat pitch and ran away. As I remember, the tachometer went to about 6,000 rpm resulting in an increase in drag rather than the reduced drag of a feathered propeller.

Number three engine was also hit and began operating at reduced power. Even so, we were able to keep up and deliver our bomb load over target.

After leaving the target, it became apparent that we would not be able to maintain our position in the formation, so we moved into the center of the group's V formation using the group for front cover.

I ordered Richard Cooke (b) and Lee Hoskins (n) to the rear of the aircraft to help with the injured and to man their guns since we were now coming under heavy fighter attack. We shot down two fighters, but one burst of enemy fire caused an explosion in the forward section of the plane and flames started coming through the hatch leading to the bombardier/ navigation section. (Archie received burns on his face and hands at this point.)

We started to drop. I ordered the crew to bail out at 17,500 feet. Then I pulled the emergency release for the bomb doors, which was my emergency exit. Unfortunately, the cable came loose in my hands.....apparently damaged by the flack. The doors were supposed to open with 250 pounds of force, so I crawled to the bomb bay and fell on the doors. They opened about six inches -- enough to get some air, and away from the flames, but not enough to get out.

This left my only means of exit to be through the waist door, so I crawled to the rear of the bomb bay and up into the radio room. The left side of the radio room had a hole about two feet wide. John Popowitz was laying on the floor with a huge wound in his hip. He was alive, so I dragged him toward the waist door.

Wesley Schneider was laying face down just aft of the ball turret. I rolled him over and determined that he was dead. Jesse Hirschberg (wg) was crouched down faced forward and leaning against the side of the fuselage. I grasped his shoulder and pulled him over and found that he was dead.

The airplane would stall, then fall off on the right wing and dive until it gained air speed. It would then pull out of the dive and climb until it stalled again.....repeating the process. When it was pulling out of the dive, gravity made movement impossible. I finally got to the waist door and took one of the static cords which were installed by the right side of the door, snapped it on to John's rip cord and threw him out the door.

The airplane was pulling out of another dive and I saw trees outside the waist door. I went to the door, dove out, and as the stabilizer passed over my head, I saw that much of it was shot away.....only the main spar was holding it on. (Later, when I saw John Waskovich (tg) in Nuremberg, he told me that only the armor plate was holding him in his tail gun position and that most of the rudder had been blown away.)

I landed very hard in a frozen field, broke my leg and lay there stunned. The aircraft crashed in an adjacent field. Almost immediately a man crawled out of a drainage ditch beside the field and ran over to me. He was a French slave laborer. I gave him an orange and a candy bar that I had in my flying suite. Also gave him an escape map and he scurried back to the ditch. As I lay there, I could see the chutes of the crew still floating down.

In a short time, a Wehrmacht soldier driving a horse and wagon picked me up and took me to a clinic in the outskirts of Landshut. There were two tables in the clinic. Paps (Popowitz) was lying on one and they placed me on the other. Paps was still alive, but I couldn't tell immediately if he was conscious. Soon I realized that he was. He kept calling my name to

help him, but as time passed, his voice grew weaker. He died at 5 o'clock.

*When we were liberated, I reported what I considered lack of proper care on the part of the clinic's staff to the debriefing officer at Camp Lucky Strike in France (one of the "Cigarette" Camps where military reported for return to the USA). Later, I was visited by an OSI officer at the Santa Monica R&R Center. I gave him a deposition to be used at the war crimes trials in Nuremberg.*

Later that evening, Paps (Popowitz) (r) and I were loaded in a wagon that already contained the body of Bill Baxendale (cp). Although Bill's body was covered, I recognized his ring. Bill (cp), Paps (r) and I were taken to a hospital in town. I was placed in a ward with wounded Wehrmacht soldiers.

Later that night I was visited by one of the pilots who shot us down. He told me that we had downed two of his comrades. He rolled a piece of paper around the end of a cigarette to keep the smoke away from my burns and held it while I smoked. He also brought me a bottle of cold beer. A bizarre ending to a tragic, fateful day for crew 457 of the "Straight Shot".

***As told in a letter to Greg Cooke, written September, 1995***