

A Sequel to the Kassel Mission Disaster
7 October 1944

by Frank W. Federici (445th)

On September 27, 1944, the 445th Bomb Group flew a mission to Kassel, Germany with thirty-seven aircraft. There was a solid undercast and navigational errors were made such that a different target was hit (Gottingen) about thirty miles northeast of Kassel. This put the entire group out of the bomber stream: they were on their own. Ten minutes later, about one hundred German fighters jumped the group of bombers. The entire battle took less than five minutes. We lost twenty-five crews and ships at the scene of the tragedy. In addition, two ships crash landed in France, two crashed at Manston, England, and five crashed near our base at Tibenham, England, which means that only three ships returned and landed at our base. (The preceding mission details were taken from the 445th Bomb Group history book.)

The main purpose of this writing is to describe the effect on those of us at our home base on the day of the tragedy and thereafter, and to relate a Kassel mission story that occurred on 7 October 1944. I was the navigator on Jim Williams' crew which included:

Jim Williams, pilot
Vincent Mazza, copilot
Leo Lewis, bombardier
Frank Federici, navigator
John Christianson, nose turret navigator
Herbert Krieg, engineer
Carl Bally, radio operator
Edward Goodgion, waist gunner
Kenneth Brass, waist gunner
Charles Bickett, tail gunner

As a lead crew we flew many practice missions to maintain top proficiency. On the day of the September 27, 1944 Kassel Mission, we flew a colonel up to Aberdeen, Scotland. When we returned to Tibenham, we noticed that a lot of aircraft were not in their parking places. (The mission should have returned to base already.) We landed and I walked over to our ground crew chief and asked, "Where are all of the ships?" He answered with, "We have been wiped out, sir." I replied, "That's not funny, sergeant." He replied, "Honest to God, sir," and started to cry. I felt badly and placed my arm on his shoulder and apologized to him.

We eventually went to our hut which accommodated officers of four crews (four per crew) or a total of sixteen men. Our hut was empty when we walked in because the other three crews had been shot down over Germany near Kassel.

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We were shocked at the great losses of men but also very angry at the enemy. The next day our base put up ten aircraft which flew with another group and went back to Kassel, Germany with one thousand pound bombs. All returned safely. Results were very good. It was amazing how fast replacement crews came to our base - within ten days our hut was full again.

On October 7, 1944, our crew flew lead position on a mission to Kassel with a total of forty aircraft and had excellent bombing results. In fact, we received a "Lead Crew Commendation" for the accurate bombing results. But it was not a "milk run" for our crew . . .

Our hydraulic lines were damaged by flak. As we approached our base, our pilot, Jim Williams, asked our flight engineer, Herbert Krieg, to lower the nose landing gear manually to conserve hydraulic pressure for lowering the flaps. I volunteered to help Herb lower the nose gear manually. In his thoroughness Herb warned me to pull my head back before we reached a critical position of the gear as we were cranking. I thanked him profusely after I saw the gear move back, up, and then down in a locked position (in one continuous motion). If Herb had not warned me, my head would have been hit and possibly pinned between the gear and the underside of the flight deck! Once the nose gear was down, the flight engineer went back to the waist section of the ship to observe whether the main gear were down and locked by seeing if two yellow paint marks were aligned on the gear. However, the flaps on the wings had already been lowered and, thus, obscured his view of the alignment of the yellow marks on the gear.

Since an inordinate amount of time had elapsed since the flight engineer had gone back to the waist to check the main gear *and* the cockpit could not contact the waist on interphone, I volunteered to go back to the waist to find out what the status was. When I reached the waist, I was amazed to see each waist gunner holding a leg at the ankle of the flight engineer who was hanging upside down outside of the waist window without a parachute pack!! (A parachute pack would have interfered with lowering him on his stomach.) I composed myself as I walked toward these dedicated and single-minded men and calmly said, "Haul him in," and proceeded to give them a hand. Incidentally, Herbert Krieg was thirty-six years old at the time and a very wiry and slight of build guy (who could easily fit into and operate a ball turret). If he was not of this build it would have been virtually impossible for the waist gunners to safely lower him out of the waist window. Although a valiant effort was made to lower the flight engineer, he still couldn't reach a low enough position to see if the yellow marks were aligned indicating that the gear were down and locked. Consequently, I immediately called the pilot and told him what I had learned and said we would take crash positions in the waist area for the landing. During the course of landing, I "lectured" the flight engineer and the two waist gunners, Kenny Brass and Eddie

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Goodgion - all of whom were exceptionally determined as they tried to ascertain if the main gear were down and locked!! We landed safely.

A navigator friend of mine, Ira P. Weinstein, will enjoy reading this story purely because it occurred at the same target, Kassel, Germany, when he participated in the September 27, 1944 mission and was shot down and became a prisoner of war. We enjoyed each other's company at the 2ADA's 56th Annual Convention in Oakbrook, Illinois, June 3-8, 2003. We met in the 1990s at an Eighth Air Force Historical Society meeting near Chicago, where Ira presented his story about the infamous Kassel mission and his subsequent experiences as a prisoner of war.

The Kassel mission of October 7, 1944, along with the Misburg and Karlsruhe, Germany missions, were some of the most memorable missions I flew. Our Kassel Mission will always give new meaning to "flying by the seat of your pants."