

ONE OF THE MIGHTY EIGHTH CAME DOWN IN ENGLAND

On the 8th January 1945 a Fortress returning from a raid on Germany arrived in some distress above a village on the channel coast. St Margarets at Cliffe lies behind the high chalk cliffs between Dover and Deal and, being only some 22 miles from the Pas de Calais coast, much of the village and surrounding area had been taken over by the military early in the war, including the school. The local children travelled by a Bedford bus to nearby East Langdon each day and that was how, at five years old, I was on the bus with my elder brother Ted and the other children riding home that afternoon.

The sight of a B-17 on its belly in a ploughed field, fifty yards from the road, provoked an instant chorus for the driver to stop and within seconds the bus was empty. We hurried across the field to the bomber and found what I believe was the crew, still in possession. We were allowed to enter the Fortress and I can vividly remember being carried by a leather coated man inside the fuselage and along the bomb bay cat-walk to the cockpit. In one place, below our feet, mud was mixed with snow where some damage had been caused. In addition to our welcome, Ted recalls we were given sweets and chewing gum by the Americans. A few of us were near enough to walk home - well overdue, but the final arrival of the school bus without most of its cargo caused some consternation.

It was to be thirty nine years before I discovered that the aircraft had been a yellow tailed B-17G of the 487th Bomb Group based at Lavenham in Suffolk and a further six months before I was able to visit the airfield.

On 8 January 1945, in the sixth winter of the war, the weather in Europe was bitterly cold and four months of hard fighting still lay ahead before VE day dawned. At this time tens of thousands of Allied Prisoners of War were being forced marched hundreds of miles through the snow to new camps in the west as their old ones in the east were abandoned ahead of the advancing Russians.

The previous night 645 R.A.F. Lancasters and 9 Mosquitoes had raided Munich and on this Monday with Mission 8AF787 of the U.S. 8th Air Force, 502 B-17 Flying Fortresses and 234 B-24 Liberators of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Air Divisions were continuing the 'round the clock' bombing campaign against 16 targets. Of this American force 131 Fortresses had bombed Frankfurt and one of these aircraft, 43-39068 of the 487th Bomb Group based at Lavenham in Suffolk, was in dire trouble on the return flight to England.

B-17 Number 43-39068 lifted off the Lavenham runway at 0706 am and some hours later, flying Number 4 in the Low Squadron, bombed their target at 1125 from a height of 25,800 feet on a heading of 70 degrees.

The bomber, bearing the large 'Square P' code of the 487th BG was being flown by Captain Frank L Casey. At a time when flying a total of 30 combat missions seemed an insurmountable feat for bomber crews, Frank Casey was on his 50th mission, 20 raids into his second tour of duty.

On their return flight two engines went out while they were over the English Channel. Frank alerted the crew to prepare to bail out although dropping into the freezing water would probably have been catastrophic. Just a few seconds later he lost total power which killed the other two engines together with all instruments and the communication system. All efforts to recover the situation proved unsuccessful and the Fortress was at about 8,000 feet and

dropping 1,000 feet per minute. After breaking through a line of clouds they could see that the plane was approaching the White Cliffs of Dover. Once over the cliffs they were at some 300 feet, perilously low, and Frank had Sgt. Dye seated near him to crawl back and cancel the order to jump, all the time fighting the plane and trying to keep it under control. The big bomber, now basically a glider, was flying so slowly it was in danger of falling out of the sky. On his left Frank noticed a farm field. He made a left 'flat' turn, cleared some trees and missing some haystacks, came to rest very close to a road. The tail of the 'plane hit the ground first and Frank recalled later that the tail dug into the ground and did not jump around. From the time he came out of the clouds till he was on the ground was about two minutes or less, no room for error! Although the landing was on a ploughed field, part of East Valley Farm, it was so smooth no one was injured although the radio operator had injured his hand as he prepared for the landing and the ball turret gunner had frozen first three toes on each foot.

The aircraft was relatively undamaged with the most visible result of the landing being to the four propellers. I had always thought that where we saw the mud and snow through the fuselage must have been due to the bomb bay doors being torn away. However the Crew Interrogation Form under '14. Malfunctions' stated: 'Bomb Bays had to be cranked open and shut by Engineer.' This seems to indicate that the systems problems started before they reached the target and the doors were probably secure. Ted recently recalled seeing the ground 'through a hole in the floor' and, as Frank landed tail down, it is probable the hole was caused by the ball turret being torn away as it touched the ploughed ground.

Frank was awarded the Silver Star for this incident and he also received two Distinguished Flying Crosses during his military career.

The Interrogation Form also has the comment that 'the crew was alert and we cleared the plane within 10 seconds.' Frank walked to the nearest house but no one was at home. At the next house a lady answered the door and Frank asked: 'Do you have a phone that I may use?' She replied: 'Where did you come from?' Frank rang the Air Sea Rescue Service and paid for his call. The Rescue Service arranged for a truck from Manston to take them to R.A.F. Hawkinge, near Folkestone. In the meantime the radio operator and the ball gunner were attended to by the Royal Artillery, probably from the local area as the army was much in evidence. From Hawkinge they were flown back to Lavenham by Captain G. Reader. Captain Reader was shot down a few weeks later and was a prisoner in hospital in Berlin where he was treated well by the German doctors. When the Russians captured Berlin the soldiers stole his watch but he survived the war.

The crew of 43-39068 was:

Capt. Frank L. Casey (GA)	Pilot
Lt. Harry E. Sanner (PA)	CoPilot
Lt. B. W. Nelson (NY)	Navigator
Lt. Earl E. Grimshaw (IL)	Bombardier
Capt. James F. Kane (IL)	Bombardier
T/Sgt. Thomas B. Dye (OH)	Engineer/Gunner
T/Sgt. Armstrong	Gunner/Engineer

T/Sgt. Ted Farley (PA) Radio Operator

S/Sgt. William Jefferies (KS) Gunner

S/Sgt. T.B. Burnette Gunner

There was a heavy fall of snow that night and it was some time before the B-17 was dismantled and taken away on a low loader.

Frank Casey was in the Georgia National Guard when the war started and was a cook. Although Frank did not have the qualifications required for flight school, volunteers were allowed to take an examination and he qualified with the second highest score in his group. After full training he arrived in England to join the 487th BG at Lavenham where his first tour of operation was made up of 26 raids flying the B-24 and the remaining 4 with the B-17. His Flight Engineer/Top Turret Gunner for the tour was Sergeant George M Ogle.

On one mission over Germany Frank was flying as the deputy lead. On the first bomb run they could not drop their bombs for some reason and had to go around for a second try. Just as they were over the target the lead B-17 exploded in front of Frank. At this point Frank took over the lead position and had to turn to make another attempt at the target. This third run proved to be very dangerous, Frank reported that they were all shot up but fortunately he and his crew were not injured.

For his second tour, the mission on 8th January was Number 20 and subsequent missions were all in January. On 13th to Mainz, the 14th to Magdeburg, the 15th to Augsburg and the 16th to Dressau. After this mission, number 54, Frank was taken off operations and became an instructor pilot at Lavenham. In May he returned to the USA, finally going to Hamilton Field, now Travis Air Force Base, where he transferred to Air Transport Command and was assigned as a C-54 pilot.

He remembered his first trip from California was to Saipan. From August 1945 to December 1946 he ranged over the Pacific; on 1 September he was at Atsugi, that had been a Japanese Naval Air Base, with a load of white mice to be used testing for radiation. The next day, 2 September, he flew over USS Missouri just as the peace treaty was being signed and he remembers seeing all the ships in the harbour. His visits to former Japanese held territory included Kwajalein, Saipan, Okinawa, Manila, Guam, Iwo Jima and he also flew into Johnson Island and Tokio.

The exciting episode of the Fortress landing was not forgotten in England or in the U.S. and sometime in 2010, Millard Greer from Cedartown, Georgia, made contact with Ruth Nicol, the St.Margarets-at-Cliffe historian. It transpired that Frank Casey was still alive, also in Cedartown and, in addition to Millard, another close friend was G. W. (Jerry) Ogle, son of Frank's first tour Flight Engineer/Top Turret Gunner. From then on things escalated; with news being shared with my brother Ted, lifelong friend Maurice Wellard, Brian Cole who still lives in the family house shown behind the landed B-17, and later Alastair Lyon, current owner of East Valley Farm. In a village community, my wife Brenda was born in East Valley Farm although the family was forced to move out as the farm was requisitioned for military use and the surrounding land used for commando training. We children were picking up spent mortar cases years after the end of the war. Brenda's family were housed in Surrey and later moved to Cromer - but that is another story!

Maurice's family bungalow was a few hundred yards from the farm and his mother was Brenda's aunt! Alastair's family acquired the farm after the war and he and Maurice have always been close friends.

In January 2011 I was able to borrow a neighbour's metal detector and with Maurice's grandson Jake spent many hours in a howling wind trawling over the landing site. We found quite a number of .303 bullet cases, presumably nothing to do with the B-17, many buried coca cola cans left by generations of harvesting farmworkers and, finally, two pieces of aluminium that obviously did come from 43-39068. I sent one piece to Millard for Frank, accompanied by a carefully phrased letter in case the U.S. Customs found it hard to believe that a piece of a B-17 had re-crossed the Atlantic after some 67 years! The Cedartown Standard edition of 12 July 2011 devoted a lot of space to Frank with photographs of him in the war and holding his piece of aircraft, the paper pleased to honour one of their wartime heroes.

Frank died in the early morning of 3 November 2013 a few weeks short of his 93 birthday and 'his English Friends' sent suitable expressions of condolence to his family, Millard and Jerry. It had long been Jerry's wish to visit the crash site and that a suitable memorial might be placed there.

Jerry and Shirley his wife made the first wish come true in May 2012. Their trip to England included visits to the 486th BG home of Sudbury, the 487th at Lavenham, the 100th BG Memorial Museum, Madingley Cemetery, Cambridge University, and finally, a day in St. Margarets exploring the crash site and afterwards having afternoon tea courtesy of the Parish Council.

We have all been working on the project to have a memorial 'All Crew Safe' on Victory Road, fifty yards or so from the main road into St. Margarets that the B-17 stopped just short of. Alastair has kindly given permission but currently checks are going on as to who else might need to be informed, Brian and Maurice have been instrumental in getting us this far and Jerry is working on the production of the metal memorial plate.

Jerry Ogle is currently President of the US 487th Bomb Group Association.

Malcolm Finnis 28 February 2018

