

**Brunswick, Germany - Ernie Gavitt's Story By Ernest Gavitt, Navigator, Arnett Crew 717**

After briefing on the flight, we took off with other 492nd aircraft at about daybreak from our base at North Pickenham and climbed to altitude, heading across the English Channel in a very loose formation with our group B-24s. The poor formation turned out to be a decided weakness later in the mission as we approached the target. Enroute, we had some fighter protection; however, as we approached the IP (initial point, which is the point at which the bomb bay doors are opened and we get prepared to drop our bombs upon the signal of the lead aircraft bombardier onto the target area), our fighter protection was minimal. The sky was full of flak and many German Focke Wulf aircraft which attacked our formation. Our loose formation did not allow our aircraft maximum protection from our own plus other aircraft guns, thus the German fighters took a heavy toll of 492nd B-24s. (We learned later that 12 of 492nd aircraft, including our own were shot down).

Our aircraft took several hits in the engines, losing power which made us break formation and abort the mission to target. As Arnett and Stewart fought to regain control of the aircraft, I salvoed the bombs and gave Arnett a heading (course) to return to base.

We picked up a single fighter and were also blessed with Cumulus clouds which allowed protection as we proceeded westward. We began ditching everything that could be thrown out to lighten the weight of the aircraft thereby allowing us to maintain as much altitude as possible with our damaged engines. Realizing we could not stay airborne across the English Channel, I gave Sgt. Pierce, our radio operator, our IFF (Identification Friend or Foe) code and also a projected point of impact into the English Channel for him to radio to Aircraft Rescue in England for their assistance.

All crew members put on their Mae West flotation gear to prepare for ditching into the Channel. As we crossed over the Zuider Zee leaving the Netherlands' airspace into the Channel, our engines failed and put the aircraft into a spin. While Arnett and Stewart fought again to gain control and keep the aircraft level and in a glide, we did a 180 degree turn and were now heading back into the Netherlands at about 750 - 1,000 feet altitude. Arnett ordered the crew to prepare for a crash landing and to take their assigned positions.

The aircraft came to rest on land between several dikes near Alkmaar, Netherlands, in the middle of a German anti-aircraft group that took the crew prisoners. We lost Sgt. Robertson in the crash and Lt Gavitt was injured and unconscious. Both men were removed from the aircraft just prior to one engine fire to the demolished B-24 aircraft. The "Boomerang" did not return to base as planned. The Germans took care of Sgt. Robertson's body and Lt Gavitt, now conscious, was taken to a German Hospital for his head injury. The officers were separated from the enlisted personnel, each group going to an interrogation center where the Germans tried to get information other

than name, rank and serial number, which, according to the Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners of war were all you were required to tell. After spending several days at our center in solitary confinement and questioning, we, Lts' Arnett, Stewart and Gavitt, were taken by train with other officers who were shot down and taken prisoners to Stalag Luft III near Sagan, (Zagan) on the Oder, (Odra) River. We never saw the enlisted men again, although we know they all returned home safely after the war. I have contacted them and still do each year at Christmas.

At Sagan, we were sent to the West Compound of the Prisoner of War camp for Air Force Officers from Allied Countries. We stayed at the camp until the late evening of January 27, 1945, when we were ordered by the Germans to march westward into Germany under their control to keep us from being liberated by the Russian forces who were making great advances into our area from the east.