

# Valor: The Saga of Barrel House Bessie

By John L. Frisbee

**Aug. 1, 1989**

Bremen, in northwest Germany, stood high on the Eighth Air Force's target list. It was Germany's second largest port, the site of submarine pens, and the center of an industrial complex that produced aircraft, ships, trucks, ordnance, and petroleum products. With so many prime targets, it was well defended by guns and fighters. Bremen was no milk run, especially in late 1943 when there was only a handful of P-38 and P-51 long-range escort fighters.

On Nov. 26, 1943, the Eighth launched 633 aircraft in its largest strike up to that time. The 384th Bombardment Group, commanded by Col. Dale O. Smith, was assigned targets in the Bremen area. The group had been there before. Smith (now a retired major general) led the mission on a bitterly

cold day with layer after layer of heavy stratus clouds. Among the 384th B-17s was *Barrel House Bessie*, piloted by Maj. William Gilmore. His flight engineer and top turret gunner, 29-year-old TSgt. Maurice Henry, emerged as one of the heroes of the mission. Because of conflicting reports, the exact sequence of events that befell *Bessie* and in which Maurice Henry played a key role is impossible to recount with certain accuracy, though there is agreement on Sergeant Henry's acts of heroism.

In the target area, the group encountered intense flak and from 150 to 200 enemy fighters. Short of the target, *Bessie* sustained extensive structural damage and the loss of No. 3 engine. Bessie was unable to keep up with the formation. Gilmore ordered the bombs to be jettisoned, but one, fully armed, hung up in the bomb rack. Henry left the top turret, went into the open bomb bay at 40-degrees below zero, and freed the bomb.

The fighter attacks continued, and an incendiary shell started a fire in the cockpit. Again Henry left his turret to put out the fire, though he was almost overcome by the acrid smoke. In the interval between these events, Henry is credited with

shooting down one enemy fighter and damaging another.

Diving into the clouds for protection, *Bessie* broke out at 6,000 feet directly over the city of Emden, where she came under heavy attack by anti-aircraft guns. By this time the oxygen and electrical systems and all instruments were knocked out, a quarter of the nose shot away, the flight controls and all four engines damaged. Once over the icy waters of the North Sea with more than 200 miles between *Bessie* and her home base at Grafton Underwood, Henry helped the pilots restart the No. 3 engine, which ran only spasmodically. Then No. 4 quit, and its propeller couldn't be feathered. Ditching was imminent. Henry made repeated trips through the open bomb bay passage to supervise the jettisoning of equipment. Finally Nos. 1 and 2 engines, which had been running erratically, failed.

The wake of a ship was sighted in the distance. Gilmore headed for it with little hope of success. *Bessie*, now an oversized glider, was losing altitude too rapidly. Since the radio was out, Henry found a .45 pistol and fired flares in hopes that the ship's crew would see them.

Henry next assembled the crew in the radio compartment and prepared them for ditching about 40 miles from the coast of England in rough seas. When the B-17 hit the surface, water poured in through the damaged nose and the open bomb bay, breaking *Bessie* in two just aft of the radio compartment. Henry directed the other crew members in inflating and launching an undamaged life raft and helped those who couldn't get aboard the raft into the water. He was last to leave the sinking B-17, but only after he had searched for and found the emergency radio.

Henry was last seen plunging into the icy water, still clutching the radio. Before he could fight his way to the life raft, he was swept away by the waves and lost. Ten minutes later an RAF rescue boat pulled one man from the water and took aboard six from the raft. Lost with Henry were tail gunner SSgt. Albert Schamber and one of the waist gunners, SSgt. James Bucher.

TSgt. Maurice Henry was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, second only to the Medal of Honor, for his heroism and "selfless devotion to other members of the crew." *Barrel House Bessie* didn't make it home, but that she got

as far as she did with no greater loss of life was due in large part to Henry's leadership, professional competence, and heroism. "He was," said Gilmore, "an example to the entire crew."

Published by: <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/valor-the-saga-of-barrel-house-bessie/>