

An account of the 384th Bomb Group mission on March 22, 1945
By the crew of Lt. Charles B. Shuff, DFC.

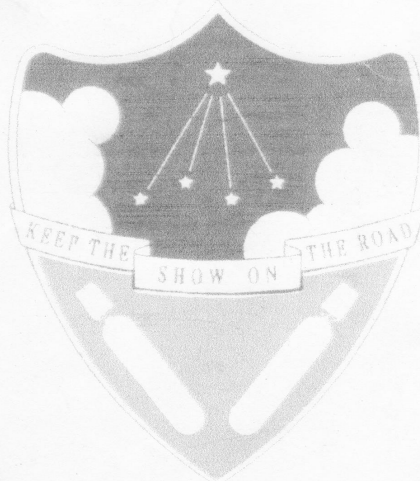
384th Bomb Group (H) Eighth Air Force



544th



545th



546th



547th

Mission # 20, March 22, 1945

Germany: Four hundred fifty 1st Air Division B-17s and 289 3rd Air Division B-17s attacked ten Germany Army bases and encampments; 325 2nd Air Division B-24s attacked GAF airdromes; 208 3rd Air Division B-17s attacked two GAF airdromes; and 21 heavy bombers attacked secondary targets and targets of opportunity. One B-17 and three of the 632 VIII Fighter Command escorts and scouts were lost.

Air War Europa; Chronology 1942-1945. by Eric Hammel, Pacifica Press, Ca. 572 pp., p. 462

One by one members of Shuff's aircrew stepped out into the chilled English night on their way to the damp stone cold latrines at the edge of the Squadron area. The distant sound of heavy aircraft engines floated up from the maintenance hangers a mile away. The pungent odor of sulfuric smoke from the pot stoves filled their lungs.

When they left the Officers and Sergeants Clubs the night before the Green mission lights were on. They had another mission tomorrow. Very early in the AM an orderly would come through the officers' hut, flash a light in the faces of those on the roster to fly, and rattle off the times for breakfast, briefing and takeoff. A senior sergeant would pop into the enlisted men's tent and rouse them all at once. The mission two days ago had been wild and woolley. The target was Hamburg, and as they came off it and headed north powerful head winds caused the bomber stream to stack up on itself so that groups found themselves flying along side of each other. To make matters worse they encountered elements of Me 262s that came wheeling past just out of range. The gunners reported seeing planes going down behind them. It was the crews' nineteenth mission in thirty days. Everybody felt the fatigue, especially the pilots who did hard physical labor holding the B-17 in formation hours on end. The navigator and radio operator had their chores to keep them occupied; and the gunners had to deal with hours of scanning the sky for trouble in its many forms. Over time everyone could feel it.

So far their luck had held. Despite plenty of flak on the bomb runs they had yet to pick up a single shard of shrapnel. Nor were there any major mechanical problems. The Luftwaffe was nowhere in sight most of the time. Weather was the biggest danger, both taking off and climbing into formation or dragging home through thick cloud cover and low ceilings. You could lose it coming or going. It didn't help that the 8th Air Force was putting up 1200 bombers a day in the bomber stream with 800 fighter escorts. Thirty-six groups of 36 aircraft each streaming past a single entry point on the Dutch coast was an unforgettable sight, but things were lot more messy on return. On three occasions they looked out to see another Group bearing down on them. Watching two Groups of 36 B-17s trying to occupy the same space at the same time was a helluva sight. Somehow the pilots avoided what seemed like certain collisions as the Groups shuffled the deck.

tightly run outfit under Colonel Theodore Milton. Promotions were earned slowly and sightseeing fighter pilots were not welcome. Bob told Hill to come down in the morning and watch the take-off spectacle; and they could go into town when he got back. He had located Hill when they had their only three day pass to London; and one day Hill had flown over in his P-51. It had been a good reunion.

At briefing there was good news and bad news. The good news was the mission was briefed for less than six hours. The bad news was they were headed into the heart of the Ruhr Valley, one of the most heavily defended places on earth. The German Wehrmacht was in a bad way. The Allies was massing their troops for a Rhine crossing at Wesel and the smoke pots were already lit. The 384th was targeting a small railroad north of Essen that probably hosted a headquarters outfit. All along the line the 1st Air Div. had similar targets.

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Navigators and pilots went to different briefings. Bob was fairly relaxed as he filled in the route lines and flight times to the various check points on nice fresh maps. This was his and Charlie's twentieth mission. His first one had been a navigational disaster. As was the custom Charlie had been scheduled to fly co-pilot with a high mission crew back on Feb. 19th before taking his own crew on their first. But the navigator's roster turned up one short that day and Bob found himself being routed out to go with a crew that only had a couple of more missions to go. Totally surprised he was tight as a drum. Europe was completely overcast that day and when the Group tried to make a radar drop on its target the lead decided to go for the secondary at Munster. Bob scrambled to plot dead reckoning tracks as they seemed to jog all over the Ruhr. When he finally got his first reliable G-box fix he was a full thirteen miles off and his log was full of blanks. As he left the aircraft his toggeler said, "You were working way to hard Lt." But he had learned lot since then and today's mission looked like a milkrun. He was the last of the crew to arrive at the hardstand of #630.

The crew members were getting their gear on board including their .50cal machine guns. Joe had installed Bob's gun for him. He had never fired in the air. The gunners all test fired their guns on the way into Germany but Bob worried about a jammed round figuring the last thing they needed was a .50 round exploding in the nose. He had them jam in practice and did not trust himself to clear it. Fred and Charlie were finishing their walk around and getting ready to start their checklist. Each position had a parachute, flak jacket and steel helmet for use on the bomb run. The hazard now was flak, German 88s, fused to explode among the formation. They would reach the Group's 19,500 ft altitude with ease; and since the weather was clear they would be using their superb telescopic sights.

The intensity and accuracy of the flak varied a lot. If the Germans thought they knew the track of the bomb run they could fill a "box" with steadily exploding rounds. They had run into one of these over Bremen. At first it looked like a large dark smear in the sky ahead. Then as they closed on it the tight swirling black balls began to appear until finally there might be one close enough to see the red flash. Occasionally there was no flak at all, or only the last squadron caught some.

Green flares from the tower signaled Start Engines and the mission was on. Thirty-six heavily loaded B-17s began filling the taxiways to the end of the takeoff runway. Five thousand pounds of bombs and 2700 gallons of fuel gave Charlie a handful as he taxied into place. Hoggy and Bob stayed in the nose and Shorty stood between the pilots. The others were in the radio room. There was no point in leaving the nose. If the plane failed to get airborne it would simply add to the large charred spot already off the end of the runway. Every airbase had them. Fully loaded aircraft left no survivors.

Climb out was an hour of rising circles in pursuit of the leader. All over southeast England the groups swarmed around their beacons forming up in response to color coded flares from their leaders. Straightforward enough on a clear day, it could be nerve wracking when the cloud cover ran from 800ft up to 12,000. Then at breakout everyone scanned for others and hoped there had been no collisions.

The mission track ran due east into Belgium along the Scheldt estuary. They went on oxygen at 12,000 ft and the formation began to tighten up. Joe had squeezed into his tail seat, propping his chute and walk around bottle just behind him. He could see the English Channel to the south and the North Sea to his right. He would report on the formation and any flak to the pilot. Cramer had entered his ball turret leaving his chute and bottle behind since there was no room for them. He spun the ball to test it while Shorty did the same in the top turret. Charlie and Fred took turns at the formation flying required. Hoggy checked his switch panel one last time to be sure he could salvo the bombs on the leader over the target. Itch had bundles of aluminum foil strips called chaff when he would push out a slot behind his seat on the bomb run. Each strip sent a return to German radar to confuse the signal. #630 was equipped for radar and radio jamming and a sergeant was on board to operate the equipment. No one knew him. On a beautiful, clear March day none of this would matter much. They would be seen just fine. Bob had excellent checkpoints along the way with precise times and marks. Already he could see the smoke at Wesel. He got ready to call out the time to the Initial Point so everyone could get into flak jackets, helmets and positions for the bomb run.

The IP was just inside Germany and almost immediately Joe called out that he could see flak appearing. With less than two minutes to Bombs Away the plane took close bursting flak that riddled the waist and radio room.

A cry of anguish filled the intercom. "Who is it?" someone asked. "It sounds like Birney." Itch said. Bob replied, "No, it's Lesko, Itch. Better get back to him". Charlie came on saying "We don't have any rudder left. Give me a heading out, Birney." Bob came back, "The bombs aren't away. Stay with the Group."

At that moment Hoggy toggled on the leader and the bombs left. He had been startled by a piece of flak that had hit his jacket. The #3 engine was running away, the sound getting higher and higher until Fred feathered it. When the flak hit on the flight deck Charlie looked down to see a hole the size of a baseball in the floor, and looking up there was another one in the roof. Fred checked the palm of his glove which had torn out without breaking the skin. The Group began its turn to the north when the jammer yelled that the oxygen was shot out and Itch had passed out. Joe started out of the tail to try to help when Charlie put the plane into steep dive and asked for a heading. Voices faded quickly until people popped their ears painfully. Bob had no track but saw the Wesel smoke and picked a heading to track for Manston in Kent which served as a huge emergency landing field for cripples.

Shorty and Itch tried to make Lesko comfortable as he lost consciousness. He had taken a fragment in the spine. Charlie totaled up the damage and figured he had problems. His rudder cables were gone, #3 engine was out as was the radio, and he had a badly wounded crewman. But he was straight and level with three good engines. Once settled in at 8500ft. Fred went back to check on the waist and when he returned Charlie did the same. He went through the riddled radio room, past the severed control cables and after seeing Lesko decided he need major medical attention. That meant England. As they got closer to the coast he could see a long convoy moving up the Channel ahead. Not wanting to cross it he began easing south along the coast, but figuring he had to cross he told Shorty to get some red flares ready to show he had wounded on board.

Shorty leaned in and said, "There's a fire in #2.

Charlie called Bob. "Where's the nearest airfield?" "Ten miles south, why?" "#2 is on fire. We need an open field." Charlie could see fire trailing all the way back to the tail. Joe could see it too. Charlie told the men in the waist to hook Lesko's parachute to a static line and prepare to push him out. They informed him they had cut his parachute harness off to get to his wound. They had no spare because they had forgotten the emergency duffle bag. He put the wing down to start down and Bob called up to say there was airfield practically underneath. Bob sent Hoggy back to the waist. He had taken his gear off looking for his wound. Bob followed him up to the flight deck and took up a position behind Fred. Shorty was behind Charlie. Later Charlie described when happened next.

"I made a left turn sending the flames over the radio operator's window. Itch yelled "We're on fire!" We made a rapid descent from 8500 ft—full flaps, wheels down,

even the cowl flaps open. For no reason we did not feather #2 engine. Feathering an aircraft engine is when you shut the engine down and rotate the prop blades so they are 90 degrees to the line of flight. This creates less drag. Not feathering the props created more drag which let us descend more rapidly. Later Shorty said he thought this probably kept the flames from the tanks—who knows.

On the down wind leg I noticed a stream that was just short of the runway. This would be right between us and the runway as we made the approach. I was planning on being little high and hot as we only had two engines. This stream probably pushed me a little higher than planned. Before we turned on the approach I told Shorty to get the red flares ready. These would let the troops on the ground know we had injured on board. I turned on the approach and a fighter pulled on the runway to take off. I was thinking, "Little fellow, you better hurry because you're fixing to have company."

As I said before, my plans were to come in hot and high. I was planning on 'slipping' when I was sure we would make the field. By slipping a B-17 you would turn that big tail to the side and you would really drop. When it was time to slip I pushed the rudder pedal with my foot and had no rudder. The rudder cable had been shot in two. During normal flying we never used the rudder. No rudder meant I could not slip the plane. So—we were too high and too fast.

Wondering what do we do now I told Shorty to shoot the flares. He stuck the flare gun in the hole, but did not lock it down. The gun went off with all of the noise and smoke coming back into the cockpit. My brain said, "That's it!" However when the smoke cleared we were still flying. I knew that without rudder we could not hit the 1500 landing strip. I also knew we could not go around. We were going to land somewhere!

I could see what appeared to be a fairly level field right off the end of the runway. There was no way of knowing if there were holes, rocks or whatever, so I decided a belly landing was safer than wheels down. With the wheels already down I asked White to pull the wheels up. He did not hear me so I had to tell him again, "Wheels up!" As we passed over the field sure enough I could see a lot of holes. We were landing in a mine field. The holes were where the locals had dug them up. We touched the ground very softly and were sliding along nicely with what looked like small pines about twenty feet tall on our right. The right wing caught them and cut them like a grass blade cutting grass. This turned the nose of the plane to the right. The plane rode up on the trees and stopped. To give you an idea how smooth the landing was---when White returned to his co-pilot seat after checking on Lesko, he failed to fasten his seat belt. After the plane stopped in the mine field, on the saplings, White had not moved from his seat nor realized that his belt was not fastened. After the plane stopped Birney and Hendricks (who were standing behind

our seats) were shaking hands and saying, great landing, great landing! I yelled, "Get outa here, we're on fire!" Fred and Shorty went through the bomb bay to the waist, Charlie went out his window and dropped to the ground; and Bob passed back to the smashed in nose and went out that way. When they got to the tail the others were carrying Lesko on a blanket. They had stopped and were listening to a Canadian officer yelling they were in the middle of a mine field. (The Germans had used the place for mine school training and they were everywhere.) An ambulance arrived and a soldier with mine detector came to lead them out. The plane continued to burn itself out. Charlie and Itch went with the ambulance and the rest of the crew loaded on a truck that followed. After a while a doctor appeared and told Bob that Lesko was dead. The next day they returned to the crash site. The entire center had been burned out. Alderman reported he had found badly bent metal pieces on his flak jacket. No Purple Heart for him. That night in the officers' mess a pair of Typhoon pilots told about taking part in the slaughter of the Germans caught in the Falaise Pocket. An army photographer showed up with the pictures of the plane.

In the morning they loaded onto a truck for Brussels where they found themselves in a huge arena building with wooden double deck bunks and straw biscuits. It was a collection site for downed aircrews and it soon appeared that half the 8th had been shot down. The place was jammed. The last airdrop of the war had gone off on March 24th north of Wesel. The 2nd Air Division had supplied 240 B-24s for low level (500 ft.) supply drops behind the German lines. All told we lost forty-five C-47s, fourteen B-24s and five B-17s that day. Many more made emergency landing in France and England. Charlie ran into a pilot he had trained with. (*Thirty years later Bob learned that his oldest daughter's father-in-law, Stanley Plagenhoef, had also been there after making the Wesel raid.*) Two days later they took a C-47 back to England and a grabbed truck for home base. Bob got to call Hill who had been left asking the returning crews where they were. He finally found someone who told him Shuff had left under power. That's all he knew. Until he got Bob's message.

When the crew returned to their tent they found Lesko's area completely clean. All if his personal effects were on their way to his family. After a medical check-up the word came they would spend the next week at flak houses near Oxford. The pause felt good. In April the crew flew five more mission, the last as Deputy Lead to Seddin. The results that day were perfect. Four days later the 8th Air Force stood down. Thus ends the story of the lone B-17 lost on March 22, 1945.

According to the German records the 8th AF lost five B-17s on the Ruhr raids that day. See JG 7, by Mandred Boehme, Schiffer Military History, Atglen, PA

Sgt. George Lesko lies interred in Arlington National Cemetery.

