

**Mission: Oschersleben, Germany**

**Tuesday, January 11, 1944**

Briefing started at 04:00; the target was approximately 500 miles deep into Germany. The bomb load was high explosives and incendiary, a maximum effort. Intelligence re-ported heavy flak and fighters would be expected, especially nearing the target area. The approach was lined on either side of the Ruhr Valley with large concentrations of anti-aircraft batteries. Extremely heavy flak and fighters would be expected going into the target.

At take-off all ten B-17s from the 615<sup>th</sup> Squadron were up and forming. The 612<sup>th</sup>, 613<sup>th</sup>, and 614<sup>th</sup> squadrons made it a total of 33 aircraft from the 401<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group. These aircraft were readied by the best mechanics, ordinance and armament crews, men who had worked long and hard all through the day and night, assuring that the last plane took off by 08:45.

The air battle lasted about three (3) hours. Light flak and some fighters were seen as the formation crossed the coast over the Zuider Zee in the Netherlands. Flak and fighters alternately dogged the formation. Due to bad weather conditions, some groups were receiving radio messages ordering them to alternate targets. The 401<sup>st</sup> B.G.'s target was still Oschersleben.

The *Bad Penny*, piloted by Lt. Fred "Duke" Grinham in the 615<sup>th</sup> Squadron, lost the #4 engine during another flak and fighter attack approximately 80 miles from the target. Losing altitude and lagging slightly behind, the aircraft was hit again but continued to

follow the 401<sup>st</sup> B.G. formation over the target. It had taken a hit by flak and lost the #2 engine. The bomb load was dropped, and the *Bad Penny* limped away from the target.

The fighter attacks encountered to and from the target were almost suicidal—head on in the front and straight into the rear of the formation. FW-190s and ME-109s fighters flew through the group with reckless abandon, determined to destroy them. Dornier -217s and JU-188s sat off to the side of the B-17's formation lobbing rockets and 20mm shells. The attack was devastating, the toll was heavy, and the 615<sup>th</sup> Squadron lost Lt. H.J. Chapman's and Lt. D.C. Sprecher's crews who were seen going down. Pieces of wing and tail sections of other aircraft could be seen floating to earth. B-17s were hit by flak and, with engines on fire, were leaving the formation. At times B-17s sustaining direct hits to the open bombays disappeared in an enveloping mass of fire and smoke. Those aircraft still airborne watched for and counted the number of parachutes able to jump clear, and made mental notes of the B-17's identification. B-17s were ripped and torn apart by machine gun fire and bursts of flak. But to no avail; the Luftwaffe had been dealt a staggering blow to an overwhelming portion of the German defenses aircraft industry. The target was hit, Oschersleben, the largest producer of FW-190 fighter aircraft, was destroyed and engulfed in flames.

Soon after the crippled *Bad Penny* left the target, while attempting to close the bombay doors, it became evident that the hydraulics to the bombay doors were damaged. T/Sgt. Roy W. Cockerham left his top-turret gun position, climbed into the bombay and hand cranked the mechanical gears. This task required tireless

brute strength while Cockerham perched on a narrow 6" metal walkway in the open bombay where the temperature hovered at -60°F—24,000 feet over the target area. Lt. Ralph W. Wolfe, the bombardier, observed him crank the doors up into a lock position.

As the 401<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group and the now-trailing *Bad Penny* headed for England on two engines, they were hit from all sides by FW-190s and ME-109s; again the assaults were mainly straight-on frontal and straight-in rear tail attacks. After downing his first German fighter, the tail gunner, James R. Hamilton, was hit by a 20mm shell. T/Sgt. Charles M. Lewis crawled back and around the tail wheel to see how badly S/Sgt Hamilton had been wounded and check out the damage. Finding S/Sgt. Hamilton conscious, he returned to the radio room. Although unconscious for awhile, S/Sgt. Hamilton came to and fought on to be credited with at least three fighters destroyed. S/Sgt. Charles E. Hardy, the ball-turret gunner, was kept busy keeping the fighter attacks away from the belly of the aircraft; he was credited with knocking down two. Meanwhile, the left waist gunner, S/Sgt., William T. Cummings, was struck by a 20mm shell, although suffering from wounds to the leg and thigh, he continued to fire his 50 calibre machine gun. Though he had two probables, he never sought credit. S/Sgt. Herbert M. Housman, the right waist gunner who was firing short bursts to save ammunition, was credited with two probables. Cockerham, the top-turret gunner, was busy warding off the attacks high around the clock and had several hits; he never put in for any even though he was manning twin 50 calibre guns. T/Sgt. Lewis, the radio operator gunner, manned his gun while listening to radio transmissions relating to

weather and other radio traffic. He was kept busy moving ammunition to areas in need when not firing his own gun. In the nose of the aircraft Lt. Ray Whitney, the navigator, was plotting a route back to England that would be short—keeping in mind the fuel usage—but evading as many of the flak areas as possible. Only #1 and #3 engines were up and running: #1 was running rough and #3 was running hot. Under these existing conditions, maintaining speed and altitude was next to impossible. Up front in the nose, Lt. Ralph Wolfe tried to counter the head-on attacks with the twin 50 calibre guns fired to repel the attacks. He declined credit for any probables.

The German assaults continued, the 401<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group's formation distance increased; the *Bad Penny* would be on its own. As if in answer to a prayer, a lone American P-51 Mustang fighter appeared out of the air engaging the more than 30 German fighters. The pilot, Major James H. Howard, a flight commander of a group of P-51s, had been separated from his own group. He happened upon this formation, engaged the enemy fighters, and shot down first one, and then another. He methodically ended up shooting down at least five German aircraft: one FW-190, three ME-109s and a ME-110; all went down on fire and smoking. When the fighters broke off the attack, it was learned that all four of Major Howard's 50 calibre guns were operating on the first two attacks, on the third only two, and only one gun was firing on the last two attacks. Major Howard was credited with five downed, at least five damaged, and several probables. It was learned later that Major James H. Howard was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his heroic actions in the face of the enemy. Major Howard's own P-51 sustained a single hole in the left wing.

(Major Howard and T/Sgt. Lewis both lived in St Louis. On their return to the States they met for a lunch at the home of Major Howard's father, where they relived and shared those moments with his father. Upon request, Major Howard graciously signed T/Sgt. Lewis' "Short Snorter" (a U.S. dollar bill signed by members of various crews) and thanked him for being thoughtful enough to take the time to contact him. T/Sgt. Lewis was grateful and humble, and is proud to still have the "Short Snorter" in his possession. Major James H. Howard was the first part of a two-part miracle. Lt. Fred "Duke" Grinham, our pilot, was the first part)

The bomb group formation had moved on, soon to be out of sight. The severely damaged *Bad Penny* could not maintain altitude; for the moment it looked like the aircraft was on its way down. But this crew knew that as long as the pilot and co-pilot had two engines running, the navigator plotting the shortest and most flak-free route, and the remainder of the crew able to ward off further fighter attacks, they would make this perilous flight back to England! The remainder of the flight was hampered by the cold—the heating system had been shot out during the first attack when approaching the target, and they were low on ammunition and fuel.

As they neared the Netherlands coast, just about over the channel, everything that could be thrown out to lighten the aircraft was ready to be jettisoned. The radio operator was ordered to begin sending out a "May Day"/S.O.S signal. An attempt to lower the landing gear failed, the hydraulics damaged by flak or shell fire. The T/Sgt. Cockerham entered the bombay for the second time to attempt to lower the landing gear with the hand crank, and the co-

pilot was also in the bombays transferring fuel. The pilot "Duke" Grinham kept advising the aircraft engineer to get out of the bombay if he could not get it down, for they were just about out of fuel.

The landing gear was finally cranked down and clicked into lock position. The *Bad Penny* was finally over water, 20 miles from the coast of England. Everything that could be spared was jettisoned. The gunners to the rear of the radio room came forward take up an emergency landing position, "Duke" Grinham contacted a B-24 /Lancaster base to inform the tower that the aircraft was coming in for an emergency landing with only two engines running and wounded aboard. Permission was granted, the runway was cleared for landing, and all emergency trucks and equipment were put on alert ready to roll into place. The *Bad Penny* crossed the English coast aligned with the runway for a straight-in approach and landing. The aircraft—shaking almost uncontrollably—passed over the start of the runway, and the #1 engine coughed and shut down, completely out of fuel. The plane was now landing with its one and only #3 engine running. As the wheels touched down and rolled a short distance, the propeller on the #3 engine fell off, cartwheeled across the field, and sliced the tail off a parked aircraft; the *Bad Penny* was without power to maneuver. It rolled to the end of its longest runway, onto the grass, and stopped.

Emergency vehicles of all sorts following the *Bad Penny* down the runway rolled to a stop, ready to assist in every way. A large crowd gathered and waited with the ambulances and medics standing by for the wounded to exit the aircraft. The wounded crew members

exited and were attended to, and the crowd watched and waited for rest of the crew to exit the aircraft.

The devastating damage to the *Bad Penny* elicited comments of profound amazement and disbelief. The aircraft had sustained 528 holes from the waist windows to the tail, and a large piece of the rudder was blown away by a 20 mm shell. A final count by the *Bad Penny* crew chief was just under 1,000 holes nose to tail. The *Bad Penny* had lived up to that old adage, "A bad penny always returns." This proverb indeed was proven true and was fulfilled through the great flying skills and extreme calmness and coolness of Lt. "Duke" Grinham and Lt. Fred Brown, the pilot and co-pilot, and their crew. This fulfilled the first part of the Miracle. This shared experience of the crew and the *Bad Penny* on the mission to Oschersleben, Germany, proved a maximum effort and the ultimate degree of teamwork experienced under the worst weather elements and battle conditions, the heaviest concentration of flak and fighters, and ultimate stress.

This mission to Oschersleben, Germany, was to go down in the history of air war to date as a "major assault and blow" to the industrial heart of Germany's air defense. All buildings at the Oschersleben plant were severely damaged or destroyed, and left burning. This dealt a devastating blow to the German Luftwaffe forces. More than one-half of the total of Fock Wolfe produced came out of Oschersleben. A significant portion of the Luftwaffe's air defenses had been all but obliterated. A near record-setting number of B-17s was lost: it was indeed a tremendously high price.

Among the one hundred and fifty-nine B-17s was the 401<sup>st</sup> B.G. with the 612<sup>th</sup>, 613<sup>th</sup>, 614<sup>th</sup>, and the 615<sup>th</sup> Squadrons participating in the Oschersleben target. A total of 139 B-17s made up that formation, and another group of 20 split up to hit "special" targets of opportunity. Of the 139 B-17s, 34 were shot down and 85 were damaged. 349 crew members were posted as MIA, 11 were wounded, and 9 were killed in action.

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Charles M. Lewis

*Charles M. Lewis*