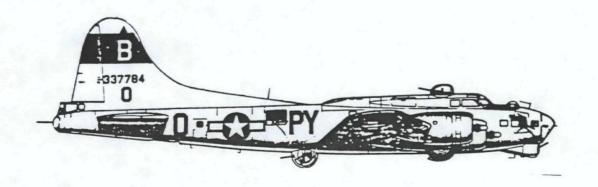
Robert D. Willeins (BOMBARDIER)

downed on GELSENKERSHEN, GERMANY (RUHP VALLEY) sulat Migen WILSON TOOD plane but by flak (one engine moting) Bob was squadron bomboodies in 327th squadron of the 92 ml bond map of the 8th air ford his friend Copt. Navy Nugles what Bob's parents to relet Boli was FON # 1482 Delay Just 3 (publisher camp Dely Jest 1) photo 9817 v/tout# 25916 "N" on mile The mission of 1443: Hym todies "Rothie I" O THOS: W. ROBERT L. CAMPBEL - LIBERTY, MG. COPILOS: LS. JOHN C. "RED" MORGAN - NYC, NY (69 IN 1983) BINGARON: LT. ROBERTS. WILKINS - WILSON, M.C. NANCATIR: LT. HENRY A. HUGHES SR - SERSH CITY, N.J. (68 IN 1983) WAST GONDERS: SGT. WALTON REESE - JOPUN, MO. 567. EUGENE PONTE - ST. LOUIS, MA. (60 M 1983) RADIO GUNNEY: SOL GLENN E. JOHNSON - GARMER, KANSAS (63 IN 1983) BALL-TURKE : SUT. RICHARD GETTYS . TAIL GUMMEN: SET JOHN C. FORD . HIGHLAND PARK, MICH (HILEG

100 HURREST : SLET. TYRE WEAVER - RIVEYIEN, ALAGAMA

"RUTHIE I"
92nd Bomb Group
325th Squadron
8th Air Force
07-04-43

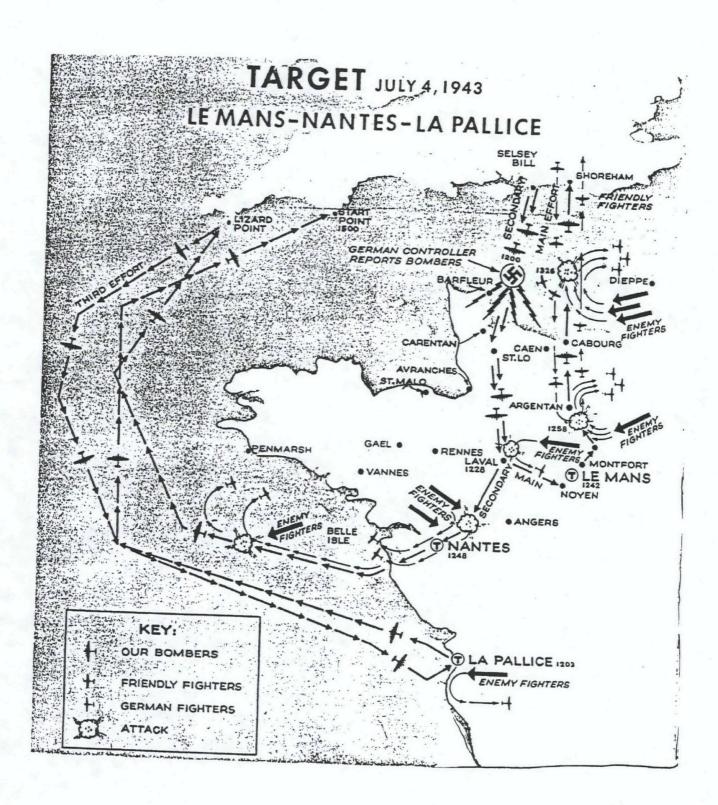


This is the story of the B-17F named "Ruthie" attached to the 325th Bomb Sqd., 92nd Bomb Group-8th Air Force.

On July 4, 1943, the targets for the day were LaPallice, LeMans and Nantes, France. The 92nd was scheduled for Nantes.

- The Crew -

Pilot - Robert (Bob) Campbell
Co-Pilot - John (Red) Morgan
Navigator - Henry (Harry) Hughes
Bombardier - Robert (Bob) Wilkens
Flight Engineer/Top Turret - Tyre Weaver
Radio - Glen Johnson
Ball Turret - Richard (Dick) Gettys
Tail Gunner - John C. Ford
Left Waist Gunner - Reece (Blacky) Walton
Right Waist Gunner - Eugene (Gene) Ponte



My recollection of our July 4, 1943 raid on Nantes, France.

It was early in the morning: I mean really early! As I recall, it was around 4:00 A. M. when the C.Q. came into the combat crew barracks yelling, "rise and shine:. As we stumbled out of bed and walked, in the dark, past the local pig pens to the Mess Hall, I kept wondering: what delicious taste treats will our Chefs have prepared for us and what will this July 4th celebration have in store for the men of the 8th and especially, "Ruthie".

I soon found out the first part of my concerns, as there we were face to face with a gourmet delight: powdered milk, powdered eggs and laughingly some mish.mash called Oatmeal!

Nevertheless and regardless of these tasteless treats, we forced some down in order to hold us over for what would probably be a very long day.

After returning to our barracks, we dressed and went to the briefing room to learn our challenge for the day. The mission was a three prong attack on France: to LeMans, LaPallice, and Nantes. Our 92nd was assigned the Nantes leg.

The flight started uneventfully. Walton naturally fell asleep after take off while I prayed a little and indeed wondered "what the hell" I was doing there. We reached altitude and I awakened Walton to put on his oxygen mask; test fire his gun and try his best to stay awake throughout the rest of the mission.

As we neared Paris, one element broke off to the left to hit LeMans and we continued south to Nantes. As we approached the I.P., the formation had to make a sharp right turn to line up on the target. Since we were at, or at least near the end of the flight group (Tail-end Charlie) the prop wash pushed us further and further out until we were flying out almost by ourselves. At this point, I think over the target, the FW's began to hit us. I remember the # 4 engine being hit and the flames shot past my waist window all the way to the tail section. At the same time, I believe the flaps came down which reduced our air speed even more. Gettys was hit about the same time and began to scream; however, he bravely kept firing his guns until he passed out.

Everything was happening at once. I really thought the flames from the # 4 engine fire were getting into the ball turret and burning Gettys-the screams sounded like a movie version of someone burning.

Weaver told me later that after the engine caught on fire and would not go out, he hopped out of the turret and pulled the throttle out of Campbell's hand to stop the flow of gas and the fire extinguisher put out the flames. They could not feather the prop and it began to windmill and vibrate until I thought it would tear the engine loose from the wing mounts.

When the flames shot past my window, I was ready to go but I was either too scared to bail out or my mentor, "Walton" didn't give me the go ahead.

The fighters began to swarm around for the kill and started to attack in formations of three to five abreast. The attacks seemed to come from the rear just above and below the tail section. We didn't know at the time what had happened to John Ford in the tail section and his love affair with countless twenty millimeter shell bursts.

Walton's gun had jammed so he went back to get Gettys out of the ball turret and into the radio room. After Gettys was made as comfortable as possible on the cold metal floor of the craft, Johnson called Hughes to provide first aid and take care of Gettys' wounds. Walton returned to his gun: it still would not operate. I remember one time he tapped me on the shoulder and I looked out the left waist window. A checker nosed FW came flying in toward our ship. I thought he was trying to fly right through the waist windows! Walton just shook the dead gun at him and began screaming some choice French words at the fighter.

Walton may not have been morally or militarily the greatest soldier; however, in the time of battle he was the guy to be next to and depend upon. He was the coolest, most unafraid person I ever knew and was very instrumental in saving my life on the next raid.

A little insight into my background training: during the heavy fighter attacks I remarked to Walton about the flack and to my surprise he informed me we were flying over the water. The "flack" I was seeing was 20 millimeter shells from the German fighters blowing up outside the waist window.

We dropped altitude to protect our belly (with the ball turret out) and the yellow nose FW's began to turn back. All of a sudden we heard over the intercom, "Drop the plane fighters!" We looked back and saw two JU-88's coming to finish us off. Between the final blast with our fifties and the plane violently dropping the JU's missed us completely. Weaver said a stream of cannon fire flew over the top of us which surely would have blown us out of the sky.

By now we were quite low; I do not remember how low, but it seemed like the fish were trying to jump through our waist windows! Perhaps Hughes remembered the altitude we were at. I do not recall we jettisoned any equipment.

Our thoughts immediately shifted from the attacking fighters to other serious concerns: "will we make it back to England" and, if we do, will our dear "Ruthie" hold together when we attempt to land? We gunners were all huddled in the radio room preparing for a water or crash landing. Gettys was lying on the floor and looked terrible. Hughes had sprinkled sulfa all over him and gave a shot of morphine to ease the pain.

As we approached England, the flight crew found the hydraulics were out, so Weaver came back to the radio room to manually crank down the flaps and landing gear. As I recall, Johnson stayed at the radio. We had to roll Gettys over to one side so Weaver could raise the floor plate and gain access to the manual cranks. John Ford stayed in the radio room and Walton and I returned to our waist positions. Weaver cranked the wheels down and was still straining to crank the flaps down when we hit the ground!

It was immediately apparent we landed with a flat tire which made the ride along the runway extremely rough. As the plane slowed down, the craft began to veer off across a field and was heading straight for the control tower. This event, of course, triggered an emergency evacuation of the tower. We later found the flat tire on the left wheel sunk into a sandy field insignia in front of the tower. This caused the plane to spin to the right and we stopped with the left wing snugged up close to the tower.

We immediately picked up Gettys and carried him out through the rear exit door of the plane. By this time, Gettys was in very bad shape and it was difficult to carefully move him while trying to maintain our balance while walking over the spent shell casings in the waist area. As we came through the door, the firemen had finally got the fire foam going to spray the #4 engine and we also were sprayed with foam as we made our exit.

Gettys and John Ford were taken to the Hospital. Weaver, Johnson, Walton and I went to the Sergeant's mess on the R.A.F. field. I recall the R.A.F. fighter pilots proudly relating their story of having safely escorted some bombers back to base. We gently informed them it must have been another group as all we saw that day was the FW 109's and the JU 88's!

After eating, we went to look at "Ruthie" and pay our respects-she was truly a mess! It was a "helluva" ride, a "helluva" crew and the B-17 was a "helluva" airplane. "Ruthie I" certainly gave all she could to get us back safely.

The #4 engine was completely gone. We could move the prop with our little finger: how it stayed attached, no one knows. There were two huge holes in the gas tanks in the right wing. Upon very close inspection of the tail on the right side we found three holes headed straight towards me (Ponte). Two were accredited to FW's and one to a waist gunner. I think my kills for the day were one FW and one tail section-hell 50% correct isn't bad! Weaver said he thought the large hole in the left wing close to the fuselage took out the hydraulics. The left aileron was blown apart and the ball turret showed the telltale story of Getty's fate with the 20MM hole in the front turret window.

The path of one 20MM, which came through the floor between Walton and I, clipped the top of the ball turret, passed through the radio room door, and carried into the life raft tearing it up. There were many times we thought our landing would be on the water which would have made it awfully tight to load into one raft. The Crew Chef later stated they counted about 1,000 holes in the plane-it was left at the R.A.F. field for scrap.

We flew to our home base; arriving quite a bit later than the rest of the Group. During the interrogation, we related the story of Gettys firing and downing the fighter plan after he had been so seriously wounded.

Next, we went to the barracks and found our clothing and personal belongings had been taken. This was because another Lt. Robert J. Campbell's ship went down that day and everyone thought it was us. We retrieved our belongings!

A three day pass was issued and we were off to London. I understand Hughes procured the passes for us. In the heart of London we ran into John Ford who was on leave from the Hospital. Somehow Walton and I returned to base on time. Weaver returned late and was busted from Tech to Staff Sergeant because he was posted for a raid with another crew and didn't make it.

I was a replacement gunner fresh out of gunnery school and was assigned to the "Ruthie I" crew when Combs became ill. This was right after the briefing on Hamburg which later became Oldenburg due to heavy cloud cover on June 25, 1943. If you think being a Maytag repairman is lonely, forget it. For a young punk kid of 19, with a whole six months of service, the second time on a B-17, assigned to a veteran crew: now that Sir is lonely! (I'm glad you guys didn't know what you were getting). I only say this because I think after the 4th of July raid I really began to feel I finally earned the right to become a full fledged member of the finest crew in the 8th Air Force.

However, this was very short lived for on another raid, July 26th, 1943, both of my hands were severely frozen and this ended my short but "brilliant career" as a gunner on a B-17 Flying Fortress.

I am certain, Weaver, Morgan, Hughes and the rest could have added many more exciting stories about our 4th of July celebration. I will forever remember the fear; what was happening; the joy of landing safely; and most of all, the Crew which kept this punk kid alive to celebrate many other 4th of July Holidays: none of them so exciting but forever thankful to observe.

by Gene Ponte

"RUTHIE I"
- THE GALLANT LADY -



Robert Wilkins Part 2

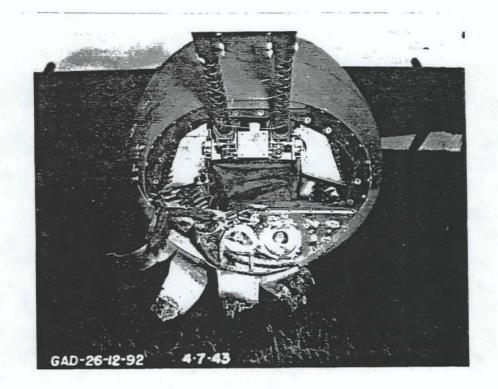
THE CREW RUTHIE 1



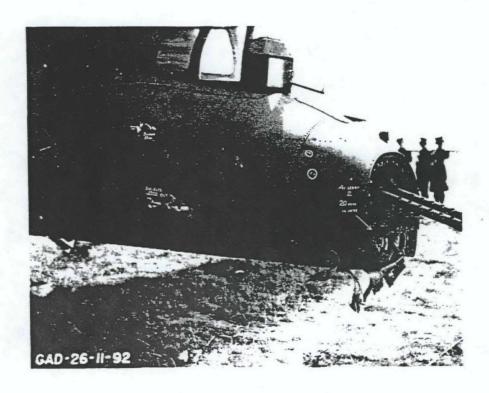
Back Row L/R Jessie Combs (Replaced by Gene Ponte 06/25/43)
Reece (Blacky) Walton, Richard (Dick) Gettys, John Ford
Tyre Weaver, Missing Glen Johnson
Front Row L/R Robert (Bob) Wilkens, Robert (Bob) Campbell
Henry (Harry) Hughes, John (Red) Morgan

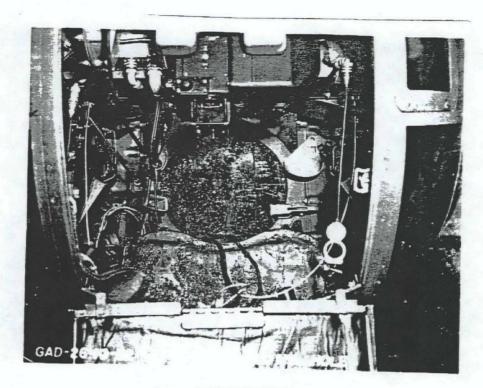
Gene Ponte (Replacement Gunner)



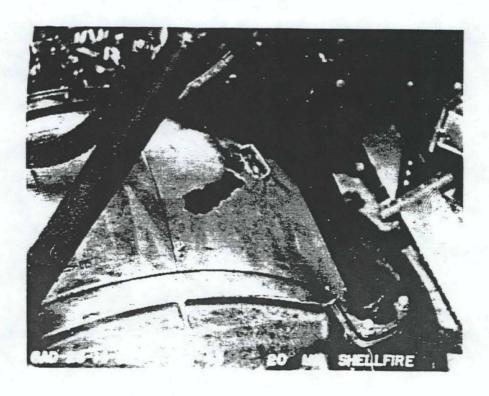


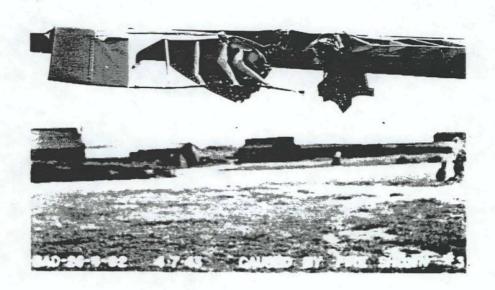
- TAIL SECTION -John Ford





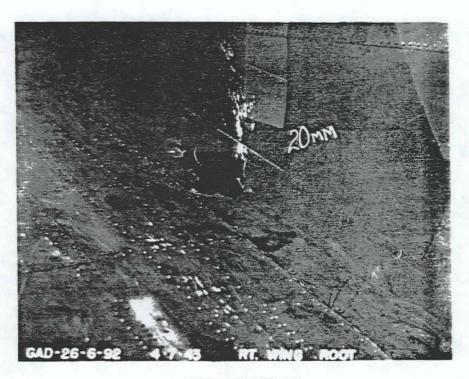
- BALL TURRET -Richard Gettys





- LEFT WING -





- LEFT WING ROOT -

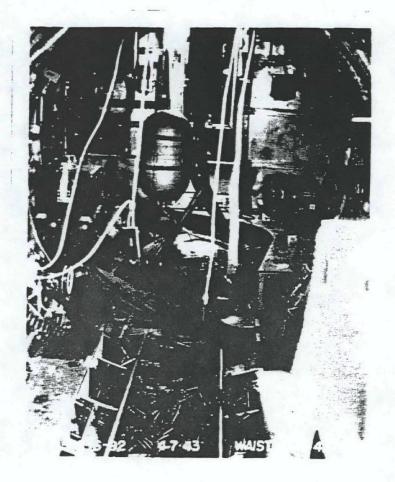
- RIGHT WING UNDER SIDE -

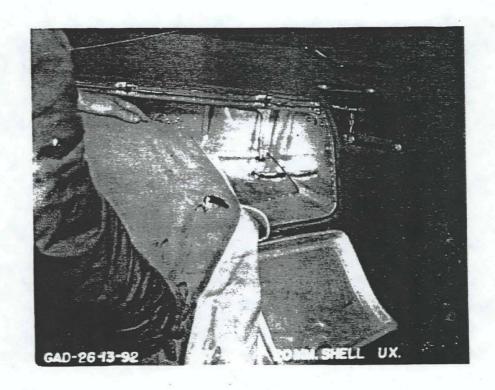




- RADIO DOOR -

- WAIST COMPARTMENT -(Looking Forward)





- LIFE RAFT -

- LEFT WHEEL -





S/Sgt. Dick Gettys Receiving His D. S. C. July 4, 1943 Raid



S/SGT. JOHN C. FORD TOP GUN---TAIL GUNNER



REUNION "RUTHIE I" 07/04/43 - CLEARWATER, FL - 1983 -

L/R BOB WILKENS HARRY HUGHES TYRE WEAVER JOHN MORGAN GENE PONTE GLEN JOHNSON

SPECIAL NOTES: RUTHIE I - JULY 4, 1943

- John Morgan told me both he and Bob Campbell's arms and shoulders were sore for a week from pulling and holding the Control Yoke to keep Ruthie flying.
- Both Weaver and Walton said the checker nose FW came in so close they could see the pilot. He tipped his wings and flew off.
- 3. The shrapnel from the two exploding 20MMs in the tail section potted the ammunition feed and after several rounds the belt would hang up. John Ford had to lower his guns; lift the plate; clear the stoppage and re-feed the guns. While he was doing this the Germans assumed he was either wounded or dead; they closed for the kill. When John got up after fixing the guns, there were at least five or six FWs within 300 yards. John would start shooting and they would scatter. A 20MM came in the view glass of the ball turret and exploded. Despite the severe pain Dick Gettys continued to fire his guns and shot down the enemy which hit him. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. Blacky Walton assisted Gettys out of the turret and put him on the Radio Room Floor. Glen Johnson radioed Harry Hughes who came back and administered First Aid. John claimed three enemy aircraft. Gene Ponte claimed one down and one damaged. The Interrogation Officer ask if we could confirm they went all the way down. We told him we were too busy with 20 other FWs trying to shoot us down. Many years later at a Bomb Group Reunion, some people in planes with the Group confirmed our kills.
- 4. In addition to the two exploding 20MMs in the tail section, there were several 30 calibers which hit us. One struck John Ford in the leg and another cut the oxygen line on the left side.
 Before John passed out he switched to the line on the right side.
- The left waist gun was out; the ball turret was out; the tail guns were operating on one lung; therefore, the Pilot took the plane down low to prevent enemy attacks from below (Navigator Record attached). Hughes said, at one point, we were down to almost 300 feet.
- One of the 20s which went through the Radio Room, clipped the sleeve of Glen Johnson's jacket without touching him.
- Since the radio was out, Glen Johnson climbed into the Navigator's Compartment to send a Flash (light) Message to the Group up ahead to prepare for Emergency Landing at Portreath (R.A.F. Field) England.
- 8. Because the hydraulics were shot out, the flaps and wheels had to be cranked down manually. We moved Gettys to one side of the Radio Room floor and Weaver raised the floor plate and started cranking. The flaps and wheels were down just in time to hit the runway. The flat tire on the left side was noticeable immediately. With no brakes, the plane became uncontrollable and veered off across the field toward the Control Tower. When the flat left wheel hit the sand Insignia in front of the tower, the plane spun around and stopped.
- 9. After we had all eaten, we went back to see "Ruthie" who had taken a terrible beating. When Bob Campbell saw the condition of the ship and heard of the serious condition of Dick Gettys, he started to cry and laid his head on the tail section. Morgan and Hughes went to him and, after a short time, he was all right again.

- 10. Bob Campbell, John Morgan and Tyre Weaver did one helluva "Distinguished Flying Job" to keep "Ruthie" flying back to England and safely land her so we could all walk away!
- 11. Our Crew Chief flew down later to assess the damage. He said there was well over 500 holes in old "Ruthie". The Air Force determined to leave "Ruthie!" at the R.A.F. Portreath field for scrap because of the extensive damage.

* "THE ROUTE AS BRIEFED"

"The operational month began--patriotically enough--on July 4, with 16 B-17's and three YB-40's participating in the celebrated triple attack on Nantes-Le Mans-La Pallice. The 92nd's aircraft attacked Nantes with good results. The formation was under severe fighter attack from the IP on, and continuing uninterruptedly to 35 miles past the French coast on the return. Major Robert B. Keck, flying with 1st Lt Shaefer in the "Flagship," led the mission. One of the aircraft, piloted by 1st Lt John J. Campbell, failed to return. (See Appendix A.) It was believed to have hit the water and burned; six parachutes were seen to open, and another partially opened. Battle damage was severe, and three crew members were wounded. Sgt. Richard O. Gettys, ball turret gunner of 1st Lt Robert L. Campbell's crew, was seriously injured in the groin, chest and face by shell fragments: tail gunner S/Sgt. John C. Ford slightly injured in the leg. S/Sgt Gerald L. Swanger, waist gunner in Capt. Richard Pugh's plane, suffered slight facial injuries. Enemy aircraft claims were 10-4-1."

^{*} John S. Sloan, "The Route As Briefed": History of 92nd Bomb Group 1942-1945.

See AIR WAR, Page Ten.

were attacking, fighters and fighter-German forces, were being moved south to Sicily.

While the big British bombers neaviest tranic it troops, especiality

July 14, 1943

DBSERVER, RALEIGH, N. C., WEDNESDAY MORNING

Wilson Boy was on Ship That Came Home a 'Loss'

set Pilot Campbell Felt Like Nazi Were Picking on 'Ruthie' On That Trip Back

By GLADWIN HILL.

A U. S. Bomber Base in England July 13.—(P)—The pilot of the Flying Fortress "Ruthie," Lt. Rober e L. Campbell of Liberty, Mo., has ar engineering report of "total yoss" to e attest that he flew back from Firance July 4 with practically no plane at all-which was just how it felt.

Enemy fire knocked out two cf his engines just after the plane dropped bombs on Nantes and punctured two gas tanks, and the pilot had to pump fuel frantically into his two sound tanks before they ran out so there would be enough to to make the coast of England.

More hits tore a part of the fuse-lage into shreds, knocked the wing the flaps down into a braking position and burned out the ultimately wrecked hydraulic system and punctured one landing wheel tire.

tured one landing wheel tire.

"It looked to me," the 23-year-old flier said today with classic funderstatement, "like they were just picking on my ship and were attacking us in formations of five to land the spraying us.

10—and just spraying us.
"I looked out my window and no saw nothing but tracers. I looked an area the conflict." out the other side past the co-pilot and -Flight Officer John C. Morgan of New York City—thinking we could nove over. But there was the same hing. The only thing I could do the was pull the nose down, so I pulled co er down."

His story was made public today.
Lt. Robert S. Wilkins of Wilson,
N. C., was bombardier aboard the

July 14, 19/3

A 20 millimeter shell whizzed up Ch hrough the floor right between the co vaist gunners - Sergeants Walton a Reece of Joplin, Mo., and Eugene the Ponte of St. Louis-into the radio vai of Radio Gunner Sgt. Glenn E. Johnson of Garner, Kas.

Two more hits knocked one waist of gun and the tail gun out of com-ser mission and injured Tail Gunner ret Sgt. John C. Ford of Highland Park, of Mich. slightly in the leg.

Another 20 millimeter shell crash- Ca ed right into the ball turret and ab exploded, seriously injuring the lie saunner sergeant — but despite his bayery painful wounds he kept on lie firing through the thick of battle until he collapsed.

The navigator. Lt. Henry A. gr. Hughes, Jr., of Jersey City, N. J., of went aft and with the top turret the gunner. Sgt. Tyre Weaver of River- de view, Ala., lifted the gunner out of p the ball turret and carried him to p the radio compartment, cut away in his clothes, poured sulfanilamide powder in his wounds and gave him morphine.

He was lying over the emergency wing flap cranks. But they were losing altitude and had to crank up the flaps so they brought the wounded man back to the waist.

Campbell said:

"The navigator went back to the nose with the bombardier—Lieustenant Wilkins—to get our position.

He was trying to identify a radio station but all we could hear was a few bars of 'America the Beauti-ful.' Then our radio went out.

"But, at that, it was a comforting

thing to hear.

"I thought all the time I was going to have to ditch the ship. It had no radio so I signaled the leader with the aldus lamp and they went SOS for us.

"We put down at the first field I saw. We had no red flares to signal the ambulance so we fired off all the different colored flares we had but there were 10 or 15 other ships landing and we had to wait until they were all in.

"When I started to land I dis-

covered the tire was flat."

Campbell said he held her on the runway as long as he could and then just whirled around in front of the control tower-but she

stayed up.
"The controls were so tough coming home," he went on, "that the co-pilot pulled some tendons in his shoulder helping to hold them.

"Then we found that one shell had gone into the life raft-if we had landed in water we'd have been out of luck.

"Got the report today-ships a 'total loss.' And, boy, she was!"





Dülag-Luft Eingeliefert Gefangenen-Erkennungsmarke Dulag-Luit. Kriegsgefangenenkartel. Stalag Luft-1 Nr1482 am: 12.11.43. Vorname des Vaters: ///// pm /brocke WILKINS NAME: Familienname der Mutter: Elisalell Jakon Vornamen: Robert Sherwood 1. Lt. Funktion: bomb. Dienstgrad: Verheiratet mit: Matrikel-No.: 0 - 660 420 0 - 660 430 Anzahl der Kinder: Geburtsfag: 30.11.18. Wilson N.C. Geburtsort: Heimatanschrift: Protestant Religion: Mr. W.B. Wilkins Zivilberul 7 7 Tobukhindler 1003 Anderson Street Wilson N.C. Staatsangehörigkeit: USA Abschuß am: 5.11.43. bei: München-Gladbach Flugzeugtyp: Fortress Gefangennahme am: wie oben bei: whe oben Nähere Personalbeschreibung braun Augen: mittel Große: 6. Nase: gerade Schädelform: oval Bart: Haare: d.blond Gebif: gut Gewicht: 70 kg Gesichtsform: oval Besondere Kennzeichen: Gesichtsfarbe: gesund Blinddarmnarbe

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To: The Senior American Officer North Compound, The Senior American Officer Main Compound, The Senior British Officer Main Compound,

Re: Use of the word "goon".

The use of the word "goon" was granted to the Ps. o. W. by the Kommandant under the condition that this word would not have any dubious meaning.

It has however, been reported to me that Ps.o.W. have been using the word "focking goon up", the meaning of which is beyond

any doubt

Consequently the use of the word "goon up" or "goon" is prohibited, severest punishment being in future inflicted for any disobedience against this order.

> gez. Schroder Major u. Gruppenleiter.