

24 December 1944 (Source 92nd Bomb Group Archives)

According to the English newspapers, it was the coldest December in 54 years. Judged by American standards – to GI's inured to Maine or Minnesota winters- the weather during the last month of 1944 was chillier than usual, but nothing to get excited about. The lowest temperature recorded by the Weather Detachment was 18 degrees; that could be shrugged away. Water froze in the pipes of washrooms and urinals, but that was remedied. A thin film of ice frequently coated the runways, but a sanding detail made them safe. The most unpleasant feature of the weather did not yield to solution; as usual, the worst part was not the temperature but the visibility.

The climactic operational day of the month – and the Group's most disastrous day since September – was December 24th, the day before Christmas. On that day, the 8th Air Force mounted the largest single attack in its history, with over 2000 heavy bombers participating in a direct tactical assault on the airdromes in the Frankfurt area, and on road junctions, bridges and communications centers immediately behind the German bulge. The Field Order called for as many aircraft as the Group could put up, and the 92nd dispatched 50, making up the High Squadron of the 40th "D" composite Group as well as all squadrons of the "A" Group. Primary target was the Giessen airdrome, a fighter base near Frankfurt used by the Luftwaffe in support of the Von Rundstedt offensive.

The day's misfortunes started at take-off; the aircraft piloted by 2nd Lt Robert K Seeber of the 327th Squadron, a new pilot, took off in fog which prevented a clear view of the trees about 200' yards to the left of the runway at its end. Lt Seeber began to turn to get on course before much elevation was attained, encountered prop wash and, losing altitude, crashed into the treetops. The burning aircraft exploded about two minutes later. Due to the heavy fog and the position of the

aircraft, deep in the woods known locally as Roberts Farm, it was not immediately located by the ambulances and crash crew. 6 crew members were killed; the 3 survivors were Lt Seeber, 2nd Lt William H McQuinn, co-pilot, and Sgt William J Brockmeyer, engineer.

1st Lt Charles H. Nesbit, Equipment Officer of the 325th Squadron, distinguished himself by his coolness and courage in carrying several crew members out of the wreckage, heedless of the possibility of further bomb explosions. Unfortunately, the three men rescued by Lt Nesbit were too seriously injured to survive, even with the medical attention afforded them. On one occasion during the morning, Lt Nesbit was within 100 feet of a bomb when it exploded, and miraculously escaped injury or death by dropping to the ground.

The attack on the Giessen airdrome, led by Major Albert L. Cox, Jr, CO of the 325th Squadron, was successfully carried out, despite severe flak in the target area, and the object of the mission – to crater the surface of the drome and render it unserviceable – was regarded as accomplished. But at interrogation, disquieting reports were heard. Aircraft piloted by 1st Lts Donato Yanitelli of the 325th Squadron and Joseph B McConnell of the 407th Squadron were unreported. Also missing were aircraft piloted by 2nd Lts Harry G Williams, Jr, Joe B Spencer, and Donald K Lathrum, all of the 327th Squadron. S-2 reports took longer than usual to assemble and digest; because of weather conditions a number of aircraft were diverted to Bury St Edmunds and Great Ashfield, bases respectively for the 94th and 385th Groups.

A mysterious and sinister story was told at interrogation. Crews reported that a single B-17 had approached the formation just west of Malmedy area, called the leader of the High Squadron and asked permission to come in. The request was granted and the B-17 took #4 position in the low element. Almost immediately, some strange details were noted: the newcomer, a shiny Type G, had a few identifying

marks. There was no US star on fuselage or wings; the dorsal fin and vertical stabilizer were painted red, an 18 inch yellow band was painted around the nose between the astro dome and nose plexiglass. The nose was reported empty, but the top turret and ball turret were manned and the guns swinging. Shortly after the aircraft came into the formation, gunfire which had hitherto been meagre and inaccurate became suddenly very accurate. At this time the stranger was lagging about 250 yards behind. The formation leader ordered all guns trained upon the aircraft, and attempted to call it on the radio but without success. The aircraft bombed with the rest of the formation and disappeared north after the target.

It was a strange and strained Christmas Eve; one by one the reports filtered in. Lt Yanitelli had crash-landed at Lille, with 2 engines gone and with several minor injuries to crew members. Lt Spencer was unreported. Lt Williams had been seen heading toward Allied battle-lines with 2 engines on fire.

At 1830 hours, Lt Lathrum crashed at the diversion field at Bury St Edmunds in attempting a landing; cut out of the traffic pattern on his first approach and coming around on his second, his plane was unable to gain sufficient altitude, presumably because of engine failure. Striking some treetops, the aircraft crashed and burned. 7 crew members were killed outright; 2 survivors were taken to the 65th General Hospital, where one died from his injuries two days later. Sgt Isaac E. Harder, tail gunner, was the sole survivor.

It was not until a day or two later that all details were available concerning the others. Lt Spencer's crew was missing in action. Lt McConnell's crew had bailed out and the aircraft had crashed at Ohey, 10 miles east of Namur. 3 crew members were killed; 2nd Lt Anthony Piekarcz, the navigator, whose parachute opened but did not fill out, S/Sgt Harold H Paske, ball turret gunner, who would not jump and rode

the ship down to his death, and T/Sgt John F Booth, radio operator, whose parachute tangled in the horizontal stabilizer, dragging him down with the ship. Lt McConnell struck a picket fence in landing, and broke both legs. S/Sgt John J. Caravello, the tail gunner, landed close to the German lines, blundered into them, walked out unscathed.

Lt Williams' aircraft was first hit by flak 20 miles inside the German lines; 2 engines were knocked out and a fire started on the flight deck. The aircraft dropped out of the formation, salvoed the bomb load on a small German town south of Schleiden and attempted to reach friendly territory. Over the enemy lines at 10,000 feet, the ship was further struck by accurate ground fire and the two remaining engines were rendered useless. Lt Williams put the aircraft into a flat glide in a desperate attempt to reach safety; at 4500 feet he ordered a bail-out. All of the crew made successful jumps; two members – S/Sgt Joseph R. Gray, ball turret gunner and Sgt Neal H. Modert, bombardier – landed behind the German lines. Sgt Gray made his way to Stavelot by nightfall, where he met a majority of the crew; Sgt Modert was picked up by an advanced US infantry platoon on Christmas morning.

The hoary platitude that “it never rains but it pours” was applicable on the afternoon of December 24th, when the day's misfortunes were augmented by a serious fire in a Nissen hut used for pyrotechnics storage. The fire broke out at about 1400 hours, and the Fire Fighting Platoon responded with every available man and full equipment. After moving two trucks loaded with flares from the side of the burning hut, the firemen attempted to extinguish the flames. After twenty minutes, with the fire gradually coming under control, the firemen were ordered away from the blaze because of the possibility of heavy explosions. An hour and a half later, with the danger of explosion apparently passed, the firemen were ordered to put out the blaze. Damage was estimated in the neighborhood of \$20,000.