

Christmas Eve 1944: Grim Business as Usual for the Mighty Eighth

By Samuel Martin

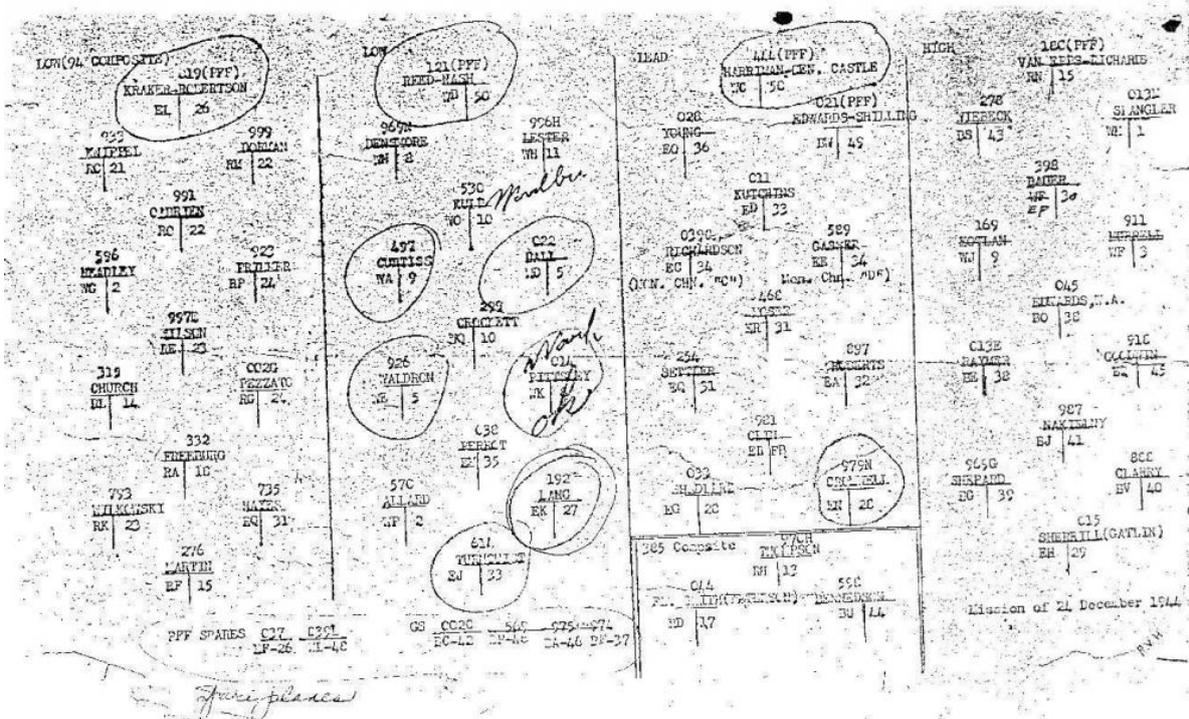
At briefing on Christmas Eve 1944, the flyers from the 487th were informed that General Frederick Castle would lead that day's mission. The men were well aware of the rumor that Castle had never led a "milk run" and they hoped this day would be a first. The 487th would be leading the Eighth Air Force on the largest raid of the war. The Eighth's targets included an array of German airfields, marshalling yards and communication centers in support of turning back the German thrust in the Ardennes. The airmen's hopes of a "milk run" proved to be in vain for the Luftwaffe responded in force and with a change of tactics from which the 487th received the full brunt. Instead of waiting for the American air armada to cross over the front lines to German-held territory, German fighters attacked over Allied lines before the rendezvous with American fighter escort. The 487th Group's Mission Report for 24 December 1944 indicates that nine aircraft, including Castle's, were lost in less than fifteen minutes. Castle posthumously received the Congressional Medal of Honor for his actions that day. According to the award's citation, Castle's B-17 experienced engine problems and could only remain with the formation if he jettisoned their bomb load to lighten the aircraft. Since they were still over Allied-held Belgium, Castle refused to jeopardize American troops below with their bombs and chose to relinquish the lead position and leave the protection offered by tight formation flying. Once the B-17 became a lone straggler, it came under repeated attack by German fighters. The aircraft received severe damage and at least two of the crew had already been wounded or killed. Castle ordered the crew to bail out while he attempted to keep the aircraft under control. Before Castle could bail out the B-17 went into a spin and plunged to the earth, killing him.

One of the challenges faced by historians is ensuring that any different or new information about an event is examined and addressed. Such is the case with the events relating to the loss of Castle's B-17. On this particular mission, Henry Hughey was operating the ball turret on B-17 43-38028 "High Tailed Lady" that was flying off Castle's left wing and had a clear view of the events that transpired. Hughey recalled: "I had my turret coming around to 6 o'clock. As I came around to 3 o'clock position I saw a 109 go right down through our spotter and another one and another one. . . I continued to turn and I looked at General Fred Castle's airplane. We were right off his left wing. I told you if I had the proverbial ten foot pole I could have reached out and touched his airplane. The number 3 engine was on fire."

The landing gear on Castle's B-17 was lowered and then retracted probably as a signal for the deputy lead aircraft to move to the lead position. Castle then pulled away from the formation. According to Hughey, although Castle had previously reported problems with their number 1 engine, battle damage, not engine trouble, forced Castle to leave the formation. "He did have engine trouble alright. When you get an engine that is full of 20 millimeter German cannon shells you have engine problems. It was on fire." Moments later a large group of fighters approached the formation. Many of the airmen believed that their fighter escort was arriving in the nick of time. Hughey wondered aloud over the intercom why the fighters had their landing lights blinking. Seconds later the answer came: they didn't. The fighters were German and the "lights" were from the fusillade of cannon and machine gun fire that shredded the 487th Bomb Group.

While the details of an event often differ among witnesses, they also provide additional perspectives that allow historians to relate the event with better accuracy. In the case of the 487th on 24 December 1944, Hughey's perspective underscores the ferocity of the attacks made by the Luftwaffe against the group that day. At one point during the engagement, Hughey's pilot asked him to report how the low squadron looked. Hughey replied: "Low squadron, hell, you don't have one." Most of the low squadron's aircraft were gone. As for Brig. Gen. Castle, he is remembered as the gentle hero

whose awarding of the Medal of Honor would have been a tribute to the brave men who perished with him that Christmas Eve.



Portion of the 487th formation assignments and indicating aircraft lost (circled). Bomb Group's Mission Report for 24 December 1944 showing