

True Account: Jack Mercer's Story

"Like most everyone on the mission I made some notes about the mission before leaving England," Jack Mercer wrote in a 1991 letter to Bill Dewey, editor of the Kassel Mission Reports. "Mostly something for my own reference and not very well done. Over the years I have been reluctant to honor requests for my



recollections knowing full well how 'hangar flying' tends to inflate our 'war stories.' Periodically I did update my notes as new information became available. The official Air Force reports and other recollections in your Kassel Mission Reports certainly shed new light, and I have updated my earlier notes after repeated requests from my family. A copy is included for you. ...Bill, we recognize we made it through this situation only by the grace of God. We should also be thankful that our pilot emergency procedures training gave us enough confidence in the capabilities of our aircraft to get back on the ground safely. Must have been a good trip – we're here!" *Credit: Photo by Tom Shafer*

Next to Last – and then home

And there we were – 26,000 feet, 10:16 a.m., Sept. 27, 1944, somewhere south of Kassel, Germany, flying above a nine-tenths overcast – and then "BOOM!"

We had just completed our group turn away from the target and were beginning to get the formation tightened up. On this day we were flying the No. 3 position on the wing of squadron leader Cecil Isom. The officers in Isom's crew shared the same quonset hut with us and were good friends.

Just then tail gunner Harry Lied broke in on the intercom with "Bandits at 6 o'clock level, ten or twelve across." And thus began the most hectic eight to ten minutes

imaginable, followed by two hours of "walking on eggshells" flying an aircraft that was a virtual time bomb.

I immediately began an intercom check to assure all crew members were alerted, but before completing the "check-in," Lied interrupted – "They're firing – looks like their wings are on fire, they're closing fast - - -" but the intercom went dead before he completed his message. Without the intercom I had no idea of the degree of destruction going on around us but I did see that the sky was filled with gun bursts like flak. My concentration immediately centered on those things necessary to keep us flying.

We had taken a number of hits I knew. The controls went slack, the No. 2 engine began to run very rough and I could see the oxygen pressure had dropped considerably. As I struggled to find our problems I quickly realized formation flying was out of the question, and we had separated from Isom – about 200 feet below and to his left rear. I engaged the autopilot and to insure adequate flying speed increased RPMs and boost. By then we had FW-190s swarming around us and our whole plane was shaking from the firing of our .50's.

While we were alerting the crew, co-pilot Paul Pouliot, who had been standing by on the fighter channels throughout the mission, began to contact fighter groups. The German fighters' first pass knocked out all of our radios just as he made first contact, but Paul did not realize this immediately. He was trying so hard to reach someone he got red in the face as if he were trying to yell at them in frustration. So neither Paul nor radio operator Bob Bennett could let anyone know our position and situation.



Basically the German fighters attacked en masse from the rear, lobbing their 20-mm shells into our formation until they came in range of our .50's, then they peeled off and came up under our formation – hanging on their props as they pumped shells into our bellies uncontested. This confirmed that they knew our ball turrets had been

removed (to improve handling characteristics at high altitudes – and it sure did make the 24s easier to fly in formation). But the ball turrets wouldn't have helped much this day – there were just too many German fighters.

Pictured: Bill Mitchell, Dewey's bombardier after the Kassel Mission, points to a hole from flak that almost got him

By then I could begin to sense the unbelievable catastrophe taking place in the sky to our right and high. Our position in the formation on the extreme low left gave us a near complete view of the entire group that was left – but all I could see was Isom. Planes on fire, planes blowing up, parachutes cascading from damaged planes. 20-mm shell bursts like heavy flak, smoke – but the most eerie – the sight of two groups of four props corkscrewing forward from their ships but maintaining formation, and then slowly turning over to a horizontal plane as they lost forward momentum and began floating downward like loose windmill blades. No doubt these aircraft were lost because pilots did not follow proper procedures for increasing power rapidly. They sheared their props by ramming thrust to the wall before increasing RPMs sufficiently.

In the ensuing air battle we encountered two special situations which we will always remember. Apparently one of the FW-190s misjudged his vertical attack from below on Isom's ship which was about 200 feet ahead of the position we were able to maintain. He nearly stalled out, then rolled out directly towards us at 12 o'clock level firing wildly when he saw he could not complete his attack on Isom. Both Paul and I were trying frantically to get some gunner's attention, but what can

you really do to contact a gunner some 20 feet away when you have no means of communicating? Here was this guy looking right down our throat firing away like mad and we could do nothing. We both knew we had been had! But suddenly both the nose gunner (Ted Hoiten) and top turret (flight engineer Kenneth Kribs) picked this guy up. They both fired in a continuous burst for such a long time I wondered why their guns didn't burn up or jam. Finally after what seemed like an eternity this guy blew up – and we flew safely through his debris.

Near the middle of the attack I found an FW-190 camped very close under our left wing – far enough forward that I could look very clearly into his cockpit (nearly could read his instruments). We knew previously that the Germans were wanting a PFF (or radar) ship, and this guy was apparently "looking us over." He was able to get in a position where neither the left waist gunner, the top turret nor the nose turret could touch him because the Jerries knew our ball turrets had been removed. He looked quite comfortable sitting so close under our wing knowing our guns could not touch him. Boy, I'll remember that portrait – the piercing eyes looking out over his oxygen mask, his goggles on top of the black helmet – and again so clear that I could have read his instruments if I had had the time to look more closely. Oh, how I wished for the .45 they took away from us before D-Day. I would have even used the "Very" pistol or maybe thrown a rock or something if I had it. Just to do something I used the autopilot aileron control to lower the left wing towards the 190 as quickly as possible. Apparently the pilot flinched and drifted from his safe position so that Harry Wheaton (left waist gunner) got a good shot at him. Suddenly, without any sign of damage to the FW-190, the canopy came off and the pilot ejected into space – no more than 100 feet from us. Apparently Harry's shots hit his ejection control. The last I saw of the German pilot his chute had opened and the 190 was headed straight down, still with no outward appearance of damage.

As soon as we could be sure the attack was over I asked Paul and Kribs to check on each crew member and for damages. I wasn't about to leave the cockpit so long as we didn't know what was wrong. I tried to stay close to Isom (the only remaining ship in our squadron) but could only keep him in sight – formation was out of the question.

Pouliot and Kribs reported back that the crew was "all shook up" but OK – nobody hurt. Lied had no oxygen in the tail turret so he had gotten out of the turret and

connected to another outlet which permitted him to stand just outside the turret and maintain a lookout.

As for damage – we knew we had no rudder controls, no radios, no hydraulic pressure, low oxygen and the No. 2 engine was running very rough. Kribs and Pouliot found a major leak in the bomb bay crossfeed (gas transfer valves) along with a hydraulic leak. Kribs cranked open the bomb bay doors about a foot to reduce the danger of explosion and fire, and warned each crew member about no smoking. He said the waist and tail sections looked like a sieve from shrapnel damage, and jokingly told of a 20-mm shell that exploded in a box of chaff which was stacked immediately behind George Noorigian (bombardier who was riding as a waist gunner on this mission) on the floor with no damage.

Both Kribs and Pouliot were concerned about the amount of gas we were losing, and could not make an estimate of how much flight time we could expect.

As soon as we got this information I asked Paul to go down to the navigator's table and ask Milton Fandler for a course to an RAF emergency field at Manston, England. I knew a route to Manston would put us over friendly territory quicker than a course direct to our home base, giving us a better opportunity to get on the ground safely if we ran out of gas or some other emergency developed. I also liked the idea of Manston's 12,000-foot runway over an up-and-down terrain for a "no flaps, no brakes landing," and that they were well equipped for emergency landings.

We increased power to catch up with Isom to let him know we were OK even if we could not contact him by radio – just to wave and say "bye." Since we needed to get to lower altitudes soon because of the low oxygen supply we began letting down at 500 and then 300 feet per minute. This enabled us to increase our airspeed considerably (get on the step) and then to throttle back to save fuel. I didn't want to feather No. 2 thinking we might just need that little bit of additional power in any further emergency, but we did throttle No. 2 back further and reduced the RPMs to reduce the vibrations to a minimum.

After a suspenseful two-plus hours on needles and pins (at least in the cockpit) about the condition of the ship, we all let out a big cheer when Milton poked his head up in the celestial navigation bubble and made swimming motions – we had no trouble interpreting that we were over the English Channel. At that time we

were down to 3,500 feet just above a layer of broken clouds. And then a sight to behold when we broke through the low clouds – there were the cliffs of Dover and beyond lay the long runway at Manston. Milton had done his job well – Manston right on the button.

With help from Wheaton, Kribs began cranking the main gear down, then kicked the nosewheel out. We did not get a "green light" on the instrument panel that the gear was locked, and could not tell for sure with our visual check. As we circled the field once for landing we tried to shake the gear into a locked position by wiggling the wings but still no "green light." The crew prepared for a crash landing.

Successful landing? You bet! Paul worked the autopilot rudder control to assist in lining up and the landing was almost normal except for the excessive speed required for a "no flap" landing. Touchdown was relatively smooth, and when we rolled to a virtual stop we found there was sufficient pressure in the brake accumulators to set the brakes one final time. We all knew we were very lucky and that someone had been looking over us, but were even more reassured when a small Bible fell on Bob Bennett when we touched down. We later learned one of the ground crew kept the Bible in a small space in the radio equipment on the flight deck so he could read in his spare time. Needless to say – he didn't get the Bible back – Bennett appropriated it.

Pictured: Lt. Bill Dewey's crew mocks an attention "brace" during a moment of off-time during training in the States



Battle damage?
Maintenance records from the Manston Repair Depot covered more than six full

pages – over 300 items. Over 275 shrapnel holes in the waist and tail sections (90 percent on the left side), damage to approximately 45 percent of the stringers in the waist. A 20-mm dud in the No. 2 gas tank, a six inch by half-inch sliver off the trailing edge of one No. 2 prop blade, severed rudder cables, shattered elevator cables, damage to the gasoline transfer system and gas lines in the bomb bay, shrapnel in both main tires, replaced No. 2 engine and prop, replaced left vertical

stabilizer and rudder, replaced left horizontal stabilizer and elevator, replaced left bomb bay door, etc.

We were so happy just to be on the ground safely we didn't even gripe about our overnight stay in an RAF billet awaiting transportation back to Tibenham. Not that we particularly liked the evening meal of "boiled mutton," two small potatoes, three small tomatoes, a slice of dark bread (tasted like sawdust) and some awful English tea. Breakfast was just as bad.

Only upon our return to Tibenham about noon the next day did we learn the gory details of Kassel, and that we had not hit our assigned target of Kassel but dropped our bombs about 30 miles NE close to the town of Goettingen. All of these terrible losses just because the lead navigators and bombardiers apparently misread their radar scopes which were used for navigation since the mission was flown above an overcast. Their navigational errors placed our return route from the target to England virtually over at least five German fighter bases in the vicinity of Eisenach.

To me, the highlights of this mission include:

The excellent performance of each crew member operating under conditions for which we were not trained, i.e. how to operate without intercoms during air battles, emergencies, etc. The difficulties of operating effectively on the flight deck while wearing oxygen masks with no intercom. When you need help you need to tell someone what you need. On a personal basis I felt badly that I couldn't keep each crew member personally advised of our minute-to-minute situation, particularly regarding the condition of the airplane while we were in such a precarious situation both during the attack but even more while en route to Manston in a flying time bomb. It was their lives in jeopardy and they needed to know where we stood at all times. Crew members were credited with five kills and two probables. And best of all, the next day after returning to Tibenham I was informed we would have to fly only 30 missions – one more for me and two for most of the crew. Good news for a 21-year-old newlywed.

One more and then home!!!!

Crew members:

Pilot – Jackson C. Mercer

Co-pilot – Leo Paul Pouliot

Navigator – Milton Fandler

Bombardier – George Noorigian

Flight engineer – Kenneth Kribs

Radio operator – Robert Bennett

Tail gunner – Harry Lied

Waist gunner – Harry Wheaton

Nose gunner – Ted Hoiten

Waist gunner – Donald Selway (not flying this mission)