

Paul Swofford

April 19, 1999

Lakeland, Fla.

Lt. Paul Swofford, of Lakeland, Fla., was the pilot of The Sweetest Rose of Texas, one of only four planes to return to the 445th Bomb Group's base at Tibenham, England, following the Kassel mission. Swofford went on to complete his missions, remained in the Air Force, piloted B-47s, and retired as a Lieutenant Colonel.

Paul Swofford: 42-51105 was the serial number of the Sweetest Rose of Texas. Henry Dobek was my navigator at the time, and the Kassel raid was our seventh mission. After that, the commander and operations officer pulled him off of my crew and made him the navigator for Dewey's crew, and they became the lead crew. But the lead crews didn't fly as much. They had to do a lot of extra flying and training in order to maintain their currency as a lead because they had a lot more responsibility. On the Kassel mission Donald Smith was the lead crew in our squadron. Now, Donald Smith came back, and I came back on his wing, and I only had three engines coming back, because I lost an engine. It was shot out over the target. In fact, one of my propeller blades was almost severed. It had a nick as big as your fist in it.

We didn't know anything about what happened. We just knew that four airplanes returned to the base. The intelligence people, they knew all that but they didn't share it with the crews. It just happened to slip down by word of mouth, anything we ever found out. All we ever knew was that four crews made it back to base, one of which was me, and I knew that Dewey had landed at Manston because later he came back. There was nothing like official information that was passed out, like they do on this war over there today, the TV people will tell you everything that's going on. All I knew was that four airplanes came back to base because I could count them as we were flying back.

Aaron Elson: Where in Texas are you from?

Paul Swofford: I'm from Spruce Pine, North Carolina. I had one man from Texas in my crew. He's still living; he lives in Boise, Idaho. Willard Dykes was my armament man, and he was one of the waist gunners. He and Timothy Pimpinelli were the waist gunners. Joe Waller was the tail turret gunner. You see, when I got over to England, they decided that they didn't need ball turrets in the Second Air Division,

and so we thought that the airplane we took over - we were thinking, we'll put our nose art on it, and when we get over there we'll fly it every mission. The first thing they did, they said, "Get your gear off, this airplane's ours!" And we never saw it again. What they did was to send it to a depot over there and they removed the ball turrets, because they didn't need them. They said, "Who's gonna be shooting from below? Fighters are going to be up there coming down on you. They're not going to come up from underneath. They lose speed that way. So they took the ball turrets off, and we had an extra man, so one was released. I don't know what ever happened to him. His name was Billy Lumb.

Now, this plaque you can see is made with the 445th tail marking on it, a B-24, and it says, "Paul Swofford, first lieutenant, pilot, B-24 Liberator, 8th Air Force, 2nd Air Division, 445th Bomb Group, 701st Bomb Squadron, Tibenham Airfield, Norwich, England, 35 combat missions, July 1944-February 1945." That's the Distinguished Flying Cross there. That's five air medals represented there. And this green one here is the European Theater of Operations ribbon with three battle stars that all of my crew were awarded. They were awarded all of the air medals I've got here, but I was the only one who was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross [not for the Kassel mission].

This is a B-29. As soon as I came back to the States I got into flying the B-29s and could have been sent to the Pacific, but the war ended over there. So I was checked out in the B-29. And then later in my career I flew the B-47. I flew that for about eight years in the Strategic Air Command.

Aaron Elson: You had a thousand hours in the B-47?

Paul Swofford: I've got more than that, but I was awarded that plaque when I got my first thousand. I have less than 2,000 but getting up there.

Aaron Elson: Did you ever carry nuclear bombs?

Paul Swofford: No, but I did stand alert. Now that's another picture of the B-47. That was the finest airplane I ever flew. I flew several. That's a six-engine jet. It was fast. It flew high. And it was fast. Beautiful. It had a canopy just like a fighter, and the pilots sat one behind the other. On the ground we'd open that canopy just like we had a fighter airplane. And the pilot's sitting up there - we'd say, "We're sitting up there in the bubble" - and all of the sun's rays would hit you. That was one beautiful airplane.

Aaron Elson: When did you retire?

Paul Swofford: In January 1966. I served 24 years in the U.S. Army Air Corps and its successor, the U.S. Air Force, and retired as a Lieutenant Colonel. I've been out for 33 years. ...Have you ever seen this?

Aaron Elson: No. "The Liberator Album."

Paul Swofford: It's pretty recent. It has the nose art. It says here that there's only two of these B-24s in flying condition. It says the first one is the All-American, and the other one is Delectable Doris, which is right outside of Lakeland. Each wing would have - since they only had three bomber groups in a wing, they would do their markings this way - they'd have two colors. They'd have a horizontal marking, a vertical marking, and a diagonal marking. At first glance that might look like it's black and white. It might be red and yellow. Because in a black and white photo you can't tell. But this one, it says, is Delectable Doris, which is the picture I've got back there. It doesn't say where Delectable Doris is, but it's located just outside of Lakeland, Florida, here. The original Delectable Doris was assigned to the 389th Bomb Wing at Hethel, 2nd Combat Wing. You see the black tail with vertical white stripe. But this album has a lot of nose art. Here's, well, the Sweetest Rose of Texas, right here. It says it was a B-24 H - 25 - DT, and its serial number was 42-51105, and O, plus. Now our call sign, as we would fly that, I'd call in to the tower and say, "This is 1-0-5 Oboe," and that was my identification, 445th, 701st Squadron that we were in, and it says you can find that on Page 26 of the album. I don't know if the Sweetest Rose of Texas was painted on both sides of the nose, but you see it's the O-plus here, and it says "B-24 - H - 25 - DT, 42-51105, Sweetest Rose of Texas of the 701st Bomb Squadron, 445th Bomb Group. The 445th B-24's tail markings consisted of a black background with a horizontal white stripe.

Aaron Elson: How did it come by its name?

Paul Swofford: I have no idea.

Aaron Elson: It was assigned to you with the name on it?

Paul Swofford: We didn't have assigned airplanes there. I thought I was going to get one because they assigned it to me down in Topeka, Kansas, and I flew it to England. I don't remember if I took it to England or Scotland, that's been a long time, it's been 55 years.

Aaron Elson: On the Kassel mission, as you recall it, what can you remember from the time you left the base that morning?

Paul Swofford: We had the Sweetest Rose of Texas as our airplane. That was my seventh mission; that was my crew's seventh mission. We had one substitute. My bombardier, Og Mandino, did not accompany us. He was indisposed for some reason, so we picked up an airman, I don't even remember his name. Some of us crew members - Dobek and others - we've tried to recall what his name was, but he was just kind of a transient. I don't think he had a crew and he just filled in on any crew that needed an extra nose gunner.

We didn't know that anything was out of the ordinary. We didn't know that we were going astray. But there were people who did, and didn't do anything about it.

Now, apparently Chilton's crew - the group lead - Chilton and McCoy, who was the command pilot, and his navigator didn't know that they were wrong. Except they are out there on autopilot. I'm sitting back here flying formation. Everybody except the four squadron leads flew formation. Every squadron had a lead. They put their airplane on autopilot, and the rest of us dressed back from them. But we all flew formation, and tight formation. That was a big airplane. It was hard to fly formation. I'll say it took muscle to fly. And it took extreme concentration to fly close, good formation. So as a pilot, my concentration is not, "Where is the bomber stream going?" My concentration is, "Am I socked in there on the wing of the plane I'm supposed to be dressing off of?" And "Is the other plane on the other side or above me or in back of me, is there any danger being created here?" So I'm concentrating almost 100 percent. Now, remember that since this was only my seventh mission, I hadn't yet "graduated" from having to fly off someone else's wing. Later, I would be able to lead an element of three or four aircraft.

As far as I can recall, my navigator did not notify me, and I do not recall - now remember, it's been pretty close to 55 years - but I do not remember hearing on the radio any chatter that we were going to the wrong place. So far as I knew, we dropped our bombs on the assigned target of Kassel. I did not know we were out of the bomber stream because, as I say, when you're on the bomb run, the pilot is 100 percent concentrated on one thing: flying in the right formation, and I'm watching every airplane and especially if I can see the lead, because the lead is the one who has the bomb sight and triggers the bombs, and all other group aircraft toggle on him.

Now, we've got the bomb doors open, and I have the gunner in the nose, and we're on the bomb run. I always tell my bombardier, who usually manned the nose turret, "Have you got your salvo switch armed? You keep your eye on the lead; don't concentrate on somebody else. Somebody else might trigger their bombs early. You find that lead aircraft up there and you observe him for a bomb drop." After bombs away and after closing the bomb bay doors, our group turned off the target to get set for the exit strategy.

There wasn't any notice from our gunners. I don't know why, because I always briefed my gunners, anytime we're in enemy territory, you watch for enemy planes. That's one of your main jobs. The first thing I knew was I could see several of the other planes just start shredding. I could see chunks of the empennage - the tail assembly - falling off. You can shoot part of the wing off. You can shoot part of the belly off of the airplane. But if you get shot in the empennage - your elevator and your rudders, your horizontal stabilizer and your vertical stabilizer - any part of those, you're in deep serious trouble. I later learned that our group was attacked by more than 100 enemy fighters.

Then disaster struck my plane. We lost all communication. Interphone and external radio communication. The only one that I could talk to was the co-pilot. I've got to take my mask off to talk to him. Or the engineer. I couldn't call to the back. I had to send my engineer back through the bomb bay to go back and see how they are. The most unfortunate thing that could happen is to not have any communication with the rest of the crew.

When we got hit, I lost my No. 2 engine, which was on my side, and our windshield was shattered. Some 20-mm fragment hit my radio operator, Gene Thum, in the leg, and disabled him. The engineer, Phil Vosburgh, had to get back to him to apply a tourniquet.

The flying glass in the cockpit got both myself and the co-pilot. We always wore these leather helmets and goggles. Whenever we were getting ready for the bomb run - or over enemy territory, really - we'd put on a flak suit, and put on goggles, and a big metal helmet that didn't fit; you could shake your head and it would just roll around on you. It had earflaps that would protect you.

Both my co-pilot, Ward Smith, and myself got a face full of flying glass. I felt the blood running down my face, and I looked over at the co-pilot; blood is running

down his face. I didn't know if he was fatally wounded and he didn't know if I was fatally wounded. But there was blood everywhere. It turned out that it was just flying glass that got us around the foreheads.

The engineer looked up and saw us. And he thought we both had had it, because all he could see was blood. But neither of us was hurt seriously. It didn't rate a Purple Heart for either of us, so they said, but my radio operator did get the Purple Heart.

The airplane was hard for me to fly. I could hardly control it. At a time like that, when you're flying formation, the pilot who is not flying formation is observing all of the instruments. You know if an engine is functioning, say if the oil pressure's good, and if the cylinder head is within limits, and if you don't feel any yaw or any pull to one side. But there the flying characteristics were such that I just couldn't control it. I'm sure that part of our flight surfaces were damaged.

The first time I could glance down to take a look at my instruments, I could see that the No. 2 engine was dead, and immediately - no, not immediately; first I had a thought. My thought was, if I feather that engine, they would get me. And I've thought since that that was probably the reason that my aircraft was spared any further attacks from the fighters, because they couldn't see that I was damaged. But as soon as I could - well, there was hardly anybody left to fly formation with, so we spread out a little bit because all of these planes had gone down. We could see them.

I didn't feel it was safe to feather the No. 2 engine until we got some fighters back. So I said to the engineer - on the deck of the airplane we had a Very pistol to fire the red flares - I said, "Get every red flare you've got and fire it, because we've got to get the attention of the fighters," because we knew there were no fighters around. That was the surprising thing. We never knew until we got back home that we got out of the bomber stream. That's the first time, when I got on the ground and went into debriefing, then they told us, but we had no idea that we were out of the bomber stream. So we fired those Very pistols, and apparently the fighters which were maybe several miles away had already gone and followed the rest of the bomber stream, some of them came back. We could always tell our own fighters; we called them our little friends. And then I feathered No. 2, because you can't fly with an unfeathered propeller; you just don't have enough power to sustain flight. And that's when I observed that the one prop blade had a big chunk

missing, about one foot from the tip of the blade, it was a chunk as big as my fist. Apparently one of the 20-millimeter shells from one of the fighters had hit the prop. And by then I could see that my whole nacelle was just peppered with shots. The nacelle is the casing for the engine. So it wasn't just the propeller, it was the engine itself that got shot up.

So we lost the engine. We lost all hydraulics. If you don't have hydraulics, you can't operate your gear. You can't operate your flaps unless you do it manually. And you've got no brakes when you land.

Donald Smith was our lead pilot, Lieutenant Smith. I told them on debriefing of the situation, that we lost our interphone, we lost our radio contact, our ability to talk to anyone at that time, when we got hit, but later on we got interphone contact. That was wonderful, but I still never got any radio contact back with anyone. Lieutenant Smith being our squadron lead became the lead for the few remaining airplanes that we had. He just assumed the lead, because the flight commander, or the command pilot, was in the lead plane in the lead squadron, and he was shot down.

Smith set his speed at cruising speed. I can't talk to him. He's got gunners that can look back and tell him who he's got. I'm sitting back there with a feathered engine. I don't know if they ever told Smith that I had a feathered engine. If they told him, then any person would know that if an airplane has a feathered engine he can't keep up with a normal cruising speed. So he would have to throttle back and fly at the speed that's attainable by the worst flying aircraft there is. He can't just give it balls to the wall and go up and leave everybody else in enemy territory. And it was impossible for me to keep up. My only alternative at the time - normally you'd cruise at, say, 90 percent of your attainable power - I have to throw my throttles to the firewalls. I have to put my mixtures in full rich, which means I'm using about twice the fuel that anybody else would use. I didn't know if I'd have enough fuel to get back. And I have to put my propellers in a high RPM that we only use for takeoff and landing. And when you run the engines continuously in the same manner that you use for takeoff, your engines are not gonna last long. So my fear was that I'm gonna lose another engine, or two, because everything - when you run those engines full throttle, full RPM, the full rich keeps it somewhat cooler but the critical thing about an airplane engine is the cylinder head temperature. You've got to observe the red line. If you get your cylinder head temperature too hot, you're going to ruin your engine right then and there, just like an automobile that you run

without water in the circulating system. But I couldn't talk to him on the radio, and I guess it was at least an hour before we got out of enemy territory, and I was in that fix. I couldn't keep up, and I just knew that somebody's gonna come and pick me off. So since I could talk to my navigator, I said, "You keep me advised as to when we get out of enemy territory." At that time, after D-Day, our front lines were somewhere in France, so when we got back out of enemy territory you could heave a big sigh of relief, and the first thing I did when that happened, I pulled my throttles back. I set my throttles, my trim and so forth, and I couldn't maintain altitude, so we just started a gradual descent because here we are up there at say, 23, 24,000, 25, whatever, and I just started to descend. I told the navigator, "You give us a direct course to our home base, and you keep advising me how many miles we've got to go." All pilots in training, you learn how you can manage your descent according to your distance, how many miles you can travel and lose so many feet a minute. That's the only way I could maintain flight and feel that I'm not burning the engines up.

So we were just about alone for the rest of the mission. We knew that we were going to have to crank our gear down by hand. We knew we had to crank the flaps down. But the flaps weren't as critical as the gear, because the gear puts tremendous drag on the plane when you're flying on three engines. You first have to get the gear down and lock it, and it takes quite a bit of pressure with a handle there to crank all three wheels down and get them locked, so you couldn't wait till you got to the base to do all that.

I discussed with my co-pilot that we may not be able to lower the landing gear at all, and we couldn't wait until we got into a traffic pattern to attempt to lower it. We would have to try to lower it while we still had lots of altitude. I decided to crank the gear down while in a descent and approaching the field, rather than to wait for the traffic pattern. I knew that with the gear down I would not be able to fly level, but I could slow the rate of descent by adding power even if it meant takeoff power on three engines. But level flight or climb was out of the question with the gear down.

The navigator would keep us apprised, and in spite of what the navigator could tell you the pilot needs to see his airfield so he can plan how he's going to land the aircraft, and set up for his traffic pattern.

We spotted our base. We were on a northwesterly heading. Then we spotted what appeared to be a runway, and all three of us on the flight deck agreed that our only chance was to head straight for it, regardless of wind direction. We had very vague forward visibility because of the shattered windshield. We had been descending, and we had descended almost to traffic altitude by this time. I asked the engineer if he needed any help and it could be that one of the others, I don't know if Hank Dobek helped, but neither of the pilots could get out of the seat. We knew that the free-fall of the main gear would alleviate part of the gear problem, but then all three gears had to be manually cranked into locked position. We weren't sure that it could be done, considering that so many systems on the airplane had already failed. But we knew that once the gear was locked down, the die was cast. It's land straight ahead or you crash. It took both of us to control the airplane with one engine out; you've got pull into the dead engine. I told my crew, and I told the co-pilot, "There's no going around. We've got to hit it the first time. We're descending now and when we get this gear down, we can't maintain altitude." I said, "We have to land, and we've got to plan it back here. We've got the base straight ahead. I can see it. We've got to get that gear down."

All right. It's locked in place. I have no radio. I can't call the tower and say, "Watch me out here and get everything ready for me." And then we've got to get the flaps down, because with flaps it changes your attitude for landing, and it slows your landing speed. It might slow your landing speed by as much as ten miles an hour. That's good, because if you land hot you need nearly twice as much runway as you would if you could get the flaps down and land at a slower speed. That puts drag on the airplane, too. But you can maintain flight with a slower speed with the flaps down. Because of the uncertainty of being able to lower the gear, we had to lower it while we had ample altitude.

We got the gear down. We got the full flaps. And I had said to my co-pilot and engineer, "I don't care if we land in the grass, we've got no brakes. We've got to get on the ground. We don't have time to make a normal traffic pattern. I see the base. Whatever I see, I'm gonna land on it."

I didn't care if it was a runway or what it was, I was going to land. Well, here I get down to a hundred feet. We've got everything under control, and they started shooting those red flares from the control tower. I never saw so many red flares in my life. I said to the crew, "It's got to be. There's no emergency like this." And those tower operators up there, with no radio communication - the group commander

should have been up there in the tower telling them - you don't send anybody, you don't send anybody around - but they waved me off. I was lined up on the shorter runway, which was about 4,000 feet long and which was only used for lighter aircraft. It was the 33-15 runway, and as we approached, the control tower was just off our right wing. The main runway was probably 6,000 feet and was oriented 03-21, i.e., NNE-SSW. It was dangerous because of the shorter runway length, but it was more dangerous going around. The lives of my crew were important. Because I had already applied full power after the landing refusal, if we had been unable to crank the gear up, we most certainly could have crashed in the countryside beyond the end of the runway. The co-pilot and I had previously discussed the possibility that other airplanes may have already crashed on the main runway and closed it.

Aaron Elson: Were there planes on the shorter runway?

Paul Swofford: Not on it. They were parked over on the sides, well back on individual hardstands.. They waved me off at my own base on three engines, back from a combat mission, knowing that everybody was shot to pieces. It wasn't just the engine. Everything was shot. Hydraulics. Radio. Empennage. The windshield was shattered on both sides of the cockpit, severely limiting forward visibility. We had holes all through us. Only one man had an injured leg. They waved me off. It's been 55 years, but I still get angry when I think about it. They had this veranda around the control tower. Every time there was a mission taking off or a mission landing, the group commander and the squadron commanders and the operations officers, they'd get up there on this deck - it's just below the control room of the tower - and they'd watch to see who's coming back, how many are coming back, which ones are not coming back and so forth. All of our commanders were up there. They could see the tower operators firing red flares. You don't ignore red flares. You don't ignore them.

I didn't know what was ahead. I didn't know but what the group commander is saying, "You can go and crash on the outside but you'd better not land here." I still had maybe fifty feet. Maybe fifty feet. Full power. So I yelled to my engineer, "Start cranking the gear up. Crank it up and crank it fast! We need full throttle." And we came right down but I didn't touch down. He got the gear up. He managed. We'd already crossed the field boundary by then, just above the treetops. Three engines. Gear down, flaps down. You can't do it. But the engineer managed to get the gear up. That was the important one. You can leave the flaps down but you've got to get the gear up, because that's a drag you can't compensate for. And then, when he

told me he had the gear up, it was a sigh of relief to me, and to my co-pilot. We went straight ahead and I tried to get some altitude. I could get to a hundred feet, maybe. And then I told the engineer, "Start lifting the flaps up slowly. Do it by hand." He managed to get the flaps up. And I guess we might have gotten to 200 feet, but I know we didn't get any higher. And when you make traffic patterns in a military aircraft, all traffic patterns are counterclockwise. You always make a left, rectangular traffic pattern. My bad engine was on the left side. It wants to drop anyway. You're in a terrible fix. But we managed.

On our second approach, I knew that we would be able to crank the gear down, and how long the job would take. With these variables settled, it would be less difficult to plan our next approach. I said to my crew, "Now we've got to crank that gear down again." We had no communication with the tower. I said, "Watch for the wind sock. See which way the wind is blowing, and we'll pick the runway, and get the runway this time, it's into the wind," and so we moved off a few miles so that I could get headed straight in. Then I got the engineer to crank that gear down, and then get those flaps down. And I was able to land right at the end of the runway. And with no brakes, that airplane just rolled as straight as a die right down the middle of that runway, but there's nothing I could do except pull the power back, let the nose fall down, guide it with the rudders, and roll straight. And we knew it was going off, but fortunately, we had slowed down to just a few miles an hour by the time we veered to the left side of the runway because of the asymmetrical engine thrust, and the rudders' lost effectiveness. I could have landed on that short runway. It was dangerous I know, but that was a case where you didn't do things by the book. What you have to do is to salvage the crew. Don't worry about the airplane. The crew's what's important. But we got on the ground, near the end of the runway. Of course it's always soft when you get off the pavement like that, and the weight of the airplane sinks down and it stopped pretty quick when it got off in the soft ground there. But only after I got out and was talking to some of the people there, that's the first time I learned that we'd lost all those airplanes. I had no idea what had happened. I thought they were just kind of scattered. I was absolutely dazed to hear that only four aircraft returned out of the 37 that were launched. But to this day, I have yet to figure out why I was waved off on the first attempt at landing.

My crew performed admirably. My engineer's dead now, he lived down in Key West and he and his wife died in an automobile accident about three years ago. And my co-pilot was a chemist; after the war was a chemist with the Firestone Rubber

Company in Akron, and he died in 1987. Those two were my two right arms. But that engineer, by doing all of that work that he did, and thus able to keep an airplane on three engines going around ... I never would say I deserved any medal or whatever, but I would say that my engineer and my co-pilot deserved recognition; that never came. There's not much that any other members of the crew can do, but the two pilots and the engineer, on this particular flight, had the sole responsibility of actions; we took actions and fortunately we got back in one piece, and brought the crew back, and we were safe, except for my radio operator and I think if you would talk to him, he would say that his injury was insignificant in comparison with what we went through to return to home base. But we never got any recognition, not one atom. Never heard one word from the group commander, from our operations officer. We went into debriefing and I told them all just what I told you. Never had one word from any commander, my own squadron commander; my own operations officer, the group commander, no one, absolutely no one, said one word.

If we'd all piled up and have been killed out there they'd have given us a Purple Heart. Aside from Thum's Purple Heart, not one person on my crew was awarded any recognition whatsoever! I'm not saying I deserve recognition, but I am saying my engineer and my co-pilot performed valiantly. There's nothing that the other crew members can do but hold on. I don't remember now if my engineer had someone from the back helping him; that's a tremendous job, cranking those gears down and up and down. That's a manual job. Those gears weigh more than a thousand pounds. And he had to get them down and lock them in position, and then crank them back up and wait till we get around there and do that again. Magnificent performance. It's an extremely difficult job to fly an airplane that's crippled like that, trying to get your nine man crew down on the ground safely. Having said all of that, it should never have happened. But we got back. It was said that any crew going into action over there during the war with the 8th Air Force and flying 35 missions was nearly impossible. Every time you went out there was a certain chance that you wouldn't come back. You can look in my book here and look on the 35 missions that my crew flew. About 50 B-24s were lost by the 445th Bomb Group on all the missions flown by my crew. That airplane that went down on each mission could have been mine. So on any mission you go out over enemy territory, and you're exposed to enemy fighters and enemy ground attack firing at you, or something mechanical happening to your airplane, or you run into some midair collision, you get your gas tanks shot out, get your oxygen system shot out and you've got to drop down to low altitude, there are so many things that can

happen on each mission that the odds of anyone going over there and flying 35 missions and coming home without any injuries, the odds were very heavily against you getting back. They were against you getting back from just one mission, much less 35 consecutive missions.

Aaron Elson: How soon after Kassel did you fly again?

Paul Swofford: Kassel was on the 27th of September. My next mission was the 5th of October, so it was eight days. Kassel was my seventh mission. You see there? Those were my missions. You can see that there's 35; it listed Magdeburg as the last one and Mainz as the first one. Let me add a word of "possible" recognition from my group. About one month and seven missions later, we were sent to Southport, England, on R&R (flak leave). But all crews received a rest like that.

Aaron Elson: Magdeburg! I thought they're supposed to give you a milk run for your last mission.

Paul Swofford: Well, I'll tell you, my crew was anticipating the end; we were anticipating a milk run when we got to the briefing, and you don't know how sad it made us feel to look up when they pulled the curtain back and we saw we were going to Magdeburg. We knew Magdeburg was a tough one. In fact, during the four weeks just prior to our last mission, our group had three other missions to Magdeburg. Delectable Doris of the 389th Group was shot down on one of them.

I had my last mission on Feb. 14, 1945 ... No, didn't lose any at Magdeburg. February the 14th was Valentine's Day. My crew was pretty good at flying on holidays. I flew on Thanksgiving Eve and Thanksgiving Day. I flew Christmas Eve and I flew Christmas Day. I flew New Year's Eve and New Year's Day. And we got shot down on New Year's Day. See, I flew December 31st and January 1st. And from January 1st you see a space ... I went from January 1st to January 17th. Well, let's go back to December. Notice now, No. 23 is December 12th and 24 is December 19th. Now, we wanted to fly badly sometime in there. Do you know what that period is there, what's the significance?

Aaron Elson: That's the Battle of the Bulge.

Paul Swofford: The Battle of the Bulge. December 16. Right in between those two, the worst weather they ever encountered on the Continent, they said. And we were socked in in England. They needed us over there for support in the Bulge, and that's

when the Germans chose to start the Battle of the Bulge. But we managed to get up on the 19th, and you see, Dec. 24th and 25th, you don't see any big cities. Notice, Bitburg, Wohlsfield, Mayenne, Arsfeld, Gerolstein, Prum, so forth. And Homburg and Saarbrücken on the 28th, all of those were ground support for the Battle of the Bulge. We went in at pretty low altitude for those; we went in to support the troops that were being forced out in that Bulge there, and that's what happened to me on January 1st. We were still supporting the Battle of the Bulge, and somewhere in the vicinity of Aachen, after we got off of our target, we got hit, probably by an anti-aircraft shell because you just couldn't miss that. You could look out and the sky would just be black with anti-aircraft there.

I never brought an airplane back that didn't have holes in it from flak. Never. On January 1st, they shot out my fuel tanks. I lost all my fuel. But being front line support, it wasn't far to friendly territory in northern France. I got back, and I had the navigator find me an airfield on his map. He found one that wasn't too far away there in France. And, what was it called, "Mademoiselle from Armentières, Parlez-vous?" Armentières is where we set down.

Well, you can have an airfield on the map, and it doesn't mean you're gonna have an airfield when you get there. Armentières had been bombed by fighters and bombers, and it had bomb craters all over the field. And this is another time I didn't know if we were gonna make it, but my engineer told me, "We've got no fuel." So the moment he told me that I brought my throttles back and we started gliding. That's when I said to the navigator, "Find me an airfield but be sure it's beyond the front lines." So he found Armentières. And wouldn't you know, I was coming in for the approach - there's snow on the ground there - you don't see some of these things from the air. You can't see all these bomb craters. I managed to find out which way the wind's blowing. Of course there's no such thing as calling the control, there wasn't any tower there. There was just a hut, but his map showed that it was a military runway. The Germans used grass fields for fighters. They used them for bombers too. It was a grass field, but I see snow on the ground. First of January, with snow on the ground, it should be frozen ground. But when you've got bomb craters there, it's dangerous. You're better off landing with your gear up. So when we were ready to touch down, I suddenly gave it the throttle. I said to the co-pilot, "We can't do this. We might run out of gas, but if we leave the gear down and the wheels go into a crater we'll wreck the ship." I left the gear down and I said to the co-pilot, "Let's find an area here where there's no bomb craters." And we finally located what we thought was a swath that we could dodge the craters, and I set it

down on all three wheels, and shut the thing down when we got on the ground, because we were just about empty of gas.

Well, we didn't know what to do. We couldn't speak French. It's out in the middle of a big field. I knew it was Armentieres, the navigator had told me that. This is my other navigator, it wasn't Dobek. I already had gotten a new navigator. His name was Frank Sadowski. So we're just sitting there, discussing, "Well, now what?" We're out here in an open field. We hope the people are friendly; we think they're friendly.

Crowds started coming from all directions. Hundreds of people came, migrating towards our airplane. They came from every direction. They came up to the airplane. But also coming to the airplane was a British vehicle, a lorry they call them. And an officer and an enlisted man were on that lorry. They posted a guard on my airplane, right then and there. They had a guard on that airplane day and night. You see, they knew that it would be a prime target for the Germans. The Germans always came over at night. They didn't dare stick their head out there in daytime, but they'd get over there at night, and they had that in their sights, and they came back for it later, they came back for my airplane. But he wrecked and killed himself. And we were told by the British and the Canadians who were there also that their information was that that pilot was looking for my airplane to bomb it, or to shoot it up, and he lost his own airplane and his own life. And they drove me and my officers around to the wreckage and showed it to us. The body had already been taken out.

We were there about two weeks. Before we left the airplane, our batteries were still good. Even though we didn't have gas, we had batteries. Our communication was by Morse code, because you can send a signal so much further. So the engineer got the antenna directed in such a manner that the radio operator sent a message back to our home base, by code, and told them where we were, and that we were on the ground safe. The crew was all safe, and the airplane was whole except for we got our gas tanks shot out.

We had just been paid the day before. Some of the men had left their pocketbooks back at Tibenham and when they got back their pocketbooks were gone, because that's what always happens; when somebody didn't come back, "scavengers" would take over. Like when I came back from the Kassel mission my bicycle was gone.

Aaron Elson: Really?

Paul Swofford: Yes sir. I paid 10 pounds for a bicycle - that's \$40 - and I'd just ridden it a couple or three weeks there, and it's gone. Even the very day I got back my bicycle was gone, because that's what happened. Scavengers.

Aaron Elson: That's awful.

Paul Swofford: You bet. Right in your own outfit. Well, that's what, my radio operator, Thum, said. "Oh my goodness, I left my billfold on my bunk." He came back, it's gone. See, what happened, there was an American forward air base that's called Merville maybe twenty or thirty miles from there, and finally, after we'd been over there nearly two weeks, they sent up a driver in a vehicle to tell me to come over there to Merville and check in with "base operations." The British provided a driver and a lorry to drive me over to that base. It was an American forward base, and there was a B-24 that had landed there for some reason, they had repaired it, and they wanted me to fly it back to England. So I took my crew over there and we got on board that B-24 and flew it back to its base. Its base was somewhere up in northern England. We landed up there, and then they got a truck and drove my crew back to my home station, so they didn't have to send a crew over to the Continent to pick up that B-24. They turned it over to us, because they knew we could fly a B-24. And we just left our airplane sitting out in the field there.

So I say that I was shot down. We were, but we were able to make a stable landing.

Aaron Elson: But to have two missions like that, and every mission you had holes in your plane?

Paul Swofford: Every mission. But the wonderful ground crew would get in there and patch, the sheet metal people would get in there and patch those holes, and you'd look at an airplane and it looked like a patch quilt except it's the same color, you've got to look close sometimes to see it, but they're there. Little plates would just be all over, the holes were patched and then riveted.

Now, let me tell you something. I don't know if a lot of people would even think of this. Anyone on the crew when we get in combat can get scared, and they can talk and say "I'm scared. I'm afraid of getting hit," and so forth. But there's one person can't do it. That's the commander. The pilot. He cannot afford to let anyone at any time see one grain of fear or resentment. I have heard my crew members, like the

co-pilot was very intimate you might say with the enlisted crew members. They weren't palsy-walsy with me. But they would be with the co-pilot. I was Lieutenant Swofford. Skipper. But he was Smitty to them. And I've heard them say that I showed absolutely no fear whatsoever. Well, it was there. You know it was. But I could not under any circumstances show one speck of fear. And in a way, at 23 years old, I wasn't as scared as I got ... early in my missions, I wasn't as scared as I was on my 34th and 35th missions, put it that way. When we'd get on board an aircraft for a mission, we'd have a camera. The purpose was, if you felt like taking any pictures of anything you thought was worthy of picture taking, take it. When you came back, they'd come and pick the camera up and develop the film, with whatever you got.

Well, I knew that taking pictures in the cockpit, through the windshield or the side windows, they wouldn't get a very good picture, especially if the glass had some dirt on it. I'd slide the window open and take pictures in flight, of other airplanes, and they used to tell me that they liked to put those cameras on board my aircraft because I brought them back such good pictures. But I'd slide those windows open, and the co-pilot would tell the crew, "You wouldn't believe it, but we've got this bulletproof glass up here to protect us from this flak, and the Skipper's up here with the window open taking pictures of this flak." That was early on, but later on I kept those windows closed because I knew that that flak could, well, if it hits the airplane, like I say, every mission you could always hear that stuff hit the metal. And you know you've gotten it but you don't know where it hit. And you get on the ground and the first thing that the ground crew members do, they start going all over the airplane to find the holes. And when they find the holes, they start looking to see if any of the systems got knocked out, oxygen, fuel, hydraulics, electric and so forth.

That Kassel mission should never have happened. It should never have happened. I just can never tell myself that that is any badge of honor to have gone through that.

Aaron Elson: Did you volunteer to go into the B-29s?

Paul Swofford: Here, I'll show you how I came to fly the B-29s. This is 21 February, see, I finished 14 February, and this was as I was leaving England. It says "Combat record, flying personnel, To whom it may concern, Paul Swofford completed 35 combat missions. He has been awarded the Air Medal, first oak leaf cluster, second

oak leaf cluster, third oak leaf cluster, fourth oak leaf cluster and the DFC. His performance of duty has been excellent. It is recommended that he be assigned duties as pilot VHB." It is signed by the group commander, Col. Jones. Now, see, the B-24 and B-17 were heavy bombers. That's a very heavy bomber, which is a B-29. So he recommended me to go to the B-29, and that's what I did, as soon as I got back to the States. I was flying in a B-29, about 30,000 feet altitude, pressurized cabin, over the Rocky Mountains on the 6th of August, 1945; we had this bar up here we could get our feet up there and we could put the airplane on autopilot and just sit back and listen to the radio - there were some wonderful radio stations on the ground in those days and as you'd go across country, you'd tune in commercial stations. I was listening on one commercial station when I got the news that the atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima. And we didn't know - nobody knew anything about it - when they said "atomic bomb" - well, I was a college graduate before I went into the service, and I majored in mathematics and science. I studied physics and chemistry. I knew a little bit about chemistry and the atomic tables and so forth. And my instructors in college had, way back in the Thirties they had talked to us about busting the atom. But that just didn't make sense. What did make sense, it was dropped from a B-29 aircraft just like the one I'm sitting in right there at that time. Now there's more to that. Three days later, on August the 9th, 1945, again I was flying across the Rocky Mountains, same altitude, when the word came about the bomb being dropped on Nagasaki. And we knew then the end couldn't be far off, because we'd read about the awful destruction three days earlier, we'd read about that awful destruction of Hiroshima, and listened to it on the radio; of course, that's before the days of TV, but we knew then that that one on Nagasaki, it couldn't last long.

Aaron Elson: Did you fly more than that one mission in the Sweetest Rose of Texas?

Paul Swofford: I don't know. The record that I have doesn't indicate that. I didn't know that Sweetest Rose of Texas was going to attain any notoriety.

Oh, I was mentioning to you about the young fellow who was an artist. This is a sketch of the nose section of "The Sweetest Rose of Texas," which he was painting. Now, he sent me, it's probably about three feet long and a couple feet high, a good size piece, he sent in the mail, it came to me parcel post, and he sent me the postage to send it back. He had gone to a Second Air Division meeting and had gotten the signatures of a lot of people there, and I'm not sure that all the signatures he had were survivors of Kassel because there were some who had been

taken prisoners and had been freed later. Now there's his name and his address ... Mark Copeland, and he lives up in Lakeville, Minnesota. He got a lot of information, a lot of people, I don't know how many of them could have stories or information about Kassel, but when he sent it to me, it was completely covered all around the perimeters with autographs. Some of them would put some writing in there. And for many of them you couldn't tell what position they had or what was their significance, but I was determined that if anybody saw my name, they would know who I was. So I didn't write any historical thing on there, but I wrote, "Paul Swofford, Pilot, Sweetest Rose, 27 Sept. 1944." That's the way I signed it. And anyone who sees it will know who it was. But I could not tell by looking at many of the names what was the significance of their signature being on that picture.

But the picture was complete, in color and all, and I was one of the last ones because I had to search to find a place to sign it. But I think that he had reserved a special place for me, because I think that was his coup de grace, getting the pilot, for he was painting the Sweetest Rose because of the Kassel mission. So he took pains to send that thing to me by parcel post. I signed it. He sent me the postage and everything, and I sent it back to him.