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Hal Hagerty

OPTION # 1

(O. K. to be checked out and O. K. to make copies)



DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
HEADQUARTERS AIR FORCE INSPECTION AND SAFETY CENTER
NORTON AIR FORCE BASE, CA 92409



9 DEC 1985

Mr Harold V. Hagerty
2220 East 9th Avenue
Albany OR 97321

Dear Mr Hagerty

In response to your 7 November 1985 letter, attached are the releasable portions of the 19 July 1944 B-17 midair collision mishap report. We are returning your check in the amount of \$18.65. The fee has been waived since it is our policy not to charge crewmembers of the mishap aircraft.

The USAF Historical Research Center maintains the histories of Air Force units. If you are interested in obtaining information regarding the 388th Bomb Group, please write to:

USAFHRC/RI
Maxwell AFB AL 36112-6678

Sincerely,

Vincent P. Murone

VINCENT P. MURONE
Chief, Reports Branch
Directorate of Aerospace Safety

2 Atch

1. First Interstate Bank Check
2. B-17 Mshp Rprt, 19 Jul 44

SUMMARY

On 19 July 1944, 1Lt Walter H. Malaniak and his crew departed AAF Station 136 (Knettishall, Suffolk) at 0519 in B-17, SN 42-30851, to fly an operation mission. 1Lt Ralph M. Colflesh and his crew were flying B-17G, SN 43-37623, and had taken off from AAF Station 138 (Snetterton Heath, Norfolk). B-17s were assembling over the field before beginning their climb in formation. Aircraft 623 was flying number 4 position in the low squadron of the high group. Lt Malaniak held good position as the number 5 position of the high squadron during the group assembly but during the wing assembly aircraft, his aircraft 851 was lagging back a considerable distance. As the 96th Group approached the 388th Group from the rear at the start of the wing assembly, aircraft 851 came up from below 623, which was flying second element lead of the low squadron of the 96th group. At about 0725, there was a midair collision. Aircraft 851 was below 623, and the number 2 engine propeller of 623 struck the fuselage of aircraft 851, causing it to break in half directly behind the radio room. The front section of the aircraft fell into a flat spin from an altitude of 16,000 feet and exploded upon hitting the ground. The tail section fell in approximately the same area. The two crewmen, gunners SSgt Harold V. Hagerty and SSgt James M. Bennett, parachuted to safety. The crew of 623 were ordered to bail out. Navigator, bombardier, and engineer bailed out. The rest of the crew did not bail out due to being thrown about the ship. The number 2 engine was vibrating badly from hitting the other aircraft. It was feathered, and the aircraft was flown on three engines about 40 miles out over the North Sea to jettison bombs as directed by Snetterton Heath Flight Control. They then returned to base for landing. There were no fatalities or injuries to the crew of 623. The extent of damages necessitated the replacement or repair of the following: (1) Replace number 2 engine and number 2 propeller; (2) replace number 2 supercharger; (3) replace number 3 supercharger; (4) replace ball turret; (5) replace feeder tank door; (6) replace leading edge of left hand wing flap; (7) replace leading edge of right hand wing flap; (8) replace trailing edge of left inboard wing panel; (9) replace skin surface of number 1 engine nacelle.

HAROLD V. HAGERTY, D.M.D.

2220 EAST 9TH AVENUE
ALBANY, OREGON 97321
926-3689

#14

January 1, 1986

DIRECTOR OF ACCIDENT RECORDS WOULD NOT PUT THIS INFORMATION IN WRITING - STORY WAS TOLD OVER THE PHONE AND TYPED.

Dear Stewart

Enclosed are the reports that are on file at Norton Air Base. Its very interesting after all these years to find out that we were at fault. Mr. Murone of the Aerospace mentioned releasable portions of the accident report. I called him to find out what facts the agency would find necessary to withhold. He stated that it is the U. S. Governments position to provide all fact and a summary of accidents but not conclusions or recommendations. In all cases where there is civil damage facts will not be released on that portion unless the case has been relolved. There is nothing on record that the Black Fox Pub has received payment for damages. He explained that the graphic details of death were pointless to send to widows and next of kin. Such was the case for crewman Ramos and Force. It reads that their dog tags were found along side the road about 100 yards from the crater. The tags were attached to major portions of two torsos. All human remains in the area were declaired to be their bodies. When all fragments were gathered it amounted to less than 100 pounds apice. He read the conclusions to me over the phone and stated that he could not put it in writing.

" Lt. Malaniak was lagging formation and low out of position He probably realized that wing formation was taking place and it would be necessary for him gain altitude to assume his proper position. At that same moment Lt. Colflesh arrived above and behind No. 851. Lt. Malaniak flew into the underside of No. 623.

As I mentioned in our conversation, my recollection of the collision is that the floor board exploded, pieces came up and hit me in the face. An instant later I realized that I was falling alone in space - there was absolute silence - I had my chute in my hand. We had always asumed that the propellers of the other ship had cut into underside of out plane which had caused the floor board to fly into pieces - now I'm not sure what happened.

I've written to the secretary of the 96th, perhaps he has some of Colflesh crew on his roster

Any further info I'll keep you posted.

Thanks

Hal
Hal

'Little Boy Blue' #15



The End Of A Veteran Fortress, by R. J. Collis

A B-17F in flight, though not the one featured in this story.

Following initial site investigations by leading Suffolk wreckologists Jeff Carless and Clint Cansdale, a consortium of East Anglian 'Diggers' excavated the crash site of B-17F 42-30851 'Little Boy Blue' of the 388th Bomb Group, at Thurston, near Bury St. Edmunds, on September 13, 1986.

'Little Boy Blue', a veteran B-17F-125-B0 of the 560th Bomb Squadron, was one of less than a dozen 'F' model B-17s still flying combat missions with the 8th Air Force in July 1944. She was on her 67th mission when destroyed, in a manner which was sadly all too commonplace within the milling USAAF heavy bomber formations — a mid-air collision. This grand old B-17 had visited some of the most heavily defended targets in Europe during her career with the 388th BG, including Frankfurt, Regensburg, Brunswick, Berlin (twice) and as far afield as Posnan in Poland, and Brux in Western Czechoslovakia. Gunners aboard the bomber were credited with the destruction of at least three enemy fighters, and she had collected more than a few flak holes in her travels.

It was on Wednesday, July 19, 1944 that B-17F '851, piloted by 1st Lieutenant Walter H. Malaniak, took off from USAAF Knettishall at 0519 hours, one of twenty Fortresses in the 'B' Group, which, together with eighteen aircraft of the 'A' Group, were to form the lead and low groups of the 45th 'A' (Composite) Combat Wing. The target on that Summer's morning was a notorious one in the annals of the 8th Air Force — the ball bearing and other factories at Schweinfurt, bombed at such high cost by B-17s the previous year. B-17 '851, carrying the code letter 'R' on her olive drab fuselage (the 388th Bomb Group were the only 8th Air Force bomber unit not to issue squadron codes) had been allocated

culty during Group Assembly over Knettishall, and this was accomplished without incident. As Wing Assembly began, however, their B-17F was seen to drop out of position and began lagging back some considerable distance behind the other bombers.

Disaster struck as B-17s of the 96th Bomb Group from Snetterton approached from the rear right to join formation; at 0725 hours, 'Little Boy Blue' pulled up sharply and crashed into the underside of B-17G 43-37623 of the 96th Group's 413th Bomb Squadron, flown by 1st Lieutenant Ralph M. Colflesh. The No 2 propeller of this Fortress slashed through the radio compartment of '851 just forward of the waist-gun positions, and as other crews watched in horror, the two separated, then after flying on for a few seconds, 'Little Boy Blue' suddenly nosed up at a 70 degree angle, broke in two, and plummeted

A large section of fuselage from B-17F 42-30851 'Little Boy Blue' languished in a garden as a lawnmower cover — the East Anglian Aircraft Research Group now have it in their collection. The aircraft code letter 'R' is clearly visible on it (R. J. Collis).



The rubber rim of one-piece 'fighter' type goggles, found at the site of the B-17F 'dig' in Thurston, Suffolk (R. J. Collis).

towards the ground some 16,000 feet below.

The main section of the B-17 whirled down in a flat spin, the powerful centrifugal forces probably pinning the crew in their stations. The tail unit, however, fluttered to earth more slowly, the aerofoil shape giving it some form of stabilisation as it fell. Two crew members, tail gunner Sgt James M. Bennett, and right waist gunner Staff Sgt Harold V. Hagety, were able to parachute to safety. The latter airman had a miraculous escape. Sitting on an ammunition box at his waist gun position, Staff Sgt Hagety's first knowledge of the collision came as the floor in front of him 'exploded', flying pieces of metal hitting him in the face. He immediately grabbed his chest-type parachute pack from its stowage, and was then catapulted into space from the falling wreckage. Somehow he managed to keep his hold on the parachute and clip it onto his harness as he fell, finally parachuting into a field close to the blazing wreckage of the B-17's main section. A third parachute was reportedly seen, but this and its user disappeared into the fireball as 'Little Boy Blue' hit the ground. Not surprisingly, when the two surviving gunners returned to Knettishall for interrogation, Lieutenant Ratcliffe, the S-2 Intelligence Officer, said it was hard to believe the story of their amazing escape from death.

The fully laden Fortress blew apart with a violent explosion on impact, having fallen in a ditch bordering two

Thurston. The destruction was almost total. All five 1000 lb GP bombs aboard detonated in the crash, making a crater 15 feet deep and 25 feet wide, and scattering wreckage of the B-17 over a radius of 150 yards. The remaining eight crew died in the explosion, but, fortunately, there were no other casualties, despite glasshouses being wrecked and a number of properties suffering blast damage to ceilings and windows. The second B-17 involved in the collision, '623, sustained major damage to the underside, propellers from the lower aircraft having ripped into the No 2 engine, Nos 2 and 3 inboard superchargers, the ball turret (fortunately unoccupied at the time) and both main wing flaps. Despite the damage, the pilots maintained control and the aircraft stayed airborne. After consultation with Snetterton Heath Flying Control, the crew took the damaged bomber out to sea and jettisoned the bomb-load 40 miles off the East Coast, returning to base to make a safe landing with the No 2 engine feathered. The B-17 landed minus three of the crew, however, for the navigator, bombardier and flight engineer had baled out when the collision occurred, and before the order to abandon was rescinded. The rest of the crew were thrown about the inside of the fuselage but escaped injury.

The exact cause of the collision which led to the destruction of 'Little Boy Blue' will probably never be known. Certainly it is unlikely to have been due to inexperience, for Lieutenant Malaniak had logged over 360 hours flying time on B-17s since the previous October, 171 of which were on the 'F' model. Malaniak and crew had flown on the 'Frantic' shuttle mission to Poltava on June 21, and their B-17, 42-38187:D was one of eleven 388th BG aircraft destroyed on the ground in the subsequent German air raid. He was killed whilst flying his nineteenth mission with the group. His co-pilot, Flight Officer Brinkoeter, was on his seventeenth mission, all the other crew members were on their 18th. Problems with the hydraulically actuated turbo-superchargers fitted to the B-17Fs were numerous, and failure of a supercharger unit during a combat mission invariably meant lack of high altitude power; failure to maintain formation; and straggling — precisely the circumstances which led to the collision. Another problem which may have contributed to the accident was the B-17F's tail-heavy balance condition. Fully loaded, the 'F' models had a centre of gravity well to the rear, and elevators had to be trimmed in flight to counteract the tail heaviness, reducing airspeed by about 10 mph, and placing stress on the tail unit. One or both of these factors may have played a part in bringing about this dreadful accident, but the findings of the 8th Air Force's accident investigation team remain under wraps, and therefore any conclusions reached are purely speculative.

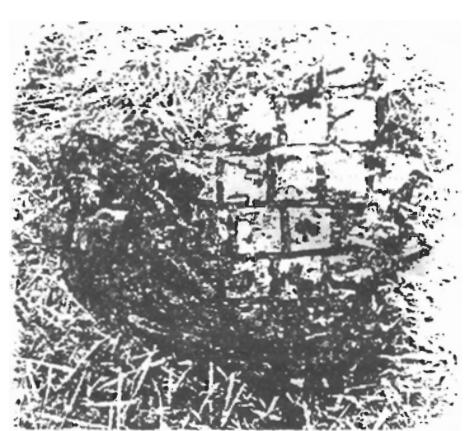
Despite high hopes and reports that

wreckage had been pushed into the crater at the time, the excavation, using a hired Hymac 370 digger, proved generally disappointing. Shattered and fire damaged chunks of wreckage were found down to a depth of 10 feet, but the hoped-for 'Core' of remains did not materialise. Instead, the thirteen enthusiasts involved had to be satisfied with smaller, but no less interesting finds. Fragments of 1,000lb bomb shrapnel, exploded .5 calibre shell cases, a piece of ball turret mechanism, and an inner flying boot, with the leather as good as new, were found in the first few feet. Deeper relics included a portion of main wheel tyre, the rubber surround of a pair of B-8 fighter pilot type goggles, and several bagfuls of assorted alloy wreckage, piping, small electrical components and pieces of perspex.

Since carrying out the excavation, representative pieces of B-17F 42-30851 have found their way into the collections of the Marches Aviation Society and the South Yorkshire Aircraft Museum, courtesy of the East Anglian Aircraft Research Group. Hopefully, these pieces will serve as a memorial to the eight USAAF airmen who died when their battle-scarred veteran Fortress hurtled to a fiery end from the skies over Suffolk 43 years ago.

Right: A photo of the dig taken in 1986 from the same spot as the photograph below (R. J. Collis).

Below: The scene of devastation beside the Thurston to Tostock road in rural West Suffolk after B-17F 42-30851:R 'Little Boy Blue' had crashed. The road was blocked by wreckage after the explosion but was soon cleared.



A portion of main undercarriage wheel tyre tread found at the site (R. J. Collis).



In July 1944, a gaping 15 by 24ft crater had been opened at this spot. In 1986, another 'crater' was dug by enthusiasts in search of aeronautical history (R. J. Collis).

