

# 5 9

Dick Nielson

OPTION # 1

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

Christmas 1944

Of the 35 bombing raids I participated in during my tour (1944-1945) with the 305th BG out of Chelveston, England, my 28th mission on the day before Christmas in '44 and the flight over the Ardennes area and back to England after dark on Dec. 24th stand out as one of the most memorable. I had been checked out as 1st Pilot in November after 18 missions of sitting in the right seat across from Jack Wolhaupt, my original pilot, and dreaming of flying from the left seat. My new crew was made up of airmen from aircrews that had been split up prior to finishing their missions due to injuries or illness. With a flight crew made up of any assortment of crewmen who had differing combat missions left to fly before finishing their tour, I had a constantly shifting crew. There was no crew known as the "Nielsen" crew and for this reason, since I didn't keep notes on who flew with me from mission to mission, I can't refer to any of my flight crew on this particular raid by name.

In mid-December of 1944, a dense fog covered most of England and western Europe. The weather provided ideal conditions for a major German offensive move against U.S. troops in the Ardennes. The German troops were moving toward Antwerp to take over the port, and split the Allied forces. The offensive was well under way at dawn on the morning of December 22 and the 305th and most of the other bomb groups of the 8th Air Force were briefed for a maximum effort mission. At first light on the 22nd, after briefing, we manned our flight positions, started the engines and maneuvered our Forts carefully around the perimeter track through fog so thick that jeeps were used to guide us to our take-off positions. There we waited, engines idling, for instructions from the tower. The co-pilot and I spent our waiting time discussing how we could find our way down the invisible runway and lift our lethal cargo of 500 pounders into the air. The mission was scrubbed and most of us spent the evening in the Officer's or NCO's clubs until the tannoy system announced that all aircrew members were to hit the sack. This was our notice that a mission was on for the next morning. The fog was so thick that night, that we had to walk our bicycles back to the barracks.

Heavy fog still blanketed the area as we headed for breakfast and briefing early on the 23rd. We went through a briefing similar to the previous morning, again maneuvering slowly around the perimeter track to our waiting positions. Then, with engines idling, we waited for further instructions from the tower. As on the previous morning the mission was scrubbed and we taxied back to the hardstands and returned to the barracks to wait another day for the fog to lift. Few, if any, of us had ever seen fog so dense. Even in daylight I couldn't see more than about 20 feet down the road back to the barracks. We didn't expect to be called out the next morning since there was little change that night in the weather. We were wrong.

On Christmas eve morning, Dec. 24, we were waiting again in our flight positions as our Fortresses sat nose to tail around the perimeter track with engines idling as they had the two previous mornings. We weren't too concerned with the prospects of taking off in the same weather conditions that had grounded us for the previous days. Wrong again. My former 1st pilot, Jack Wolhaupt, was piloting the plane that was at the head of the line of waiting Forts. The radio came alive with an unexpected announcement from the Group

Commander. The message was not what we had expected, and our plans for a day at the Officer's club were dashed. The Base commander gave the command over the radio, "Lt. Wolhaupt, you take off, and if you make it, the rest of us will follow". Although we couldn't see his plane, we could hear the engines as Wolhaupt and his crew began their roll down the runway. The next Fortress moved into position and disappeared into the fog : then the next, and then we were next.. As the Fortress ahead of us vanished, we moved into position and ran through our take-off check list. I set the gyro compass on zero so we would be lined up with the runway. From our starting position, we could not see the runway lights on either side of the plane so as we began the roll down the runway I told the co-pilot if he saw runway lights on his side, kick the left rudder to send us back toward center. As we began the roll down the runway, my eyes were glued to the gyro compass, which I trusted to help me keep the plane rolling straight down the runway until we were airborne..

I moved the throttles ahead to take-off RPM, working the rudder pedals to keep the gyro compass zeroed, and moved the wheel forward to lift the tail. Suddenly, the co-pilot kicked left rudder and the plane veered to the left. The runway lights on my side of the runway loomed ahead and I kicked right rudder, too hard, sending it back toward the lights on the right side of the runway. The gyro compass was useless, since the plane evidently wasn't lined up properly with the runway when I zeroed it. We fishtailed crazily down the runway and were almost squared away when we came to area where our 3 field runways crossed. There were no lights to help us stay on the runway. The last glance I had at the airspeed indicated only 90 MPH, so I shoved the throttles past the stops into Full Military RPM, hauled back on the wheel and waited. The Fort staggered into the air without running off the side of the tarmac, the co-pilot retracted the wheels and we leveled off, skimming the shrubbery at the end of the runway to gain flying speed, then raised the flaps and reduced the RPM before we blew a cylinder head.

At about 300 feet altitude, we came out of the fog into a beautiful clear blue, sunny day and took a heading to the assembly area for maneuvering into our assigned formation positions. I could see 3 or 4 plumes of smoke coming up through the fog where others from airfields in our vicinity had not made it off the ground. This mission was planned as a "maximum effort" mission to help the ground troops turn back the Germans. As it turned out, it was the largest aerial raid of the war over Europe ... over 2000 bombers and 850 fighters were launched that day. 33 targets were attacked during the day, and enemy fighters were out in unusual force for a "do or die" effort to assist the German ground offensive. They met our lead groups over allied territory, and dogged the formations over the target areas, following them back to a dark and fog shrouded England. Our group had attacked Nidda Air Field. 541 other B-17s from the 1st Division attacked 8 other prime targets in the area. Fortunately, on this mission our plane was not attacked by enemy fighters and our group was still intact after the bomb drop.

As the group neared Chelveston that evening, it became apparent that we couldn't land there due to the fog and the darkness. The Group commander advised the squadron leaders to head north and locate fields where they could land their planes safely. Soon after the 366th Sqd. headed away from the rest of the group, a radio message came from

the lead plane ordering radio silence due to "bandits in the area". We had to fly with wing lights on, however, since it was too dark to maintain formation without them. It was a tense and dark flight toward East Anglia. We flew over several unmapped lighted runways during the trip north which for some reason the Squadron leader chose to ignore.. The co-pilot urged me to break from formation and land at one of these unidentified fields, but I had never seen landing strips with green runway lights and luckily chose to stay with the squadron. I found out later that these were dummy airstrips that were lit up to mislead the enemy fighters that were in the area. As our 12 Fortresses flew wing to wing through the night, I could see other groups of 8th AF bombers in the distance winging through the night skys like giant Christmas trees moving tip first through the night skies with their red and green wing lights twinkling. What a strange Christmas eve it was. One that I never fail to recall on Christmas eve since.

After what seemed an eternity, we could see a landing strip ahead with normal yellowish runway lights on. There were a few other bombers and some British fighters landing while our squadron was manoeuvring for a peel off and landing approach. For some reason, white and green flares were being fired from a spot about 2000 feet ahead of the lighted section of the airstrip. As our planes came closer to the field it was apparent that the only runway lights operating were at the far end of the runway. The flares were being fired to show the pilots where the

beginning of the runway was. Our position in the squadron formation was on the far right, putting us last to peel off and land. I could see the our planes peeling off to the left as we approached the strip, making their 360 circuit to bring them around into a landing approach. We could also see that there were some feathered engines due to fuel tanks running dry.

Landing at this half lit, unknown airdrome turned out to be much hairier than usual. As we came around for our first attempt at a landing, all seemed well and we were in a normal landing approach heading toward the flares that were guiding us. Wheels and flaps were down and we were a few hundred feet from the ground. Suddenly, an unlit B-17 appeared in our landing lights, moving directly across our flight path! We were seconds from a mid-air collision and my only choice was to shove the wheel forward and squeeze under the other Fort. We made it, probably with a few feet to spare, just as the landing lights shone on shrubbery on the ground. I instinctively hauled back on the wheel and we leveled off a few yards over the top of the ground bushes. The co-pilot and I were so unnerved that we couldn't get back into a landing position, so we retracted the landing gear and took another trip around the field for a second try.

This trip around, we began to worry about our own fuel supply, so we held off lowering the wheels and flaps until we were sure we were sure of making the landing. As we approached the spot where we had last seen a green flare, another flare went up, only this time it was red. Another aborted landing, only this time we had to find out what the trouble was on the runway. We made a quick 360 back around and buzzed the strip at about 20 feet altitude looking for a bomb crater, or a wrecked plane. The bombardier in the nose, the ball turret operator hanging from the belly of the plane in his turret and the tail gunner all reported no sign of anything that would keep us from landing. By now, the

fuel tanks were surely almost empty and we would have to land regardless of the color of the flares.

We came around for the final time, headed for the red flare and levelled off for a normal landing with all 4 props still turning. I came within a whisker of running over a British Spitfire while taxiing to a vacant hardstand. All this time, we were not in radio communication with the field. We were picked up and delivered to the mess hall. It turned out that we had landed at a British airfield and were among many other crews who couldn't make it back to their respective bases that Christmas eve. We were given a meal, and I made a point of checking with a British pilot on the reason for the red flares.

"Dreadfully sorry old chap, but we had run out of all the other colors !" was the answer. We were advised to tour the base and find an acceptable spot to sleep during the night. I wandered about until I found a very nice spot in an office of an administration building. It appeared to be the CO's office because it had a nice fire in the fireplace with a bear rug in front of it, which I slept on using my leather flight jacket for a pillow..

It was Christmas morning about 5:00 AM when someone shook me awake with an unexpected message, "Lieutenant Nielsen, your Fortress is the only one from the 366th that is operational. It's refueled and reloaded. As soon as you can get your crew together your orders are to take-off and try to tag along with another group. If this isn't possible drop your bombs on a "target of opportunity."" I spent a half hour combing the area for the crew. The temperature was well below freezing and everything was covered with an inch thick layer of rime ice crystals. By the time we and the defrosted plane were able to take-off, most other bomb groups were well on their way, so we were on our own, alone, heading toward enemy territory. We could see contrails of other groups in the distance heading for their targets, but there was no way we could join them, so we selected the first target which appeared appropriate, bracketed it with our bomb load, and headed back home to Chelveston which was finally clear of fog. Looking at my old Flight Log Book, I notice that this was the shortest combat mission of the 35 that I flew -- 3 hours and 20 minutes.

On the December 24th, 12 8th AF bombers were lost over enemy territory (none from the 305th) on this mass attack. 23 bombers crashed on take-off or landings or returned unrepairable, 487 were damaged, 37 men were KIA and 114 were MIA. 70 German fighters were downed by our fighter support, and 18 were destroyed by bomber crew members. Of the 850 8th AF fighters, 10 were lost. It was a Christmas eve none of those who participated in the mission will ever forget.

Dick Nielsen

## Christmas 1944

The air crews assigned to the 305<sup>th</sup> Bomb group in mid-1944 were fortunate in being assigned to a group that was one of the most experienced in the Eighth Air Force bomber command. One of the early CO's of the 305<sup>th</sup> was Col. Curtis LeMay. LeMay developed the plan and convinced the High Command that close formation flight patterns and daylight bombing tactics were going to be more effective than the English bombers that flew at night and bombed as individual planes and which had difficulties in bombing selected targets. They were also alone in trying to protect themselves against enemy aircraft. LeMay's methods were tested and used by the 8<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Air forces for the rest of the air war. Our crew was assigned to the 305<sup>th</sup> Group which was made up of 4 flight squadrons, the 364<sup>th</sup>, 365<sup>th</sup>, 366<sup>th</sup> and the 422<sup>nd</sup>. There were also Ground maintenance and Headquarters squadrons. Our crew was assigned to the 366<sup>th</sup> Squadron, also known as the ICan Do! Squadron.

Those of us who were flying from mid-1944 and until early 1945, when the war was coming to an end, were also fortunate in that the aerial defenses of Germany had been severely weakened by the fighter pilots and bomber crews who had preceded us.

As Christmas approached in 1998, I decided to write down my experiences and view of one of the largest bombing raids of WWII. Christmas hasn't passed since those days in 1944 that I haven't relived that mission. The mission was planned for a week earlier, but due to very bad weather conditions was delayed until the day before Christmas. There were many large raids by the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force earlier in the air war which sustained more losses and were more viciously attacked by the German fighters, but they occurred before our crew was sent over.

The 305<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group was based at Chelveston, England where our crew was assigned after we flew a shiny new Flying Fortress (Boeing B17) from Lincoln, Nebraska to Nuts Corner, Ireland via Bangor, Maine and Gander, Newfoundland. We were relieved of the B17 when we landed in Ireland, as were many of the bombers flown over during the war. They were to be fitted with equipment or design changes which were important in the air battles over Germany. After being relieved of our beautiful Flying Fortress, our crew was ignominiously shipped over to England via a passenger steamer. We arrived at the 305<sup>th</sup> on August 10<sup>th</sup> and spent about 5 weeks of crew training which included close formation flying, target practice, navigation, radio procedures, first aid, escape methods and group formation procedures.

On September 24<sup>th</sup>, 1944 we flew our 1<sup>st</sup> combat mission over Merseberg, in eastern Germany. The target was a group of factories which produced engine parts for the Messerschmidts and Focke-Wolfe fighters. These planes were our deadliest opponents on missions over Germany and France. On this day, due to disastrous problems in finding the proper target, our group of 36 bombers had to fly through a massive flak barrage, not once, but 3 times before we were able to drop our bombs. One element of 3 planes dropped out of formation and headed back for England after the 2<sup>nd</sup> bomb run attempt, resulting in the element lead pilot being sent back to the states and presumably court martialed. The 305<sup>th</sup> lost 6 Fortresses and 54 crewmen on that day. The memory of that 1<sup>st</sup> mission haunted me on each of the remaining 34 that I participated in until I finished my tour on January 15, 1945.

I flew as co-pilot with our original crew for 19 missions, over German held territory beginning with the Merseberg mission, until November 23<sup>rd</sup>, which was Thanksgiving day. The missions ranged from targets which were heavily protected by Anti Aircraft fire

(flak) and German fighters, to Imilk runsl during which we usually saw few enemy fighters and little or no Flak from AkAk batteries. We were briefed prior to each mission as to what to expect, but the weather conditions or enemy opposition often changed our expectations. With luck, our whole group (36 Fortresses) would return from a given target with no wounded and little damage. On other missions, we would run into heavy flak defense and/or German fighters and return to Chelveston after losing planes and crews over the target or on the flight back to England. The ground crewmen and flight crews who weren't flying would be waiting at the field when the Group returned from a mission, counting the planes as they returned and looking for any battle damage, feathered props or red flares signaling that there were wounded men on board. Once the planes were on the ground, bomber crews were trucked back to the briefing room where a double shot of brandy or bourbon was offered prior to debriefing. Some of the men who didn't partake passed their drinks to friends who downed them quickly before sitting down to discuss details and problems of the mission. After the debriefing, many of us spent an hour or so at the officer's or enlisted man's club, and over a few beers expanded on their experiences of the day's mission, especially to friends who hadn't been on the day's mission. Often, close calls were depicted as exciting adventure tales which often did not describe the real feelings of the crewmen as they passed over the target area watching for Ibogeysl swooping down from above with guns blazing, or orange flashes and black smoky clouds of exploding anti-aircraft shells sent up from AA batteries below. In order to accurately find the target and properly aim the Norden bombsight, the bomber group had to maintain a straight and level path direct to the bomb drop. This, of course, gave the ground flak crews an excellent opportunity to zero in on the bombers. Detachable parachutes were snapped on, flak vests tightened and steel flight helmets pulled down to cover as much of a man's face as possible. The pilots, not being able to fly with the chest type parachutes attached would check the position of the chute under his seat to insure that it would be easy to reach if a shell or enemy bullets tore off a wing. After as much as 15 minutes of this tension the bombardier would release the bombs, and the Fortress would lift quickly as though breathing a sigh of relief. The bomb bay doors would be closed and the ships would immediately bank to the left and rapidly lose altitude to increase their air speed and avoid flak shells which had been timed, aimed and fired about 30 or 40 seconds before reaching the flight altitude.

As were most co-pilots, I was anxious to be checked out as First pilot with my own crew. This should give me a bit more control over my own destiny during the rest of the war, and would hopefully lead to a promotion before returning home after the war. After bugging my Squadron commander, Major Graybeal, for several weeks, he finally took me up for a test flight and checked me out as 1<sup>st</sup> Pilot on Thanksgiving day of 1944. After having spent 19 missions sitting in the right seat as co-pilot, I was ready to celebrate. I skipped the cold Thanksgiving dinner that was waiting for the Major and me after the flight, and headed for the Officer's club. I don't remember the rest of that Thanksgiving. One of my big worries had been that I would finish my duty tour and be shipped home without a promotion. The other worry, of course, was that I might not make 35 round trip missions.

One unexpected result of my becoming Flight Commander, was that the men I flew with weren't assigned to a regular crew that would be flying with me for the rest of my missions. On each morning that a mission was scheduled, I was awakened around 3 or 4 AM to get to breakfast and then to the briefing room where I was given the list of men who were flying with me on that day's mission. Some were men who hadn't finished their 35 missions at the same time their original crew had. Others were often new replacements who had just come over from training bases and hadn't yet been on a combat mission. I flew a couple of missions with a co-pilot who hadn't been inside a Fortress until we flew together on his first mission. He didn't get much flying time on that

run, but improved with experience. We were somewhat of a motley crew. Such was the crew I flew with on the day before Christmas.

In mid-December of 1944, a dense fog covered most of England and western Europe. The weather provided ideal conditions for a major German offensive move against US troops in the Ardennes sector of France. The German armies were moving toward Antwerp, Belgium to take over the port and split the Allied forces. The offensive was well under way at dawn on the morning of December 22 and the 305<sup>th</sup> and most of the other bomb groups of the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force were briefed for a [maximum effort] mission. At first light on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, after briefing, we manned our bombers, started the four 1200 HP Pratt and Whitney engines and began our cautious zigzag trip through the dense fog that covered the perimeter track and the field. The zigzag movement on taxiing was to enable the pilot to see what was ahead, since the nose of the Fortress blocked out the pilot's forward vision when taxiing. Due to the fog this morning, jeeps were used to guide us to our take-off positions. Once in place, we waited, engines idling, for instructions from the tower. My co-pilot, Joe DeSantis and I, spent the waiting time discussing how we could find our way down the invisible runway and get the lethal cargo of twelve 500 pound bombs off the ground safely. After about 40 minutes waiting, with no sign of the fog lifting, the mission was scrubbed. The bomber crews went back to the sack or to the Officer's or NCO clubs for the day and after evening mess spent the evening playing pool or cards or having a few beers. The evening was cut short when the tannoy (intercom) system sounded, announcing that all air crew members were to hit the sack. This was our notice that a mission was on for the next morning. The fog was so thick that we had to walk our bicycles back to the barracks.

The next morning, with the heavy fog still blanketing Chelveston, we groped our way to breakfast and an early briefing. We went through the same basic briefing as the previous morning, but the lines showing the German troops advancing locations had been changed. We again maneuvered slowly around the perimeter to our waiting positions. With engines idling, we waited for word of a cancellation of the mission. As on the previous morning the mission was scrubbed and we taxied back to the hardstands and returned to the barracks for some card games and to await clearing skies. Few if any of us had ever seen such dense fog. Even in the daylight we couldn't see more than about 10 or 15 feet ahead on the way back to our Squadron compounds. We didn't expect to be called out the next morning since there was little change that night in the weather.

We guessed wrong, however. On the morning of December 24<sup>th</sup>, we waited again in our flight positions as our Fortresses sat nose to tail around the perimeter track with engines idling as on the two previous mornings. DeSantis and I weren't too concerned with the prospects of taking off this morning since the same weather conditions covered the field as on the previous mornings.

My former 1<sup>st</sup> pilot, Jack Wolhaupt, was piloting the plane that was at the head of the line of waiting Forts and after about a half hour of waiting for word of an abort, the radio crackled alive with an announcement from the Group Commander. The message was not what I had expected, and my plans for another easy day at the Officer's club were dashed. The Commander gave us a somewhat negative sounding take-off order with, IW olhaupt, you take off, now, and if you make it, the rest of us will follow. We couldn't see his plane but we could hear the engines at high RPM as Jack and his crew began their roll down the hidden runway. After a few tense minutes of waiting and wondering, Jack's voice on the radio gave us the all OK with, IClear as a bell at 300 feet. After 2 more Forts vanished into the fog, it was our turn to head into the Wild Blue Yonder. We moved into position running through our take-off check list. I set the gyro compass on zero to help us stay straight on the runway. From our position in the center of the runway, the fog was so dense we couldn't see the runway guide lights on either side. I told my e



co-pilot, DeSantis, if he saw the runway lights on his side to hit the left rudder and move us back toward the center. He gave me the thumb and forefinger, IOKI, and with full throttles and high RPM, the 4 Pratt and Whitney's roared and we began our roll. My eyes were glued to the Gyro compass which I trusted to keep us in the center of the runway until we were airborne. As we gained speed, I moved the wheel forward to lift the tail and suddenly, DeSantis kicked left rudder hard and the plane veered to the left. Lights suddenly appeared through the fog on my left and I kicked right rudder pedal, too hard, and we swung back toward the lights along the right side of the runway. The gyro compass was useless because the plane wasn't lined up with the runway when I zeroed it. We fishtailed crazily down the runway until we came to the area where our 3 field runways crossed. There were no lights here to keep us from veering off the tarmac into soft earth. My last glance at the airspeed had indicated only 90 mph, not enough to lift us off, so I pushed the throttles to the rarely used emergency setting of IFull Military RPM. I hauled back on the wheel and held my breath until the ship reluctantly and sluggishly staggered into the air. DeSantis retracted the wheels and we leveled off to gain safe flying speed, skimming the shrubbery at the end of the runway. He then adjusted the flaps and I reduced the RPM before we blew a cylinder head. As Jack Wolhaupt had radioed, we came out of the fog into a beautiful clear blue sunny sky at about 300 feet. While banking to a heading that would lead us to our formation assembly area I could see 3 or 4 grayish plumes of smoke boiling up through the fog where other crews from airfields in our vicinity were not as fortunate as we had been.

This mission had been planned as a maximum effort to help our ground troops turn back the Germans who had penetrated our lines in what was known as The Battle of the Bulge. I learned later that this was the largest aerial mission of the war over Europe with over 2000 bombers and 850 fighters participating. 33 targets were bombed during the day, and enemy fighters were out in unusual force for a ldo or diel effort to bolster the German ground offensive. They met our lead groups over allied territory, and dogged the formations over the target areas, following them back in the evening to a dark and still fog shrouded England. Our target had been the Nidda airfield, a German fighter base in the Ardennes sector. Flak was light and we saw few of the German planes over our target. The 305<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group was still intact after the bomb drop and we headed for our base in England as the evening sky was darkening.

As we neared the English coast a signal was received from the Chelveston control tower that we couldn't land there due to the heavy fog and darkness. Instructions were to proceed North to any field where we could land safely. Our squadron, the 366<sup>th</sup>, headed up toward East Anglia in the darkening sky. Our Squadron commander ordered radio silence due to bandits in the area. We couldn't fly in tight formation, though, without wing lights, so they were left on. As the sky darkened. We flew for about 30 minutes toward Scotland hoping none of the German Fighters were following us. Several unmapped lighted runways appeared during our flight north which, for some unknown reason, the flight lead chose to ignore. The co-pilot urged me to break from formation and land at one of these fields, but I had never seen landing strips with green runway lights, before, and decided to stay with the squadron. I learned later that these were dummy airstrips that were lit up to mislead the enemy fighters that were in the area. As we flew on, wing to wing through the night, we could see other formations of 8<sup>th</sup> AF bombers in the distance winging through the night sky like giant Christmas trees floating horizontally, tip first, through the darkness with their red and green wing lights twinkling. What a strange Christmas eve it was. I knew that I would never forget it.

T Sqd leader  
T/T Wing men

Low element leader	T	T	High element leader
Wing men	T T	T T	Wing men
		T	Trailing Element leader
	T T		Wing men

After what seemed an eternity, we could see a landing strip ahead with the normal yellowish runway lights on. There were a few other bombers and some British fighters landing while our squadron maneuvered for a landing approach. As we descended to about 1000 feet, green and white flares were sent up from the ground to direct the squadron to the leading edge of the runway. Oddly, though, the flares were about 2000 feet closer to us than the runway lights. As we neared the field it was apparent that the only lights operating were halfway down the runway. The first half was dark and the flares were being used to direct the landing bombers to the leading edge of the landing strip. In landing the 12 plane squadron, the lead plane led the formation directly toward the runway and as the formation passed over the leading edge, the Fort flying on the port side of the formation peeled off making a steep 360 degree turn to the left, then leveling out when it was lined up for a normal landing. The following B-17s peeled off in the same fashion and most made their landings safely on the first pass, though some were so low on fuel that they only had 3 engines operating. One or two Forts had to make another circuit and make another landing approach to make it safely down.

Flying on the right wing of the starboard side of the formation, we were the last Fort to peel make our peel off and landing approach. We banked and completed our 360 turn to line up with the runway for a normal landing approach when the flares being shot from the ground were red instead of white or green. I told the co-pilot to retract the wheels, which were down, and climbed back to a normal circuit and landing approach. The red flares normally meant trouble on the runway, so I told the crew, over the interphone, to watch for bomb damage or wreckage as I flew a low pass over the runway. The bombardier in the nose, the ball turret operator hanging from the belly of the plane in his turret and the tail gunner all reported no sign of anything unusual on the landing strip.

There seemed to be no reason to delay landing so we wheeled around for another approach. Our second approach was normal, wheels and flaps down, until we were a couple of hundred feet from the ground. Suddenly, an unlit B-17 appeared ahead, lit by our landing lights, crossing directly across our flight path! With seconds from a mid-air collision, my only choice was to shove the wheel forward and squeeze under the other Fort. We made it, probably with a few feet to spare, just as our landing lights shone on shrubbery ahead. Instinctively, I hauled back on the wheel and we leveled off and skimmed over the top of the bushes with a few yards to spare. I was so unnerved that I couldn't get back into a landing approach and we retracted the gear and took another trip around the field for another try.

This time around, we carefully monitored the fuel supply and held off lowering the wheels and flaps until we were sure we would reach the landing strip. Our fuel supply was so low that there was no question of going around again despite the color of the flares or any other impediments to our landing. Turning on the final approach, I headed for a landing just beyond the red flare and leveled off for a safe landing with all 4 props still turning. In the darkness I came within a whisker of running over an unlit British Spitfire fighter while taxiing to a vacant hardstand. We had not been in radio contact with the field since we crossed the English coast. We were picked up in a covered truck and delivered to the mess hall where we found that we had landed at an RAF airfield in Scotland and were among many other 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force crews who couldn't make it back to their respective bases that Christmas eve. We were given a meal and while eating I

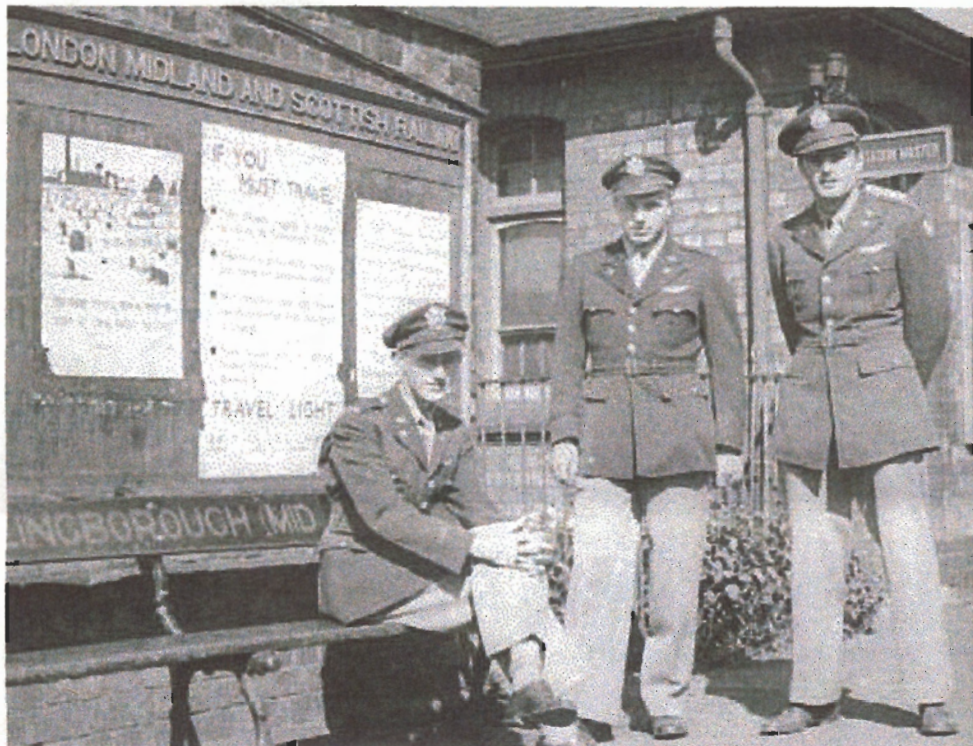
asked a British pilot sitting across from me why they were sending up the red signal flares when we were landing. IDreadfully sorry, old chap, but we had run out of all the other colors !!, was the answer. After dinner, we were asked to tour the base and find an acceptable spot to sleep during the night since no more bunks were available. I wandered about in the darkness and finally lucked onto a nice spot in an office of one of the administration buildings. It appeared to be the CO's office because it had a nice fire in the fireplace with a bear rug in front of it, which I slept on using my leather flight jacket for a pillow.

On Christmas morning at about 5:00 AM I was awakened by an orderly with a blinding flashlight. ILieutenant, your ship is the only one from the 366<sup>th</sup> that is operational. It's refueled and reloaded. As soon as you can round-up your crew, your orders are to take-off and assemble with another group. If that isn't possible, drop your bombs on a target of opportunity. I spent a half hour combing the area for my crew. The early morning temperature was well below freezing and everything was covered with an inch thick layer of rime ice crystals. As we approached our plane, the wings were being de-iced. The morning sun was coming up in a clear blue sky and all the trees, shrubs and grass were glittering -- the scene would have made a perfect Christmas card.

By the time the plane was defrosted most other bomb groups were well on their way, so we took off into a lonely sky heading toward enemy territory. We could see contrails of other groups in the distance heading toward their targets. There was no way we could catch up with them, so when we had passed over enemy lines, the bombardier selected a target which appeared to be a supply dump and bracketed it with our bomb load. We turned and headed back toward Chelveston which was now clear of the fog. Looking at my old Flight Log book, I notice that this was the shortest combat mission of the 35 that I flew I 3 hours and 20 minutes.

On the December 24<sup>th</sup> raid, 12 8<sup>th</sup> AF bombers were lost over enemy territory (none from the 305<sup>th</sup>). 23 bombers crashed on take-offs or landings or returned unrepairable, 487 were damaged, 37 men were KIA and 114 were MIA. 70 German fighters were downed by our fighter support, and 18 were destroyed by member crew members. Of the 850 8<sup>th</sup> AF fighters, 10 were lost. It was a Christmas eve none of those participating in the mission will ever forget.

Dick Nielsen



Seated - John DeVries - Nav.  
Mel Meyer - Bomb.  
Dick Nielsen - P.M.T.

Mission	From	To	RAF #	Target	Time	# Lost	Comments
	9/22/43	3/28/43		Waiting for Cadet call			At OSC: Corvallis
	3/30/43	4/29/43		Kearns, Utah			Boot Camp - Fla
	5/01/43	8/01/43		Santa Ana Army Airbase			Cadet ground school
	8/02/43	9/24/43	PT22	Visalia, CA Primary	65 hrs		Civilian operation at Visalia -- hot weather
	10/05/43	12/05/43	BT13	Gardner Fld, Bakersfield	70 hrs		Basic fit frog - Gardner Fld near Bakersfield
	12/14/43	2/05/44	AT17	Marfa, Texas	118 hr		Advanced TW Eng
	2/08/44	2/08/44		Marfa, Texas			Graduated from F1/School - Ind Lt bars
	2/11/44	2/18/44		Portland, Or			Leave
	2/20/44	3/25/44	B17G	Las Vegas AAF/Indian Spr	35 hrs		Co-Pilot Transition and gunnery school - summer
	3/30/44	4/14/44		Salt Lake City			B17 Crew Assignment Crew # 4381 - Wolfhant, pilot
	4/18/44	6/29/44	B17	Dyersburg, Tenn.			Crew Training
	7/01/44	7/06/44	B17G	Kearney, Nebraska	0 1/2h		Overseas Orders - Assigned new B-17 # 43-38008
	7/07/44	7/09/44	B17G	Bangor, Maine	4h40m		Enough trip to Bangor - midnight to 9:30 (Stormy)
	7/09/44	7/15/44	B17G	Gander, Newfoundland	9h50m		Enroute - storm over Atlantic delayed group
	7/15/44	7/15/44	B17G	Huts Corner, Ireland			Left Plane for Field revisions
	7/15/44	7/16/44		Irish Sea trip			Dublin to Liverpool on steamer.
	7/17/44	7/23/44		Stone, England			BS Assignment - Assigned to Chelveston 105th BG
	7/24/44	1/17/45		Chelveston, 365th BG			1st Div 366 Sq
1	8/24/44		568	Meresburg, Germany	9h15m	5	3X over target - Our Starboard element aborted on
2	8/26/44		575	Geisenkirchen, Germany	5h50m	0	Ruhr Valley - over target at 31,000 feet -
3	8/30/44		591	Kiel, Germany	7h45m	0	Heavy Navy flak - saw Denmark
	9/01/44			Ludwigshaven, Germany	6h15m		Recalled -- no credit for mission.
	9/02/44		601	Ludwigshaven, Germany	3h		
	9/11/44		623	Meresburg, Germany	7h50m	1	
	9/12/44		626	Euhland, Germany	9h28m	0	
	9/17/44		637	German Troops, Holland	5h45m	0	
	9/25/44		647	Frankfurt, Germany	7h20m	0	
	9/26/44		648	Osnabruck, Germany	6h30m	0	
	9/28/44		652	Magdeburg, Germany	6h	0	Engine Failure. Flew back alone.
	9/30/44		655	Munster, Germany	6h	0	
	10/05/44		665	Cologne, Germany	6h30m	0	
	10/06/44		667	Stargard, Poland	10h	0	
	10/07/44		669	Zwikau, Poland	8h45m	1	
	10/09/44		678	Schwienfurt, Germany	8h	0	
	10/17/44		681	Cologne, Germany	6h20m	1	Mail Patuchek flying Old Half&Half shot down
	10/19/44		683	Mannheim, Germany	7h20m	0	
	10/22/44		685	Hannover, Germany	7h20m	2	Mid-Air over 306th
	11/05/44		702	Frankfurt, Germany	8h05m	0	H/yards
	11/06/44		704	Hamburg, Germany	7h25m	0	Oil Refineries
	11/16/44		715	Eschweiler, Germany	6h55m	0	Gun positions
	11/23/44			Checked out as 1st Pilot	40m		Major Graybeal
	11/25/44			Weather Ship/Graybeal	3h30m		Me262 chased us
	12/04/44		736	Kassel, Germany	7h30m	0	Rail yards
	12/05/44		738	Berlin, Germany	9h	3	Rail yards - shot down 1 fighter
	12/06/44		741	Meresburg, Germany	7h55m	0	
	12/09/44		743	Stuttgart, Germany	20m		#2 failed on T/O
	12/09/44		743	Stuttgart, Germany	7h50m	0	Replacement plane
	12/11/44		746	Frankfurt, Germany	8h25m	0	Bridges
	12/12/44		748	Meresburg, Germany	9h15m	0	Oil refineries
	12/24/44		760	Nidda Airfield, Holland	8h	0	Landed in E. Anglia
	12/25/44		761	Target of opportunity	3h20m	0	Only plane flyable
	12/28/44		766	Sieburg, Germany	6h40m	0	Marshalling Yards
	12/29/44		769	Builay, France	7h	0	Railroad Bridge
	12/30/44		770	Builay (RR Bridge) Fr.	7h15m	0	Railroad Bridge
	1/01/45		774	Screening Force		5	No escort/FW 190's
	1/03/45		778	Mondrath, Germany	6h40m	0	Rail target
	1/05/45		781	Coblenz, Germany	5h50m	0	Marshalling yards
	1/06/45		783	Cologne, Germany	8h40m	0	Highway Bridge
	1/15/45		794	Freiburg, Germany	7h20m	0	Marshalling yard B17 #46605 KY I (Tommy) Lockhee
	1/18/45	1/20/45		USAF Cristobal Troop shp	10 d		Plymouth - New York
	1/28/45			New York, NY			Artie Shaw/Empire State Bldg/
	1/28/45	3/02/45		Camp Hiller, NJ			Steaks for homecoming
	2/05/45	3/05/45		Portland on Leave			
	3/05/45	3/10/45		Fort Lewis, WA			
	3/12/45	3/26/45		Santa Ana, CA			To Santa Ana
	4/12/45	4/22/45	B17	Hobbs, N.M. 3017th AAFBU	9h05m		Reassignment
	5/05/45	6/20/45	PBY	Corpus Christi, TX			Pilot instructor - reqstd transfr - no students
	7/13/45	10/11/45	OB10	Keesler Field, Biloxi			Air Sea Rescue Training/ Navy base
	11/24/45			Portland			Air Sea Rescue
							Discharged Home for Christmas !!!



2002