

## 12 August 1943

### **Ruhr Valley – VIII Bomber Command Mission #81 – “A Summary of Operations”**

[ Details compiled by Kimberly Ann Lindner (*sans bibliography*) 20090811 0204 PST ]

Between March and July 1943, the United States and Great Britain launched an intensive strategic campaign to bomb the Ruhr area of Germany - practically around the clock. The British RAF flew at night, after suffering from heavy losses during previous daylight missions, and the American USAAF flew their bombers during the day. The B-17's of the US Eighth Air Force flew in what was called the “combat box”, or “staggered formation”, which was designed to decrease the bombers vulnerability from attack whenever fighter escorts were absent.

In defense the Germans utilized extensive anti-aircraft equipment, and in fact by July of 1943 there were more than 1,000 flak guns in position. The Ruhr valley housed about one-third of all the anti-aircraft guns in Germany. By August 1943 the night fighter force totaled 550, and included Luftwaffe Jagdgruppe 50, commanded by the Ace pilot Major Hermann Graf. Under his command the primary mission of JGr 50 went from hunting RAF Mosquitoes to intercepting American heavy bombers.

On Thursday, August 12<sup>th</sup> 1943, Eighth Bomber Command chose to target a significant concentration of synthetic oil production plants around the Ruhr area, which British and American flyers had nicknamed the “Happy Valley”.

While 183 B-17 bombers from the 1<sup>st</sup> Combat Bombardment Wing were sent to targets at Bochum, Gelsenkirchen, and Rechlinghausen, another 147 bombers from the 13<sup>th</sup> Combat Bombardment Wing were dispatched to Bonn, and 110 aircraft from this group managed to hit their designated targets between 0850 and 0858 hours. Hermann Graf and the experienced pilots of JGr 50 scrambled to meet the incoming bombers.

During this mission Joe Noyes, (who celebrated his 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday on August 11<sup>th</sup>), flew as first pilot with the high element formation of the 95<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, part of the 13<sup>th</sup> Combat Bombardment Wing. He was assigned to fly the aircraft he lovingly named after his fiancée, the B-17F-90-BO, “Blondie II”, serial number 42-30182. Earlier that summer when Captain Harry M. Conley was promoted to Squadron Commander, he had confidently turned over his crew to Joe. This was Joe's eighth mission.

Meanwhile Major Clifford E. Cole, the 95<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group Operations Officer was assigned to be the mission commander, and was flying in the lead element as co-pilot of

the B-17F-90-BO, named "We Ain't Scared", serial number 42-30194. The crew was commanded by Captain Clifford B. Hamilton.

Also on board were Lieutenant Virgil W. Jones, Bombardier; Lieutenant Leroy Lawson, Navigator; Sergeant John L. Anderson, Top Turret; Sergeant Lydle C. Ocheltree, Radio Operator, Sergeant Claude E. Deverger, Ball Turret; Sergeant Cleo H. Gardner, Left Waist Gunner, Lieutenant Colonel Churchill L. Scott, acting as Tail Gunner; and Colonel Daniel W. Jenkins, acting as Right Waist Gunner.

Clifford Cole recalled in his memoirs that as they approached the target area the flak grew in intensity and they lost their number 4 engine. When the propeller refused to feather, it acted as a brake. Nonetheless they continued to lead the group at a reduced airspeed. Just short of the initial point, their number 1 engine was hit and put out of action, and they had no alternative but to hand over their position to the deputy lead airplane, and turn back for England.

As was expected their hopelessly crippled B-17 attracted a swarm of German Focke-Wulf Fw 190 fighters from JGr 26, an infamous unit which had been nicknamed "The Abbeville Boys", by Allied aircrews. The crew of "We Ain't Scared" put up a strong fight until finally their ammunition was exhausted. Leroy Lawson reported that he never even saw the enemy fighters because they were being attacked from the rear. "We heard a lot of talking on the interphone, and the constant noisy sound of our defensive gunfire".

After a 20mm cannon shell exploded behind the cockpit - rupturing the oxygen tank, and their left wing caught on fire, the crew decided it was time to bail out.

Leroy Lawson wrote, "A deafening explosion in the nose compartment made us realize we were in deep trouble. The plane went out of control, so I clipped my parachute on and bailed out of the nose exit hatch".

They were flying at 22,000 feet when Captain Hamilton ordered his crewmen to jump out. Clifford Cole remembered that as he knelt down attempting to snap on the second hook of his chute, a large boot shoved him out the escape hatch. It was Captain Hamilton. "As I was free-falling I tried desperately to fasten the other metal hook, but didn't succeed. As I was rapidly losing consciousness due to lack of oxygen, I pulled the ripcord. Mercifully my chute snapped open. I saw our ship explode in mid-air not far away, and begin its slow spiraling on one wing on its way down".

Clifford Cole then embarked on a series of tense journeys through Belgium and France, aided by underground Resistance workers. Eventually he made his way to Madrid, Spain, and was finally flown back to London. He returned home to the United States shortly before Christmas.

Leroy Lawson evaded capture in Belgium for nearly three weeks, until he was somehow betrayed, and captured in Paris by the Gestapo. He spent the remainder of the war at Stalag Luft III, which was famously depicted in the film "The Great Escape". Lieutenant Colonel Churchill L. Scott, Captain Hamilton, Sergeant Ocheltree, Sergeant Gardner, and Sergeant Deverger were killed, while the remaining crew members either evaded capture or became POW's.

Apart from Captain Hamilton's aircraft, the 95<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group lost only one other bomber over Germany that day. Flying alongside Joe Noyes in the 334<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron, was B-17F-100-BO "Pickadilly Commando", (serial number 42-30418), piloted by Edward L. Lemke, who was captured and also became a POW.

Concurrently in the August skies with the 13<sup>th</sup> Combat Bombardment Wing was Harry H. Crosby, (author of A Wing and A Prayer), who was acting as the lead navigator for the 100<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group. He reported that the target near Bonn was heavily obscured by clouds, and was forced to abort and attack a target of opportunity. August 12<sup>th</sup> was a very fortunate day for the 100<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group who didn't lose a single aircraft.

The 384<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group lost five planes over the Ruhr, while the 91<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group, 92<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group, and 379<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group each lost four, the 381<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group lost three, and the 303<sup>rd</sup>, 305<sup>th</sup>, and 306<sup>th</sup> each lost one.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Combat Bombardment Wing suffered far heavier losses than the 13<sup>th</sup> Combat Bombardment Wing. Sergeant Weldon Phelps, a 20 year old from the 92<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group was wounded before his aircraft was able to drop its bomb load over Gelsenkirchen. "We dumped our bombs and tried to maintain altitude. After two of our engines were disabled from flak, we fought to reach cloud cover where we could hide from fighters". The men on board were unable to bail out due to the aircraft rapidly losing altitude, and the pilot was forced to crash land. Like many other Eighth Air Force flyers that day, Sergeant Phelps would spend the remainder of the war in a German POW camp.

The bombers who were lost for reasons other than flak damage over Bochum, Gelsenkirchen, and Rechlinghausen, were likely the unfortunate victims of the men from JGr 50, who flew Messerschmitt Bf 109's which were specially modified for maximum speed and even equipped with fuel tanks capable of using nitrous oxide.

Less than a week after the August 12<sup>th</sup> mission over the Ruhr, the US Eighth Air Force launched an ambitious strategic attack on Schweinfurt and Regensburg, with the intention of crippling the German aircraft industry. An estimated 300 Luftwaffe fighters were ready and waiting to intercept the Allied flying forces...

## Bibliography

"95thbg.org - Home." Official Website of the 95th Bomb Group (H) Memorials Foundation.

<<http://95thbg.org>>.

"Air War Web Portal: USAAF 8th AF Losses August 1943." Air War ETO WW2 Portal.

<[http://www.airwarweb.net/usaaf/8af\\_08-43.php](http://www.airwarweb.net/usaaf/8af_08-43.php)>.

"Army Air Forces in World War II." USAAF.net. <<http://www.usaaf.net/chron/43/aug43.htm>>.

"Axis History Forum - View topic - 8th Air Force raid on 12 August 1943?." Axis History Forum Index

page. <<http://forum.axishistory.com/viewtopic.php?f=84&t=150966>>.

"Battle of the Ruhr - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia." Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.

<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_the\\_ruhr](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_ruhr)>.

"Combat box - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia." Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.

<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Combat\\_box](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Combat_box)>.

Crosby, Harry. A Wing and a Prayer. New York: iUniverse, 2001.

"Eighth Air Force - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia." Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.

<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eighth\\_Air\\_Force](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eighth_Air_Force)>.

"Ex-POW Biography of Weldon Phelps." CombatVets Network Home Page.

<<http://combatvets.net/asp/biopage.asp?ID=397>>.

Hawkins, Ian. B-17s Over Berlin: Personal Stories from the 95th Bomb Group (Memories of War).

Chicago: Potomac Books Inc., 2005.

"Hermann Graf: World War II Luftwaffe Ace Pilot." HistoryNet.com. <[www.historynet.com/hermann-graf-](http://www.historynet.com/hermann-graf-world-war-ii-luftwaffe-ace-pilot.htm)

[world-war-ii-luftwaffe-ace-pilot.htm](http://www.historynet.com/hermann-graf-world-war-ii-luftwaffe-ace-pilot.htm)>.

"Luftwaffe fighter tactics." [John Dell's aviation site.](http://freespace.virgin.net/john.dell/bf109/Bf109tactics.html)

<[freespace.virgin.net/john.dell/bf109/Bf109tactics.html](http://freespace.virgin.net/john.dell/bf109/Bf109tactics.html)>.

The. "Defense of the Reich - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia." [Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Defense_of_the_Reich)

<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Defense\\_of\\_the\\_Reich](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Defense_of_the_Reich)>.

"Strategic bombing during World War II - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia." [Wikipedia, the free](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strategic_bombing_during_World_War_II)

[encyclopedia.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strategic_bombing_during_World_War_II) <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strategic\\_bombing\\_during\\_World\\_War\\_II](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strategic_bombing_during_World_War_II)>.

"Luftwaffe Day Interception Tactics: German Fighter Pilot Methods for Attacking USAAF Strategic

Bombers | Suite101.com." [WW II History | Suite101.com.](http://ww2history.suite101.com/article.cfm/luftwaffe_day_interception_tactics)

<[http://ww2history.suite101.com/article.cfm/luftwaffe\\_day\\_interception\\_tactics](http://ww2history.suite101.com/article.cfm/luftwaffe_day_interception_tactics)>.

"Hermann Graf - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia." [Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermann_Graf)

<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermann\\_Graf](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermann_Graf)>.