

The B-24 of Lieutenant Susank

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Saturday, May 26, 1944, at the American air base of Spinazzola, Italy, 40 km. south of Foggia, it is 5:00 a.m.

This base belongs to the 460th. Bomb Group from the 55th. Wing of the 15th. U.S. Army Air Force and an air of excitement fills all 38 of the B-24s parked in their assigned spaces. All the crews are busy at their combat stations, going over their "checklists."

Today, as yesterday, the four-engine bombers will fly over France. Today's target is the sorting station at Lyon-la-Mouche.

Other groups from the 55th Wing that will take part in this raid are the 464th and 465th Bomb Groups, each composed of 38 aircraft, and the 485th with 35 Liberators.

Of the 149 four-engine planes scheduled for the mission, 21 of them will not be able to participate because of various mechanical and technical problems, including one B-24 from the 464th Bomb Group with an engine fire.

The story we are about to tell concerns the B-24 of Lieutenant Firman E. Susank of the 460th. Bomb Group. Its crew normally consists of ten members but only nine are going to participate in this mission.

The pilot, in a routine pre-flight check, { *testing the control mechanism of his aircraft* } suddenly discovers some irregularities. It so happens that his aircraft has been the victim of sabotage!

Despite the presence of round-the-clock sentries who regularly check the aircraft that are parked at the base, acts of sabotage occurred more often than we would like to think.

Sometimes the crew was able to detect an abnormality in their equipment; some others were not so fortunate.

It is well known that bombers were lost on takeoff or simply exploded in flight for no apparent reason, minutes after the crew had radioed that everything was OK. Was it bad luck or... sabotage?

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Very quickly, a new aircraft is assigned to Lieutenant Susank. It is a B-24 "G" serial number 42-78303. Following the directions of air traffic control, the Liberators proceed to the taxiway, waiting for the takeoff order that would be given at 5:55 a.m.

Two aircraft have to leave the runway because of equipment problems. A fuel pump malfunction for the first, an inoperative turret for the second.

Finally, the heavily loaded B-24s take off, one-by-one, and assemble into the box formation they would use to rendezvous with the other Bomb Groups of the 55th Wing already airborne.

They pass the Italian coast above Naples and the huge formation goes toward Corsica where, at 9:15 a.m. they were to meet the P-38 and P-51 fighters (about 40 in all), from the 306th Fighter Wing that were supposed to escort them. The flying altitude was from 5,000 to 6,000 meters (16,200 to 19,500 feet), depending on the group.

They fly over the French coast at the reference point called "Le Californie" west of Nice, close to the Bay of Anges. The group then proceeds to the Lac de Bourget (north of Chambéry) where they turn to go toward Lyon.

Above the Lac du Bourget, some crewmembers from the B-24s of the 485th Bomb Group supposedly see a short air fight between an escort fighter and a Messerschmitt 109. The German aircraft is reportedly seen with one of its wings shot off, diving toward the ground at 10:30 a.m.

Arriving at their target, the 464th Group drops its bombs at exactly 10:41 a.m. followed by the 460th at 10:43, the 465th at 10:45, and the 485th at 10:50.

They begin the trip back and about 20 German fighters, Messerschmitt 109s and Focke Wulf 190s, were seen above Givors but, surprisingly, no engagement took place. Going South-SE, the American formation heads toward Nice, Corsica, and their air bases in Italy without encountering any flak or enemy fighters.

At 10:50, only 7 minutes after having dropped its bombs, the B-24 of Lieutenant Susank starts to have mechanical problems that will rapidly lead to the loss of the plane.

An engine that was having problems suddenly stops. The pilot feathers the propeller. Then the hydraulic system also becomes defective. During this time, the aircraft maintained its place in formation but above Annot, in the Alpes-de-Haute province, a second engine has to be shut down.

We will let the radio operator of the B-24, T-Sgt. Kenneth C. Wiemers, contacted in May 1990 by the WWII Veterans of Washington, give his account:

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Because of the mechanical difficulties, two engines were cut. The pilot told us to get our parachutes ready in case the aircraft's problems got worse, when suddenly, a third engine had to be cut! The rear wheel door and the bomb-bay doors did not work anymore because of the malfunctioning hydraulic system. Then the pilot gave the order to bail out.

I helped the rear-gunner, Sgt. Harold D. Meyer and Sgt. Charles M. Ricketts leave the plane through the rear gun turret. I was the last of these three men to bail out.

Here is the report from second lieutenant John Kyosky who was the Bombardier-Navigator and from Sgt. Albert L. Harding, the mechanic.

On the way back from the target we had several problems with the engines, beginning at 10:50 a.m., 97 nautical miles Northeast of Nice. (Author's Note: This could have been a minor interpretation error because the problem started NNW of Nice, not NNE.)

The pilot asked us to check our parachutes. Twenty minutes or so later, the signal to prepare to jump (3 short rings) was given. But the three men at the rear of the aircraft apparently interpreted this a jump signal. We were 47 miles north of Nice at the time.

After the three men had jumped, the pilot decided to try to reach Corsica. But at 12:10 p.m., 15 nautical miles from Calvi, the pilot informed us that we could not continue since all engines were stopped. We all had to parachute out.

At 12:15 the aircraft hit the water violently and broke into three parts that sank in 15 to 20 seconds. We did not see the pilot, Firman E. Susank, come out of the wreckage.

Five of us were to survive and we swam around the place where our airplane sank, waiting for a rescue boat. Suddenly, Sgt. Edward McCombie disappeared from the surface of the water. We were not able to find him.

Two hours later, a Navy boat rescued us and brought Second-lieutenant John Kyosky, Flight-officer William P. McAfee, Sgt. Cyril W. Lane, and myself to Calvi in Corsica.

It is hard to know exactly what technical problem caused the B-24 to crash. The fact that the engines stalled one after one, followed by the hydraulic problem leads us to think it was an act of sabotage, but...who knows!

Why didn't the pilot parachute when he had the chance to do so? Perhaps nobody, particularly the survivors of the crash, will ever know. The Sergeant, Edward McCombie,

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who disappeared in the waters, may have died from hypothermia, or from the stress of parachuting.

Once it got wet the flight suit, double-lined with lambskin, quintupled a man's weight, making it difficult to stay afloat even with a Maewest if he was in trouble.

What happened to the three crewmen that jumped north of Nice? We have information about them thanks to the radio-operator, Sergeant Wiemers:

I landed approximately 30 meters from the top of a mountain where on one side I could see a deep gorge. I hid my parachute under a rock and in some places I could see snow. I headed down the mountain and shortly thereafter, I buried my parachute harness. Then I took out my map and compass and started to walk.

Continuing my descent, I followed a granite cliff where I ran into two German Guards that captured me. . We went back to retrieve my parachute, then we walked to a small village very close to St.Martin-Vesubie. That afternoon they brought me to St.Martin-Vesubie in a sidecar. Then they drove me to Nice and finally to Grasse where I spent two or three days in a hotel under guard. Finally, I was sent to the Rhur Valley in Germany for interrogation, then to Stalag luft 4 in the area of the Baltic Sea. But that is another story. I was lucky to survive.

Mr. Wiemers did not give us any information on his experiences as a prisoner of war because he was one of the 2,000 allied prisoners held at Sagan Camp. Simply talking of this camp reminds us of the terrible fact that the German guards forced the prisoners to march in the snow without pants and shoes with temperatures sometimes reaching 20 degrees below zero, Celsius (4 degrees above zero, Fahrenheit) to prevent them from escaping. These terrible and inhuman conditions were the subject of long debate at the Nuremberg trials where most of the blame for this atrocity was placed on Herman Goering.

Mr. Wiemers does not mention meeting two crewmembers of the B-24 that crashed at the Pic de l' Aigle (see page 98). In fact, he was sent to Germany along with these two men, Second-lieutenant Warren R. Mudge, the bombardier, and Sergeant Alvin L. Raines, the tail gunner.

In November 1992, I organized a meeting between Mr. Alvin L. Raines and Mr. Kenneth Wiemers. Both were really moved to be reunited after 48 years; their conversations and reminiscence continued well into the night.

The tail-gunner, Sergeant C. M. Ricketts, also landed in the vicinity of St. Martin-Vesubie. He was stopped and arrested after wandering around for two days. Here is the account of his arrest, translated from German into English, that was included in the official crash report of the B-24:

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Telegraphic Station, June 1, 1944, 6:40 p.m. Arrested a member of the American Air Force, Sergeant Charles M. Ricketts, identified by his I.D. tag (showing his serial number), near St. Martin Vesubie (A.M.) 40 km. North of Nice, around 10:00 a.m. on May 28, 1944.

The prisoner did not give his name; his identity was only revealed by his I.D. tag. He is presumed to have parachuted from an enemy airplane around St. Martin Vesubie, the type and current whereabouts of the airplane are unknown. Transmitted by final order, period.

Sergeant Ricketts, invoking the Geneva Conventions, refused to divulge any information other than his rank in the Army air corps. He was sent to Germany until the end of the war in Europe.

Concerning the third man, Sergeant Harold D. Meyer, no information is found in the official crash report of the B-24. In his letter, Mr. Wiemers said that Sergeant Meyer had stayed with members of the French Resistance in the St. Martin Vesubie vicinity but he gives no further details.

This story of the B-24G, serial number 42-78303 has been uncovered thanks to the B-24 crash report of Captain Hornbacker who, himself, went down in Cannes on May 25, 1944.

We also learn from this document that Sergeant Kenneth C. Wiemers was reported dead on June 15, 1944 (reason unknown). That bit of information directed my research to the Mortuary Affairs Service in Washington. They categorically denied it.

I contacted the WWII Veterans Service in Washington who informed me that Sergeant Wiemers was still alive and that it was possible to contact him. By good fortune, the B-24 crash report was detailed enough, giving the rank, first and last name, and the discharge number for the airmen. This narrowed my search for the crewman and enabled me to find him living in California.