

The Crew of



91st Bomb Group, 323rd Squadron
“The Ragged Irregulars”



Pilot - Capt. Jay Neely

Co-Pilot - Lt. Tom Hill

Bombardier - Lt. Daniel “Flash” Gentry

Navigator - Lt. Phil Lowenthal

Flight Engineer - Mstr. Sgt. Jess Hinton

Radio Operator - Sgt Brett Williams

Right Waist Gunner - Sgt. Jack Bochee

Left Waist Gunner - Sgt Fred Barnes

Ball Turret Gunner - Sgt. Curtis “Boz” Boswell

Tail Gunner - Sgt Chuck Bailey

This document is a replay of the Avalon Hill solitaire boardgame “B-17: Queen of the Skies” told in a narrative form. The game covers the early months of the American daylight bomber offensive against Germany that began in late 1942. The player commands a single B-17 Flying Fortress and crew in an attempt to complete the Eighth Air Force tour of duty, which was 25 missions. The exact time frame of the standard game is from November 1942 to May 1943. There are no boardgame variations used in this replay.

The bomber group chosen for this campaign was the 91st Bomb Group, stationed in Bassingbourne, England. They arrived in September 1942 and were one of the very first groups to begin offensive operations against occupied France, the Low Countries and Germany.

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Mission No. 1

St. Omer, France

November 7, 1942

The officers and crew of *Elvira* were ready. At least they were as ready as they could be. The 91st Group had just arrived in England in September 1942 and were now stationed at Bassingbourne. It was from here that they would fly missions into enemy occupied territory and smash his ability to continue waging war. Strategic bombing of targets in daylight seemed reasonable on paper, but it was still unproven in practice. The crew of *Elvira*, the 91st Bomb Group and other groups already stationed in England would have to be the guinea pigs. They would have to be the ones to make it happen. They would be the ones who would risk their lives and their aircraft to prove the theory.

The first targets of the 323rd Squadron would be airfields and a few industrial targets in occupied France. For now, the bombers would only venture as far as their Spitfire escorts could cover them so the targets would mainly be along the coast and a few miles inland. This would allow the bomber crews to gain experience as well as test the German defenses from both intercepting fighters and ground based anti-aircraft.

Elvira's first combat mission was to bomb a Luftwaffe airfield in St. Omer, France, a short trip across the Channel. Spitfires of the RAF would escort the Forts all the way to St. Omer and back. The weather over the Channel was good and was predicted to be good over St. Omer as well. While that made for good bombing, it also brought with it an increased probability of enemy fighter interception as well as more accurate anti-aircraft barrages over the target.

Captain Jay Neely, who would be piloting *Elvira*, said "We figured it wouldn't be too bad a trip. It was a short hop, we had good escort and we were flying in the middle of the squadron which lessened the chances of our plane being singled out so we didn't think that we'd have a rough time of it." Neely failed to make mention of what was to become a bomber crewman's worst fear, even more than enemy fighters. Flak. They would encounter plenty before the mission was over.

Elvira took off from Bassingbourne and formed up over the Rally Point which was over Dover. Before *Elvira* made her final turn which would begin their trip across the Channel, Master Sergeant Jess Hinton, the flight engineer and top turret gunner, called out, "Little friends' joining up." The Spitfire escort had arrived. They assembled over and around the bombers and the mass of planes, Fortresses and Spitfires, winged their way toward St. Omer. *Elvira's* first mission had begun.

As *Elvira* crossed the Channel, Neely told his gunners to test their guns. After all the gunners did so they began to scan the sky, watching for any enemy fighters that might make an appearance. A few minutes later, the crew of *Elvira* saw several Spitfires bank and fly off, their throttles maxed out and smoke belching from their engines. Soon after, Jess Hinton announced, "Bandits at 10 and 12 o'clock." No sooner had Hinton finished the announcement than Sergeant Fred Barnes, the left waist gunner, confirmed the sighting. "Got 'em at 10 o'clock level." It was a small gaggle of Me-109 fighters. The fight was on.

Several Spitfires were already dealing with the attacking Germans, but one fighter got through the melee and headed right for *Elvira*. Bombardier "Flash" Gentry called out, "109 coming in 12 o'clock high." Jess

Hinton confirmed the sighting as well. Both men trained their guns, Hinton's two .50 caliber guns and Gentry's single .30 caliber in the nose compartment, on the approaching Hun. Before the German fighter could close the range and fire however, two Spitfires swung in and drove the lone Messerschmitt away. After the 109 attacking *Elvira* was gone, the sky was clear. No Forts had been damaged by the attacking fighters and no hits were scored. The Forts, along with their escort, continued to France.

As they approached St. Omer, the Forts were attacked by German fighters for a second time. This attack was larger and more concentrated. Spitfires were engaged, Forts were firing their guns, and damage was being done. Soon it was *Elvira*'s turn to become the target of enemy attacks as four Me-109's were spotted queuing up to make an attack run. Two of the fighters managed to be driven off by the 'little friends' but the other two bore in on *Elvira*'s port side. "Boz" Boswell, the ball turret gunner shouted, "I got one coming in 9 low!" Hinton in the top turret added, "Another one coming in at 9 high." The top turret and ball turret gunners swung their guns to bear on the 109's. Hinton fired his twin guns and riddled his 109 with bullets. The 109 banked steeply away, smoking heavily. A few seconds later Fred Barnes shouted "He's bailing out!" Jess Hinton had scored *Elvira*'s first kill.

"Boz" Boswell fired at the 109 attacking from the low position. He scored hits on the fighter as well, but failed to knock the 109 out of the sky. The Messerschmitt made a quick, half-hearted attack and then dove away at high speed. None of the attackers had as yet hit *Elvira*.

What the Luftwaffe had failed to do the flak gunners on the ground now attempted to do. As *Elvira* neared the target airfield, large, black puffs of smoke appeared all around the sky. It was heavier than the crews had been briefed to expect but still fairly moderate. *Elvira* caught a burst of flak, the shell exploding on her rear starboard quarter near the tail section. A piece of shrapnel lodged itself in the starboard elevator root and a few holes were torn in the tail surface though none of the damage affected the aircraft's stability.



Immediately after this hit, a piece of shrapnel from a flak burst near the port side struck Fred Barnes' .50 caliber waist gun. It slammed into the barrel of his gun and bent it nearly twenty degrees rendering it inoperable and unable to fire. Barnes was unhurt by the incident though he did say the burst "jerked the gun from my hands with such a jolt it felt like it had torn my arms off." Chuck Bailey, the tail gunner, informed Captain Neely of the damage to the tail, assured him it wasn't serious, and told him he was fine.

Elvira now approached the enemy airfield. Lieutenant "Flash" Gentry flew the B-17 to the target via his bombsight and dropped the bombs. Nearly thirty percent of *Elvira*'s bombs fell within 1,000 feet of the target which was considered an excellent drop. Gentry gave Phil Lowenthal, the navigator, a "thumbs up" gesture and *Elvira* turned around and began the trip back to Bassingbourne.

The flight back to England was uneventful. The sky was clear of Luftwaffe fighters all the way to the English coast. As the Fortresses crossed Dover, the Spitfire escort began to break up and head to their home airfields. One Spitfire, which pulled up fairly close to *Elvira*'s starboard side, was spotted by Jack Bochee as he "wagged his wings at us. I saluted him, he waved back at me, and then he banked away. I really appreciated those Limey's for looking out for us as well as they did."

Elvira landed without incident and taxied to her hardstand. The ground crew came out and looked over the aircraft which had more than a few holes in it. One of the ground crew dislodged the shrapnel that had planted itself into the starboard elevator root and thanked *Elvira*'s crew for giving him his first war souvenir. Fred Barnes and "Boz" Boswell were congratulating Jess Hinton on his kill, joking around and back-slapping the flight engineer as they headed to debriefing. The ground crew chief approached Captain Neely and said to him humorously, "What did you do to my plane?" Neely smiled at the chief and said, "We brought her back for you."

The crew of *Elvira* had now been officially bloodied in combat. They had experienced aerial combat in all of its ferocity. "Sure, we were glad to be back home and we all felt really good about the success," said co-pilot Tom Hill. "We also realized that this was a dangerous business. The first mission really drove that home. I wondered that if the Germans fought so hard over a coastal target like the St. Omer airfield, what would it be like on deeper raids? The flak encounters over St. Omer were an especially rude awakening. It just made you feel helpless and that made everyone a bit nervous. It was all a great big reality check."



Mission No. 2
Abbeville, France
November 10, 1942



After Channel storms kept the Fortresses in England grounded for a couple of days, the skies began to clear enough to begin operations against targets in France again. *Elvira*'s second mission was to bomb another Luftwaffe airfield, this time at Abbeville. This airfield was known to be the base of Germany's best fighter squadrons, the "Abbeville Kids". The crew of *Elvira* figured the Luftwaffe would defend this airbase with even greater tenacity than at St. Omer. They would have to wait and see.

Once again, the mission would be covered by Royal Air Force Spitfires. The penetration would be a bit deeper into France this time which meant more time over enemy territory. That also meant "more time being shot at" said Jess Hinton.

Elvira took off and formed up without incident then headed out once again over the English Channel. The weather over the Channel was, for the most part, good and visibility was mainly good to excellent. About halfway across the Channel Chuck Bailey in the tail called out "Single bandit, coming in at 6 high." A solitary 109 was making a diving pass right for *Elvira*. Once again, however, the ever present Spitfire escorts intercepted the Messerschmitt and drove it off. *Elvira* continued on unmolested.

Soon *Elvira* and her squadron were crossing into France again for the second time. The sky was unusually quiet as the squadron continued deeper into occupied territory. Then the Luftwaffe struck.

As the bombers approached Abbeville, numerous small groups of German fighters seemingly appeared out of the blue approaching the bombers from all directions and all positions. Two Fw-190's split apart and attempted to attack *Elvira* from both port and starboard sides, one approaching from above and the other from below. However, a flight of Spitfires showed up and shook off the attackers before they could close in to shooting range. Another gaggle of German fighters attempted a mass attack on the squadron with about ten fighters, but these were driven off by the accurate shooting of the other Fortresses without giving



the Luftwaffe a chance to do any significant damage. The final attack before the bomb run began was from two Me-109's attacking *Elvira* from both sides, one on the front starboard quarter and the other from directly to port. The 109 attacking from the port side peeled off sharply as a Spitfire gave chase, but the other fighter con-

tinued in from 1:30 high. Every gun that could be trained on the lone fighter was brought to bear: the top turret, the starboard cheek gun and the starboard waist gun.

Jess Hinton fired and scored a few hits on the 109. Phil Lowenthal on the cheek gun and Jack Bochee in the waist both missed with their shots. The 109 kept coming. It made a firing pass at *Elvira* but no hits were scored. The lone fighter broke off his attack after this pass evading return fire from other Forts and sped out of the area. With the fighters driven off, *Elvira* started her bomb run.

The flak, incredibly, was light over the target. *Elvira* was not struck by flying shrapnel once all through the bomb run.

Now it was "Flash" Gentry's turn. *Elvira's* bombardier lined up on the airfield using his bombsight and loosed his "eggs" on the airfield. Thirty percent of *Elvira's* bombs hit in the target area. Another excellent bombing run. Their job done, *Elvira* and her squadron turned for home. Then the Luftwaffe struck again.

Almost immediately, three Fw-190's attacked *Elvira*. One attacked from 12 o'clock high and the other two attacked from directly to starboard from a high and level position. Spitfires drove off two of the attackers while the 190 attacking from 3 o'clock level continued on. The top turret, starboard waist, and ball turret all trained on the fighter. Jess Hinton and "Boz" Boswell missed the speeding fighter but Jack Bochee manning the starboard waist gun, scored some hits on the Focke Wulf. The 190 continued boring in on *Elvira*, attacked, and missed. The damaged 190 then fled the area.

Two more Fw-190's approached *Elvira* from the front, turned sharply and made a beeline for the bomber head-on. The ever present Spitfires damaged one of the attacking fighters as he approached and the other 190 cut and ran. The Spitfires had once again driven off the would-be German attackers.

A minute or so later, Chuck Bailey called out an Me-109 diving on *Elvira* from 6 o'clock high. This fighter too was chased and driven off by no more than eight Spitfires. Bailey would say of the Spitfire pilots, "Those RAF boys were all over the German's that day. They made it tough for the Krauts to hit the squadron from any angle and kept them from making good coordinated attacks against us. They just made the Krauts day a living hell and I loved them for it."

As *Elvira* crossed the Channel on the return home, the skies began to cloud up. By the time they were over England, the weather was generally poor. Still, Captain Neely managed to land *Elvira* without a hitch at Bassingbourne. She landed after having made a deeper penetration into enemy territory than in her previous mission, surviving numerous Luftwaffe attack attempts (with nearly all the credit going to the Royal Air Force in driving them off), and had come home without a single nick or dent in her frame. After disembarking the Fortress, Jay Neely and co-pilot Tom Hill walked towards the debriefing hut. They passed *Elvira*'s crew chief on the way and Tom Hill said to the chief, "We brought her back just like we did when we left this morning." The crew chief grinned from ear to ear. Mission number two was now a part of history.



Mission No. 3 **Abbeville, France** **November 18, 1942**



Bad weather in England and storms over the English Channel kept the 323rd squadron grounded for nearly a week until the weather finally broke just enough to begin air operations again. *Elvira*'s crew was confident and their morale was high. "We'd flown two missions and made it through just fine," said tail gunner Chuck Bailey. "We'd met the Krauts in battle and come through with hardly a scratch. We were all very confident."

Elvira's third mission was familiar to the crew. They would be going back to Abbeville, France and bombing the airfield there again. Intelligence had told the crews at briefing that the Luftwaffe had used the past week to beef up some of their fighter squadrons around this area so they were to expect moderate to possibly heavy opposition from enemy fighters on this mission. They were reminded that Abbeville was rumored to field some of the Luftwaffe's finest stationed and to be extra vigilant. Spitfires would again be flying cover for the Fortresses and that made all the crews relax a little bit more. After hacking their watches, the crews filed out to waiting jeeps or bicycles and rode off to their parked aircraft.

The weather was good at Bassingbourne but it was also cold that morning, evidence that winter was fast approaching. *Elvira*'s crew climbed aboard, got themselves situated and awaited their turn to takeoff. They would again be flying near the middle of the squadron somewhat protected by the other forts around her. "It was a bit tough to stay in formation in there with all the air turbulence from the wakes of the other bombers, but it sure made me feel safer," said Captain Neely. Soon, *Elvira* took off, formed up with the other Fortresses over the Rally Point and headed out over the Channel to begin her third mission.

Once again, the Luftwaffe was waiting over the Channel for the Flying Fortresses. About 10 Fw-190's were spotted flying slightly higher than the bombers. Some of the Spitfires peeled off and attacked the gaggle of Luftwaffe planes. During the swirling dogfights in and around the bombers, three Fw-190's attempted to make a frontal assault against *Elvira*, two from directly ahead and one off *Elvira*'s starboard front quarter. However, Spitfires were successful in driving off these bandits before they could attack. After this quick "hit and run" the 190's broke off attacks and flew away.



Elvira and her squadron neared Abbeville, the gunners scanning the skies waiting for the attacks they knew were coming. They did not have to wait long.

About ten minutes after *Elvira* crossed the coast, her navigator and bombardier saw an amazing sight from their positions in the nose of the aircraft. The sky ahead was dotted with nearly a hundred Luftwaffe aircraft. “They were in four or five groups, about twenty fighters in each one,” said bombardier “Flash” Gentry. “It was an awesome sight and it scared the hell out of me. We heard Jess in the top turret say ‘Sweet Mary Ann...look at all those fighters!’ We had plenty of Spitfires for fighter cover but the sight of all of those Luftwaffe boys in the air waiting for us sent a chill through my entire body.”

Captain Neely spoke up. “Boys, we’ve got a hell of a welcoming committee heading our way at 12 o’clock so be alert. You gunners keep your bursts short and be prepared to take some hits this time out.”

Curtis Boswell, ball turret gunner, later said after the mission, “The ‘Abbeville Kids’ were up and they were mad.”

Every Spitfire that *Elvira*’s crew could see broke off to meet the attackers. Then, it began. The first three German attackers to make a run for *Elvira* consisted of two Me-109’s and an Fw-190 which approached



from the starboard front quarter. Jack Bochee called out “Two 109’s coming in from 1:30 and 3 o’clock.” Then Phil Lowenthal, navigator, said “Focke Wulf coming in 12 high.” As the three fighters wheeled in to make their attack run Spitfires came in and broke them up, keeping *Elvira* from being hit. But even the numerous Spitfires were unable to keep all the Germans off of *Elvira* for long.

Three Me-109’s were seen once again wheeling around for an attack run on *Elvira*’s front-starboard quarter (“the pocket” as co-pilot Tom Hill called it). Then a call from Chuck Bailey: “Another 109 coming in 6 high.” Then, a new twist. Jess Hinton in the top turret called out, “109 coming in fast directly above us! He’s in a vertical dive!” *Elvira* was saved from what would surely have been murderous German fire as Spitfires flashed by and drove off the three 109’s that were attacking in “the pocket”. That left the Me-109 attacking at 6 o’clock high and the 109 diving vertically, which neither the escorts nor the gunners could attack due to the extreme speed and angle of his approach. Jess Hinton in the top turret, Brett Williams in the radio room, and Chuck Bailey in the tail all trained on the 109 attacking at 6 o’clock. Hinton missed, but both Williams and Bailey scored damaging hits on the 109. The fighter kept coming. He fired and shells smashed into *Elvira*’s frame. Bullets struck the port wing root, holing it but causing no critical damage. The bomb bay was also hit but miraculously the bombs were not struck which could have been set off and blown *Elvira* to pieces. A critical hit in the pilot compartment destroyed the oxygen supply for the

pilots cabin. The resulting rush of pure oxygen from the blasted supply was ignited by the sparks of bullet ricochets. “Jesus! We’ve got a fire!” hollered Captain Neely. Co-pilot Tom Hill immediately grabbed a fire extinguisher and emptied it into the flames which “seemed to be all around us.” The fire still burned even in the thin air at 20,000 feet due to the pure oxygen feeding the flames. It also made extinguishing the fire much more difficult. When the first extinguisher failed to put out the fire, Tom Hill grabbed another one. This time, the fire was put out. The German fighter, fortunately for *Elvira*, broke off his attack due to the damage that had been done to his aircraft by Williams and Bailey.

The 109 that was diving vertically on the bomber also struck at the same time as the 109 diving from the 6 o’clock position. *Elvira*’s port wing was struck again, bullets hitting the port flap. The port wing root was struck a second time. Shells also penetrated into the nose compartment where the bombardier and navigator were located. Navigator Phil Lowenthal was struck twice by the 109’s bullets. One of the bullets passed through the back of his neck and snapped his spine, which killed him instantly. He collapsed in a heap on the floor of the nose compartment. “Flash” Gentry informed Captain Neely that Lowenthal had been killed. Neely acknowledged “Flash” and then informed the crew that the pilots compartment had been hit and that their oxygen supply was gone. “We’re gonna have to get to 10,000 feet quick so we can breathe and get this baby home,” he told them. Neely had actually already begun the turn away before he informed the crew. Without oxygen he and Tom Hill could only function for two to three minutes before they blacked out. Time was critical. Neely told “Flash” to jettison the bombs and take over navigation. He also said, “Brett, get a channel through to group and tell them we’re breaking formation.” Then he added, “Sorry men, but we’ve gotta high tail it outta here. Abbeville will have to wait another day. We’re a straggler now so you gunners stay alert.”

Elvira made a sharp descending turn away from Abbeville and headed back on a reciprocal course to England. “I was too busy to be scared,” said Neely after the mission. “All I could think about was getting home and worrying about the Krauts. The Germans loved a straggler. It was generally an easy kill for them if a B-17 broke formation for whatever reason. Out of position like that, we were extremely vulnerable. It was fortunate that we were still under protection of some of the Spits escorting us. If they wouldn’t have been there, I’m sure the damage to *Elvira* would have been much worse. We may not have even made it back.”

Elvira leveled off at 10,000 feet, flying as fast as she was able to without a full bomb load, towards the English Channel. She was now flying home with a bullet ridden frame, damaged internals, and her first casualty. She was flying without the added protection of flying in formation where the guns of the other Flying Fortresses helped to protect her. *Elvira*, however, was not alone. A flight of Spitfires was flying escort for her in an attempt (it was hoped) to stave off any Luftwaffe attacks on the vulnerable Fortress as she made a break for England. Still, the Luftwaffe came after her.

The first attack during *Elvira*’s homeward flight was from three Fw-190’s and a single Me-109, all attacking *Elvira* from her front. *Elvira*’s four escorting Spitfires pounced on the attackers and succeeded in driving off one of the Focke Wulf’s. The rest, however, kept coming for *Elvira*. “Here they come!” said Hinton in his top turret. “Flash” Gentry, Fred Barnes, and Brett Williams, who had left his radio position to help move Phil Lowenthal’s body out of the cramped nose compartment and who now manned the nose gun, all manned their guns. All fired and missed except for Jess Hinton who succeeded in heavily damaging an Fw-190. The German fighters then let loose with everything they had. *Elvira* got lucky. None of the attackers did any damage to her. The attacking fighters, either fearing an attack by Spitfires or running low on



fuel, broke off and flew away. *Elvira* had caught a break, but they still had a long way to go.

Elvira continued crossing occupied France but no further attacks developed. Their four Spitfire escort, which had driven off the Focke Wulf that attempted to attack her earlier, had not caught back up with her. Now flying at 10,000 feet, *Elvira* had been under attack from light ground fire and flak all the way to the coast of France, but no damage had done. Still, the crew were becoming very nervous. "I'm not going to lie to you, I was scared stiff," said Brett Williams, the radio operator. He had dragged Phil Lowenthal's body to the middle of the aircraft and laid it in the bomb bay. He had taken off his fleece lined jacket and wrapped it around his head, both for covering his face and to help contain the blood. "I said a quick prayer for Phil and headed back to the nose. I told him that we may be joining him soon."

Elvira was now crossing the Channel all alone. The Fortress seemed to be flying well despite her damage, though Captain Neely noticed when he glanced over at Tom Hill that he was "flying with his eyes closed a lot. I think he was praying." There was still no sign of their escort. There was no sign of any aircraft at all, not even German.

As *Elvira* got to mid-Channel their luck changed. A small gaggle of German fighters was seen flying on a reciprocal course to *Elvira*'s. "It was a small group of Krauts that were waiting for stragglers like us to come along," said Captain Neely. "We had heard rumors that the German ground controllers had been vectoring a few fighters over the Channel to wait for returning damaged bombers. It kind of made me angry. I didn't think it was particularly chivalrous of them to do that."

Chivalrous or not, the fighters bore into *Elvira*. Still, there was no sign of Spitfire fighter cover. *Elvira* would have to get through this fight totally alone.

The gunners braced themselves for the attacks. Jess Hinton said later, "I was gritting my teeth while I watched those bastards come in. I told myself that I was going to take as many of those Krauts with me as I could before they got me first." Two fighters broke off and attacked first: an Fw-190 attacking 9 o'clock level and an Me-109 attacking from directly astern. Jess Hinton watched the Fw-190 bore in and as soon as he started firing "I let loose and hollered like a wild man." The 190 caught Hinton's burst full force, broke apart, and crashed into the Channel below. Another kill for the top turret gunner. Chuck Bailey in the tail watched as the 109 made a direct stern attack, which was generally considered suicidal by both Allied and Axis fliers alike. "He just came right in and I let him have a couple of squirts. I saw large pieces fly off of him and he broke away." *Elvira* had beaten off her first attack. Then, a call from Hinton over the intercom: "I see 'little friends' coming in at 4 high!" It was a pair of Spitfires approaching from *Elvira*'s stern quarter and moving up quickly. Everyone in the plane cheered as they roared past *Elvira* and dove into another group of fighters making a run for the stricken Fortress.

This time, two Fw-109's and an Me-109 swung in and attempted to attack *Elvira* from her front. The Spitfires succeeded in driving off a 190 attacking from the 10 o'clock position, but the other two fighters split apart and approached *Elvira* from two angles. The Me-109 attacked from directly ahead at 12 o'clock level while the Fw-190 swung wide to attack from 3 o'clock, directly to starboard. Hinton trained on the 109 while Barnes and Boswell trained on the 190. Once again, Hinton's aim was true as he shot up the Me-109. It's engine smoked heavily for a moment then burst into flames. The fighter veered off wobbling crazily as the pilot bailed out.

Barnes and Boswell had no such luck as their shots went wide scoring no hits on the fighter. The 190, approaching from the 3 o'clock low position, let loose and shot *Elvira* full of holes. The tail area was hit along with the starboard aileron. Jack Bochee and Curtis Boswell also took some hits in their gunner positions. The metal around them was turned them into small pieces of flying shrapnel by the 190's bullets, but miraculously their wounds were minor. After this pass, the 190 then high tailed it towards the coast of France.

Captain Neely and Tom Hill checked the stability of the starboard aileron that had been hit. After running through some quick tests, they both concluded that the aileron was still functioning properly. Tom Hill looked around the sky for signs of more Spitfires that could have joined the lone Fortress on her trek back to England. He saw none.

Then another lone Fw-190 was seen coming in on *Elvira's* low port side. Boswell in the ball turret and Barnes in the left waist both trained their guns on the fighter. Barnes' fire missed, but Boswell's twin gun burst caught the 190 in his climb and racked the fighter with numerous hits. The German fighter slowly rolled over in a lazy arc and fell off on his right wing. He continued down in a near vertical plunge until he slammed into the Channel waters below. No parachutes were seen. "Good shooting, Boz!" said Barnes. "Another Kraut into the drink!"

Elvira continued crossing the Channel with more Spitfires joining up with her as she continued home. By the time she caught sight of the English coast she had about a dozen Spits looking out for her. Still, there was not much celebrating as *Elvira* left the Channel behind and winged her way home to Basingbourne. "We were just kind of numb. We didn't realize how lucky we had been crossing the channel alone like that, much less making it home at all," said Captain Neely after the mission. "There was more talk along the lines of 'Thank God that's over with!' and 'Boy, am I gonna drink a few tonight!'. I guess we were all a little saddened by the loss of Phil. Our accomplishment didn't seem near as sweet since he didn't make it back with us. It was just an anti-climax, I guess."



Jess Hinton shot a red flare out of his turret to let the boys on the ground know they had wounded aboard. Both Jack Bochee and Curtis Boswell would return to duty after a night's stay in the hospital, their wounds mainly cuts and bruises. Jess Hinton would be awarded the Air Medal for his tally of kills. "It was clear he was a darn good shot," said Brett Gentry. The other crew members agreed with his sentiment and all "felt safer" when fighters were attacking and Hinton was manning the top turret.

When the rest of the 323rd squadron came home, they were all happy to see that *Elvira* had made it back

safely. Tom Hill said of the homecoming greetings from the other crews, “A lot of us wondered why we all survived and Phil didn’t. A couple of us came to the conclusion that we came back for all the other guys so we could give them some hope that there was always a chance they would make it back as well. It was more for *them* than for us. That helped us feel a little better.”

Elvira was in bad shape, but the damage could be fixed as there was little critical damage done to her internals save the destroyed oxygen supply in the pilot’s compartment. But *Elvira* had lost her first crewman. It was a sobering statistic for the crew to ponder. “After doing the math,” said Jack Bochee, “we all realized that most of us would be dead by the time our 25th mission came around. The question on everyone’s mind was who would be next.” It was feeling that every bomber crewman had at some point in their tour.

Pilot - Capt. Jay Neely

Co-Pilot - Lt. Tom Hill

Bombardier - Lt. Daniel “Flash” Gentry

Navigator - Lt. Bill Phillips

Flight Engineer - Mstr. Sgt. Jess Hinton

Radio Operator - Sgt Brett Williams

Right Waist Gunner - Sgt. Jack Bochee

Left Waist Gunner - Sgt Fred Barnes

Ball Turret Gunner - Sgt. Curtis “Boz” Boswell

Tail Gunner - Sgt Chuck Bailey



Mission No. 4
Lille, France
November 22, 1942



The weather over England was becoming worse as the days drew ever closer to winter which made good flying weather harder to come by. It was for this reason that *Elvira*’s crew only had a couple of days to become familiar with her new navigator, Lieutenant Bill Phillips from Cleveland, Ohio. “Flash” Gentry said of his new companion in the nose compartment, “Bill was an easy going guy. He was all business during a mission and didn’t fool around much. On the ground, though, he was a really approachable and thoughtful guy.”

Elvira would be headed to Lille, France to bomb an industrial factory there that intelligence said was manufacturing component parts for German aircraft engines. The Spitfires of the RAF would once again be flying along with the 323rd squadron as she ventured into enemy territory for the fourth time. The weather was expected to be good all the way to the target, a rarity in these cool autumn days.

Elvira took off, joined up with her squadron and the Spitfire escorts over the English coast, then headed out over the Channel. The trip over the water was uneventful and soon the coast of France was in sight. The Spitfires continued their weaving around the bombers as the Fortresses plodded along in a stately manner.

About twenty minutes from Lille, the Luftwaffe was finally seen by the crew heading for the bombers. Spitfires peeled off to intercept them and gunners gripped their gun triggers tightly and waited for the attackers to bore in. Three Fw-190’s attempted to attack *Elvira* from head on but their attack was broken up by intervening RAF fighters. More German fighters were seen heading for *Elvira* again, but this time the crew encountered a new aerial attacker. Three twin-engine Me-110 fighters were seen flying level to

Elvira, approaching from directly ahead, astern, and at 10:30 simultaneously. A Spitfire managed to drive off the 110 approaching *Elvira*'s front port quarter so "Boz" Boswell trained his guns on the 110 approaching from astern as did Chuck Bailey in the tail. "Flash" Gentry locked on to the one attacking from directly ahead.

Boswell's shots missed his target as did Gentry's. However, Gentry's shots from the nose managed to spook the Me-110 for his bullets went wide. He then turned sharply and flew off. Bailey's shots succeeded in damaging the 110 attacking from the rear, but the big fighter still came right for *Elvira*. The bullets and cannons of the Me-110 raked the underbelly of the Fortress all along the bomb bay. Boswell in the ball turret witnessed the attack. "It was like a fireworks display. I held my breath as those guns just shot up the bomb bay area to pieces. I just knew the bombs would go off and we'd be blown to kingdom come."

Incredibly...miraculously...the bombs were not struck by the Me-110's fire. Besides blasting the bomb bay doors full of holes, the 110's fire managed to shoot up the rubber life rafts, rendering them useless if *Elvira* was forced to ditch in the Channel. The Me-110 banked off to the right in a diving turn, then swung around approaching *Elvira* from "the pocket". Bill Phillips, now manning the nose cheek guns, called out "110 coming in at 1:30 level." The starboard cheek gun was the only gun that could be brought to bear on the fighter. Phillips let off a good burst at the Hun, but his shots missed. Then, the Me-110 hammered into *Elvira* with its heavy armament for a second time.

The starboard wing was hit along with the number four engine. The 110's shots cracked open the oil tank for the outboard engine and it caught on fire. Tom Hill told Captain Neely very calmly, "We've got a fire in number four." It was the last thing Captain Neely heard Tom say. An instant later, bullets ricocheted all around the pilots compartment and the top turret. Captain Neely took a minor hit to his thigh from a bullet that grazed him. Tom Hill was hit far worse. Three machine gun bullets from the Me-110 exploded into Hill's chest and right leg. The hammer blows knocked him unconscious, blood pouring from his wounds. Captain Neely called for Hinton in the top turret to help Tom out of the co-pilots chair. When all Neely heard was a groan over his headphones, he glanced back quickly and saw Hinton slumped down in his turret. His left arm had been shattered by bullets and his right kneecap had been blown cleanly off of his leg, blood flowing freely from the wound.

Captain Neely worked fast. He reached over and triggered the number four engine's fire extinguisher. It had no effect. A couple of seconds later, he tried it again. This time it worked and the engine fire was extinguished. He called navigator Bill Phillips to the pilots compartment to help Tom Hill and Jess Hinton out as best he could. Bill came up and helped Tom out of his seat, wrapping a tourniquet around his leg and midsection. He also applied first aid to Jess Hinton who was coming around a bit and quietly cursing. He gave them both a shot of morphine, told Neely both men were as patched up as he could get them, and headed back to the navigator's station.

Outside in the thin air at 20,000 feet, the lone Me-110 once again whirled around and made another pass at *Elvira*, approaching from 6 o'clock high. Brett Williams in the radio compartment and Chuck Bailey in the tail all trained their guns on the 110, firing at almost exactly the same time. Williams shots missed, but once again Bailey's tail guns found their mark, heavily damaging the German attacker. But even with the 110's port engine now smoking, she made one last attack on *Elvira*.

Slugs from the 110 slammed into *Elvira*'s rudder and tail section and stitched holes in her port wing root.

Fortunately, none of the damage was serious. The Me-110 finally broke off his attack, nursing his smoking port engine.

At first Captain Neely was worried about the damage to the number four engine's oil reservoir as a thin stream of gray smoke was emanating from the damaged engine. Checking the oil temperature and oil pressure gauges, he concluded that while there was some oil loss occurring, the leak was not serious. He did not try to shut the engine down. "I was not going to touch any settings on that engine until we were landing," Captain Neely said. "I didn't want to upset whatever delicate balance there was going on in that engine and risk it going out or blowing up."

Elvira now began her bomb run. Flak over the target, fortunately, was light and *Elvira* suffered no damage. "Flash" Gentry loosed *Elvira*'s bombs and they drifted slowly down to earth. About a minute later the bomb strikes were seen. Twenty percent of *Elvira*'s bombs landed in the target area, a "fair" drop. Gentry announced, "Bomb doors closing" and *Elvira* turned in formation with her squadron back towards England...and home. The Luftwaffe, however, was still not done with *Elvira*.

As she winged her way back home, five Fw-190's flashed into view and on an attack vector toward *Elvira*. The Spitfire escorts, who had not been as effective as usual, managed to drive off only one of the attacking "Butcherbirds". One of the four 190's attacking *Elvira* pulled up into a steep climb and began a slow roll over. He was going to attack *Elvira* in a vertical dive. The other three 190's attacked from 12 o'clock high, 6 o'clock high and 10 o'clock level.

Bill Phillips in the nose manned the port cheek gun and fired at the 190 approaching from 10 o'clock. He saw "some hits" but the fighter kept coming. Gentry manned the nose gun and fired at the 190 coming in from 12 o'clock. His shots missed. Chuck Bailey in the tail let loose with his twin tail guns and "shot the hell out of that Kraut." Still, this fighter continued on as well. The 190 in a vertical dive made a quick, fleeting burst at *Elvira* but failed to score any hits. The 190 continued down and flew out of sight.

Chuck Bailey's 190 shot up the tail section again as he dove down on *Elvira*. Slugs shattered the plexiglass housing where the Bailey sat and a bullet struck him in his upper right shoulder. Bailey managed to say, "I'm hit, fellas!" before he blacked out in pain. The 190's attack also shot up the wings which damaged the port aileron rendering it inoperative, and a few rounds struck the pilot compartment again, though there was no damage done. The 190 then swung around to 3 o'clock and bore in again for another attack.

Jack Bochee manning the starboard waist gun and Boswell in the ball turret all swung to face this second attack. They both fired and missed. The Fw-190 closed in, fired, and missed as well. After this attack, the Focke Wulf flew off, a couple of Spitfires giving chase for good measure.

Fred Barnes, under orders from Captain Neely, had gotten Boswell out of his ball turret so he could man the tail guns while Barnes attended to Bailey. Barnes wrapped up Bailey's wounds as best he could and gave him a shot of morphine for the pain. Bailey phased in and out of consciousness as *Elvira* continued home. Barnes said of the wounded tail gunner, "He kept coming to and then passing out again. Every time he'd come to he'd say, 'I'm all right, Fred. I'll be OK', then he'd be out like a light. He did that all the way to Bassingbourne."

Thankfully, there were no more fighter attacks while *Elvira* crossed the Channel. About halfway over the

water, when he was fairly certain there would be no more attacks, Captain Neely told “Flash” Gentry to go to the back of the plane and help Barnes with their three seriously wounded crewman. “About every five minutes or so, either Barnes or Gentry would report to me on how they were doing. Tom seemed to be the worst one of the group. His breathing was shallow and he was very pale. Hinton and Bailey, while looking rough, were a bit more animated. I think Jess silently cursed all the way home. I could hear the faintest whisper of what sounded like ‘sonofa...’ or ‘goddamn...’ in my headphones.”

Captain Neely radioed ahead that they needed to land immediately and got Brett Gentry to send off the red flare that told the ground crew to have ambulances ready for the wounded when they landed. Up until now, Neely had not touched any of the settings on the damaged number four engine. Now that he was in the landing pattern and about to touch down, he finally attempted to shut the engine down. “Only when I felt the wheels hit the ground did I immediately pull back the throttle on the



engine. As soon as I did, I heard this loud *BANG!* and then the awful sound of grinding, tearing metal. I looked at number four and black smoke was pouring from the guts of the engine. I shut her down as I taxied to the hardstand with black smoke just belching. A fire truck raced up to the wing and smothered the engine with white foam after we had stopped rolling. I just sat there for a minute watching, shaking my head in disbelief.”

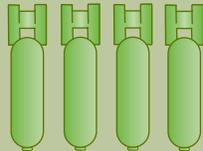
The ground crew had to replace the number four engine entirely. The crew chief stated that when they attempted to remove the damaged engine from it’s mount “it damn near fell to the ground in pieces.” All said that it was nearly impossible for the engine to have operated as long as it did.

But *Elvira* had made it home again.

Chuck Bailey spent two weeks in a stateside hospital recovering from his wounds. Eventually, he would make a full recovery. Jess Hinton would go through two years of painful physical therapy getting his shattered leg and arm to work properly again. Tom Hill was also sent home to the states to recover in a hospital. His recovery was, amazingly, very rapid. He would be in the air again soon as a stateside pilot instructor.

Pilot - Capt. Jay Neely
Co-Pilot - Lt. Dale Fleming
Bombardier - Lt. Daniel "Flash" Gentry
Navigator - Lt. Phil Lowenthal
Flight Engineer - Mstr. Sgt. Matthew Hipps

Radio Operator - Sgt Brett Williams
Right Waist Gunner - Sgt. Jack Bochee
Left Waist Gunner - Sgt Fred Barnes
Ball Turret Gunner - Sgt. Curtis "Boz" Boswell
Tail Gunner - Sgt Charles Hendrix



Mission No. 5
Abbeville, France
November 30, 1942



"The target for today is Abbeville, gentlemen."

Elvira was going back to Abbeville once again to bomb the airfield there. Lieutenant Dale Fleming, *Elvira*'s new co-pilot, was sitting next to Captain Neely in the pilots briefing. "I looked over and Neely rolled his eyes and shook his head. I had heard the stories from the other crew and officers about their last mission to Abbeville and how rough it was; about how they had their first casualty there; about how murderous the German fighters were and how badly *Elvira* got shot up. The flight was still very fresh in all of their minds."

Elvira's other new crew members, Master Sergeant Matthew Hipps and Sergeant Charles Hendrix, were also filled in very quickly by the other crewmen about how rough Abbeville was their last time out. Hipps said, "There were plenty of groans, that's for sure. Brett Williams told me 'Don't worry, Matt...you'll get plenty of chances to shoot at Krauts on this hop.' They were all expecting a real fight again."

Despite their misgivings, however, *Elvira*'s crewman dutifully boarded their Flying Fortress which had done such a brilliant job of bringing them home under the worst of circumstances. "Well, if we have to go at least *Elvira*'s going to get us there and back," said Jack Bochee to Fred Barnes as they climbed aboard and took their waist gunner positions. After going through their pre-flight rituals, Neely and Fleming started *Elvira*'s engines and taxied to their takeoff position. Soon, they were airborne and forming up with the other planes of the 323rd squadron.

Elvira maneuvered into her regular squadron position near the middle of the formation. About ten minutes later, the Spitfire escorts joined up with the heavies and took up their positions. The Spitfires flown this day, however, were not piloted by the British...they were flown by Americans. Today *Elvira* and her squadron were being escorted by the 4th Fighter Group, formed by elements of the original Eagle Squadrons. "I liked it when we had *any* fighter escort," said Matt Hipps, "but I have to say knowing that your own fellow countrymen were out there looking after you made me feel just a bit more comfortable."

As land gave way to water, *Elvira*'s crew began to tense. They scanned the skies a bit more diligently, their senses just a bit sharper than before. They gripped their gun triggers just a shade tighter and their hearts

beat just a little bit faster. The sky was remarkably free of German aircraft this day. Still, the crew did not let down their guard. They had been here before and all figured it was merely the calm before the storm.

Finally, the Luftwaffe made their appearance but only in small numbers. The Spitfire escorts peeled off and aggressively went after the attackers. A lone Me-109 attempted to make a diving head on attack against *Elvira* but the American Spitfires drove off the bandit. Minutes later, after many close but unsuccessful fighter attacks, the Germans broke off and flew away.

As *Elvira* continued on towards Abbeville, German attacks lessened until the squadron neared their bomb run. As expected, the Luftwaffe was waiting for the bombers to show. However, the number of German fighters was significantly less than the last time *Elvira* made the trip to Abbeville. Another lone Me-109 attempted to make a head on diving attack against *Elvira*, but Spitfires were successful in knocking down the bandit before he could get close enough to fire. Another German fighter, this time an Fw-190, swung wide in an attempted a frontal attack on *Elvira* from the 10:30 position. Hipps in the top turret and Phillips on the port cheek gun both zeroed in on this bandit as he bore in, but he too was driven off by effective Spitfire top cover.

The closer *Elvira* got to the target, the less the Luftwaffe attacked. Soon the German fighters were all gone, either driven off by the escorts or the guns of the other Forts. No sooner had the German fighters flown out of sight than the first bursts of flak began. The flak was heavier this time out...and also much more accurate. It was a matter of mere seconds into the bomb run when *Elvira* was struck hard by a nearby flak burst. The burst went off near *Elvira's* port wing and shrapnel struck the number one engine. Fortunately, the damage was superficial and the engine kept running smoothly. Another burst went off directly above *Elvira* and peppered the radio room with flying steel. *Elvira's* radio was effectively knocked out and the radio operators area was holed in many places. Fortunately, Brett Williams was not wounded in this terrific shower of steel.

Still on the bomb run, *Elvira* was hit again with flying shrapnel from a third flak burst, which penetrated the nose compartment area and struck navigator Bill Phillips oxygen supply. The supply was hit hard but the damage failed to penetrate the tank. Phillips reported the hit to Captain Neely but assured him that he had no oxygen leak.

Bursts were going off all around *Elvira* from every conceivable angle. The concussions shook the Fortress and generally made for a very unpleasant and very bumpy ride. "Those gunners on the ground really had us zeroed in on this trip," said Matt Hipps. "They kept us bouncing around the sky all through the bomb run. The run only took five minutes but it seemed like hours."

As *Elvira* drew closer to the target she was struck by another flak burst. The port wing was hit again but the damage was superficial. The real damage came when a burst went off right underneath the tip end of *Elvira's* tail. *Elvira's* new tail gunner, Charles Hendrix, was jolted hard when his gun was hit, putting the twin tail guns out of action. More serious was Hendrix's announcement to Captain Neely: "Captain, my flight suit heater has been hit." Flying at such high altitudes the temperature was well below zero, sometimes thirty or forty degrees. Exposed skin would freeze immediately to any metallic surface it touched. Without proper heating, a crew member was also in serious danger of frostbite. A crewman who had severe frostbite usually had to have the affected appendage amputated, ending his flying career.

Captain Neely told Hendrix he was preparing to break formation and fly down to a warmer altitude. Hendrix would have none of it. “No, sir. I’m fine. Don’t break formation because of me. I’ll handle it.” Neely was still very concerned and voiced his strong disapproval. Hendrix did not budge. “Sir, really...I’ll be fine. Just don’t break off the bomb run.” Neely, still thinking it was very dangerous to continue on, gave in and told Hendrix, “Okay, we’ll stay put if that’s what you want. Are you sure you’ll be all right?” Hendrix assured Neely he would. *Elvira* stayed in formation and continued on her bomb run.

Now over the enemy airfield, “Flash” Gentry toggled the bomb drop switch and over a ton of high explosive destruction was released from *Elvira*’s bomb bay. They glided down along with the other bombs



dropped from *Elvira*’s sister ships in her squadron. Thirty percent of *Elvira*’s bombs fell within the target area. Her job done, Captain Neely wheeled *Elvira* around in formation with the squadron and headed back to the safety of English skies.

An single Me-109 arched through the skies and attempted to make a head on diving pass at *Elvira*. The American Spitfires saw the attacker and drove her off

before she could do any damage. A minute later, an Fw-190 attacked *Elvira* on her front port quarter. But no sooner had *Elvira*’s gunners trained their weapons on the German than two Spitfires bored in and shot the bandit out of the sky. He glided slowly down to earth in large, wide circles with his engine smoking heavily. The plane dropped out of sight.

As the French coast passed beneath *Elvira* and the English Channel came into view, Neely called to Charles Hendrix in the tail. “Are you still with us, Charles?” he asked. Hendrix spoke up and said “I’m all right, Cap. Nothing’s fallen off of me yet.” Neely smiled and told him to let him know immediately if he could no longer stand the cold. Hendrix promised that he would.

Elvira crossed the Channel with no difficulty. The Spitfires peeled off and returned to their airfields once again as *Elvira* crossed the English coast. Captain Neely had still not heard anything from Hendrix about his obvious discomfort, so he motioned to Matt Hipps in the top turret to go and check on him. Hipps did so and a few minutes later came back to the pilots compartment. Hendrix was still in the tail and had been there all through the trip. Hipps informed Neely that Hendrix had severe frostbite. The tips of all of his fingers were almost black. Neely sat dumbfounded for a moment. Hendrix had suffered in silence for nearly the entire mission and still requested that *Elvira* not break her protective formation just so he could be made comfortable. “Hendrix had sacrificed himself for the rest of us. It was the bravest thing I had ever experienced up until that point in my life. It was the only mission he flew with us, yet all of us who flew with him that day never, ever forgot him or the courageous decision he made.”

Charles Hendrix would not fly again after that day. Three of the fingers on his right hand, two fingers on his left hand and his left foot would all have to be amputated due to the severe cold that he had exposed himself to. He would never say anything negative about his ordeal, nor would he ever voice any regrets for choosing to suffer in silence so that *Elvira* and her crew would have a bit better chance to make it home again. Such was the bond of men who fought together in war.

Elvira had completed five missions and returned home safely. One crew member had been killed. Four had been seriously wounded and would never fly again. Her gunners had four confirmed destroyed Luftwaffe aircraft and numerous damaged ones. She had survived many murderous and heart-stopping flak barrages over targets she had bombed. Elvira still had twenty missions to go.

But now, the missions were about to get longer and more dangerous. Elvira would begin flying in larger formations for farther distances. Fighter escorts would still be accompanying the Fortresses, but now that the distances were longer there were no guarantees of their constant presence and their effectiveness would be diminished. As the “completed missions” count grew larger, the crew knew that the odds for them coming back from a mission now got much worse.



Messerschmitt Me-109G

The Me109G first flew in the summer of 1942 until the end of the war. The aircraft could easily fly at the altitudes the Flying Fortresses flew, having a ceiling of 36,500 feet. Standard armament was two 13mm machine guns in the upper cowling, a 20mm cannon firing through the propeller hub and two extra 20mm cannons were sometimes housed in the wings though this extra weight tended to slow the aircraft. Later 'G' models had a 30mm cannon in the propeller hub. Also, two 21cm rocket mortar tubes could be attached to the underside of the wings to combat B-17 bombers but were not successful as they distorted the flying ability of the aircraft. By May 1945, over 30,000 Me109's had been built.



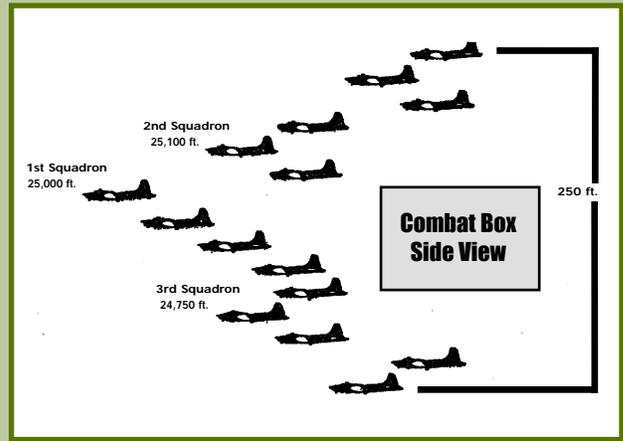
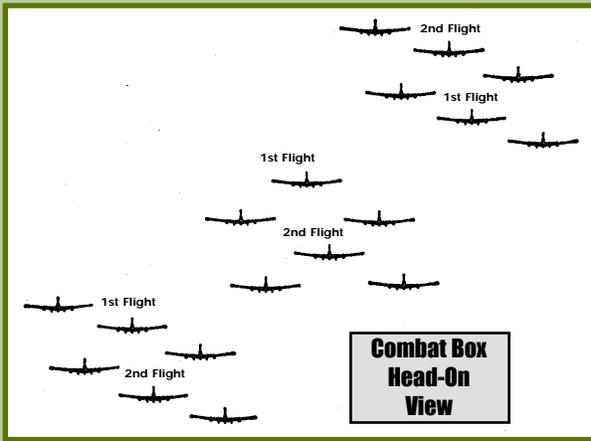
Focke Wulf Fw-190A

The Fw-190 was Germany's finest single-engined fighter in the war, outclassing the Spitfire V when it was first encountered in 1941. It was heavily armed with two 13mm machine guns in the upper cowling and four 20mm cannons in the wings, making it a very capable bomber destroyer and was most feared by bomber crewman. It played a major role in halting U.S. Army Air Force's bomber offensive in 1943, at least until American escort fighters could accompany the bombers to their targets and back again. However, the Fw-190, despite all of its abilities, could not match the performance of the turbo-supercharged American fighters above 30,000 feet as the German fighter was sluggish at these altitudes.

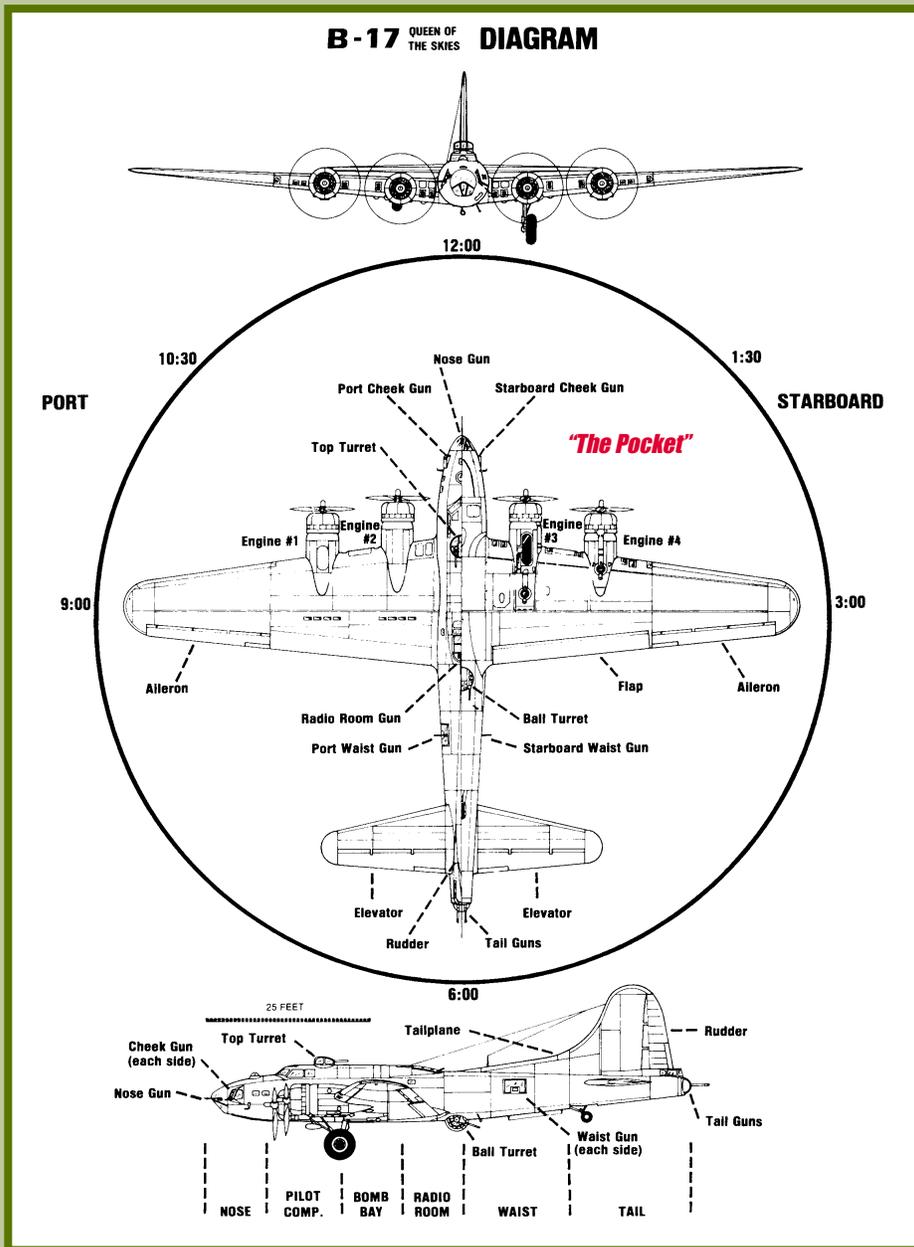


Messerschmitt Me-110D

The Me-110 was a heavy, twin-engined fighter, designed as a fighter-bomber, bomber-interceptor, and escort fighter. Though it was capable of carrying an impressive range of heavy caliber guns that could easily bring down a bomber, it's weakness (as was found during the Battle of Britain in 1940) was that it's performance was poor when matched with the latest single-engined Allied fighters. It's large size made it sluggish and it did not maneuver well in a dogfight. However, if conditions were right and Allied bombers happen to be caught unescorted, the Me-110's four 7.9mm machine guns and two 20mm cannons could cause serious damage.



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