

Our Last Mission

By Wes Bartelt (453rd)

Forty years to find most of the pieces to the puzzle of our last mission with the 453rd Bomb Group, and some are still missing.

My crew was in all probability like hundreds of other Bomber Crews. We came from all parts of the country. WE were a mixture of ethnic backgrounds and religions. Some, I still remember after forty years. My nose gunner was a Frenchman from Chicago; my radio operator, a Scandinavian from the San Francisco area; the engineer was English and a Rebel from Athens, Alabama – to him, I was a damn Yankee from Wisconsin and half Polish. The bombardier hailed from Boston of Jewish heritage; one waist gunner was an Italian from Michigan; my tail gunner was a Swede from New Jersey. The co-pilot came from Baton Rouge; he was a Duke's mixture. One crew member was distinctive and that was my navigator. Tall, blond, blue eyed, born in Munich, Germany, he came to America at age 4, his name was Hans Niichel. He always told us he had two first cousins flying with the Luftwaffe. This was one of the pieces missing from the puzzle. We were grounded for almost three weeks after being ready to fly combat.

At the Nashville convention in '82, I met Bob Harper who was with 453rd Intelligence at the time. He recalled that they were rechecking Hans' records as he was being considered to lead a mission to bomb a camouflaged target in Munich, his birthplace. It may have been more of a loyalty check, to get his reaction to such an assignment. After a short discussion with Wing S-2, it was clear that Hans was not only loyal, but a very good navigator and a competent photographer.

We were finally cleared and went on our first mission in November of '44. From that mission on it became a running joke that someone on the crew would call Hans, up in the nose, as we crossed the Zuider Zee and yell, "Hey Hans, get on the horn and tell your cousins we are up here today and to leave the 453rd alone."

Our luck continued to go well, even with 0-0 take-offs in the dark for the Bulge Missions, a few flak holes, and now and then, a near miss with some clown flying a reverse course around the Buncher.

On our third mission, we took the Lead of the 732nd squadron. That day we were flying in the Coffin Corner, but were the only ship with a bombardier and a bombsight that was working. The months moved on, December, January, February, March and our mission count grew to twenty-one.

One week before our twenty-second mission, I was called into Squadron Operations and was told to take up a new B-24 that had come to the Group. It was the latest model and I was to take it up and check it out. It had a formation stick, which worked with the autopilot, and a new type of Mickey Equipment Set on the flight deck behind the top turret. It sure didn't give us much room to move around. I took it up on two flights around Norwich and everything seemed to be working well. I gave my report to the Squadron Operations Officer and was told it was going to be the CO's personal ship.

March 15th, we were scheduled to fly our 22nd mission; so it was up early, with a breakfast of powdered eggs and the usual coffee (?) and off to briefing. As my co-pilot and I listened, we couldn't believe that we were going to fly Deputy-Lead for the Group and that our plane was the new bird we had just checked out. The target was Zosgen, Germany, 20 miles south of Berlin, headquarters for the German army. This would be our third trip to Berlin.

With briefing over, Parker, my co-pilot and I headed for our hardstand. Shortly after, we loaded our gear and pre-flighted our "New Baby." Just as we finished, Hans came along with another crew member whom none of had ever seen. We all gathered under the wing and met Bombardier and Mickey Operator, Lt. Clark.

Well, it was time to load-up and move out. Everything seemed to be normal. We took off, formed and headed for the coast, then across the Channel, and over the Zuider Zee. There was the standard intercom chatter. My nose gunner was complaining how cold he was; my tail gunner would tell me to quit swinging him from side to side, he was getting seasick. Everything seemed to be going great. Now, the formation was well inside of Germany and the crew got on Hans again about his cousins, even though we hadn't seen any German fighters for several missions.

Flying off the right wing of the lead ship, I did most of the flying. I was concentrating on flying formation because I was using the new Formation stick. Suddenly, my eardrums were nearly blown out with the words, "*fire on the flight deck!*" I called for someone to give me a report. The Mickey Set was on fire. The cabin was filling with smoke so I opened the window to see and ventilate. Parker did the same. Carlson, my radio operator got a fire extinguisher and helped Clark and my Engineer, Pepper, with the fire. It seemed like hours. I kept asking Parker, who was watching everything, to keep me posted. I was worried about the oxygen in the cabin blowing us up, so I opened the bomb bay doors as a precaution. The word came that the fire was out and so was the Mickey Set. With that, I relaxed and we closed everything up. I don't remember how close to the bomb run we were then, but things seemed OK, then the cabin started filling up with smoke again. I remember hollering to get the damn fire out, thinking it was the Mickey Set again.

At that time, I was too busy flying formation and not looking around; with that, my co-pilot hit me and yelled, “The smoke is coming from behind your instrument panel.” With more profanity, I said, “What next?” Little did I know what else was in store for us before the day was over. By this time, the smoke was coming out on Parker’s side also. Again, I opened the window and so did Parker. Whether we talked or just acted automatically, I don’t know. I signaled for Parker to take over the controls and then I started unbuckling, threw off my flak suit, got out of my parachute harness, ripped off my right hand glove and pulled out my oxygen hose. While Parker flew, I went under the instrument panel with my bare hand. I knew if I touched –40 degree metal with my warm hand, it would stick and burn, so that would not be the area of the fire. After touching a few times and pulling skin off to get my hand loose, I hit something hot and my hand did not stick, so I grabbed a handful of wires and pulled and looked for more hot spots. By this time, I needed oxygen and Pepper was there with the walk-around bottle. I took a few fast breaths, unplugged again, and went back under the panel looking for more hot wires and found them. As soon as I pulled them loose, the smoke seemed to diminish and the cabin was clear once more.

By this time we were on the bomb run. The lead ship called “tuckem in.” The speed with which one can work to get buckled up with all the gear is something else. Now it was up to me to fly the run. As I remember, someone remarked, “Two down and three strikes, you’re out.” There was a quick reply of, “Knock it off with those damn superstitions.” I was to find out later that Clark, the new man, had parachuted once and on another mission had crash-landed in some trees from which he had spent several weeks in the hospital. This was his first mission since that accident.

The flare dropped from the lead ship and Hans started the count down. Then I noticed I was pushing full right rudder and was still skidding left toward the leader. Out of the corner of my eye I could see our two port engines windmilling. By this time we were no more than 25 feet from the leader. I jammed the wheel forward and we slid right under the lead ship. Hans was still counting as I heard, “six, five, four.” All I could see above me was an open bomb bay full of bombs. Instinctively, I pushed the controls forward and turned to the right to get away from the formation before they dropped their bombs.

This is where another one of the missing pieces of the puzzle was found. At the reunion in England in June 1983, I met Delmar Wangswick who was flying in the lead ship as bombardier. For 38 years, I believed that I made the decision to head for Poland and the Russian AirField, which we had been briefed on. After talking to Del, he said he sure as hell remembered that mission and our sliding under their ship. The turbulence jostled him, but he had enough time to turn around and kill the switches for the drop. If it wasn’t for Del, not only our ship, but also the whole squadron could have been blown away. He also told me that I asked for fighter escort back to Old Buckenham but was instead ordered to fly to Poland. The decision to go to Poland has always bothered me because of the loss of my two crew members. I thought I had made that decision.

Now, there we were, out of formation and down to fifteen thousand feet and heading east to Poland. The crew was bust throwing out flak suits and loose gear, but we kept the guns loaded since we were not sure where the Russian lines were. A fast check with Hans and he gave me the headings to Lodz, Poland, which was one of the fields designated. Parker and I were busy trying to fly on two engines and maintain as much altitude as we could, but we were slowly settling. The one thing that bothered us was that our altimeter was set in England so we had no idea how much the altimeter setting would be off when we reached Poland. We had salvaged the bomb load after leaving the formation in a dive. While Hans was working on headings and giving me information on the two available airfields, all the gunners were watching for any sign of enemy fighters. The feeling of being over enemy territory all alone without the P-51’s or P-47’s to keep us company was a scary time. We would have welcomed their escort, but we knew we were going in the wrong direction.

Parker was using the escape map from his jump suit pocket and giving us the distance to the Polish border. One hundred miles of enemy territory, and then another one hundred fifty miles over Poland to Lodz. We had plenty of fuel. The big worry was, why did the two left engines stop and would the other two get us out of Germany? Our airspeed dropped to 130, so that meant two hours flying if we didn’t have a head wind. We kept busy checking everything, but it still seemed like forever. It wasn’t long before Hans called; “There’s a fair sized town ahead and to the left.” Soon we could see the airfield, so I called to Pepper to ready the Very pistol with double red flares. That was the briefing signal for the day. By this time, we were down to what we figured to be about fifteen hundred feet. We came over the airfield on which there were a number of fighters with big red stars on the wings. My nose gunner, Provo, called and said that some of the fighters were taking off. I then called the crew to clear their turrets and we would try to hold our altitude as long as we could. We were thinking that they were coming up to escort us in. I cautiously turned into the two good engines and leveled out on my downwind leg. The co-pilot started the landing checklist: gear down, 10-degree flaps, that’s when we started losing altitude fast. At that time, two fighters roared over the top of us. They were so close, I could see they were Bell P-39 Air Cobras. The engineer was still firing double red flares.

Suddenly, all hell broke loose. Someone called, "I see tracers coming at us." Parker looked up and two P-39's were coming straight at us from 12 o'clock level. By now we were below 1,000 feet and someone (I never found out who) hollered "Bail out!" With that I screamed, "Don't jump, we're too low!" Russian bullets and shells were coming in everywhere. They were even hitting the controls because the wheel was jerked right out of my hand.

At that time I yelled to Parker, "Gear up!" While he was trying to get it up, I ran the servo power all the way to ten. It was either burn out the engines to get enough altitude for bail out, or dive for the airstrip. Either way, should the bastards make another pass at us and hit our gas tanks, we'd all buy the farm. Everyone was watching for their next pass. There were four P-39's after us. All that ran through my mind was, what kind of allies are they? I watched my rate of climb, it was slow and then Parker said "The gear is stuck, it won't come up." With that I got on the intercom. "Bail out on the bell, don't even count, open your chutes as soon as you clear the ship. We'll try to get more altitude and if they turn back, that's when we go." I looked at Parker and said, "How high do you think we are?" The altimeter showed a little over 1,000 feet. He said he thought that was pretty close. The fighters turned and headed toward us again. I hollered, "Good Luck" and rang the bail out bell. The bomb bay doors had been opened by Parker while I kept trying to climb for more altitude.

We had always talked about bailing out at high altitude and also what to do at low altitude. I also told my crew that I would count to fifteen and then I was going and they had better be ahead of me. With all the extra power on the two right engines, it took both Parker and me to hold full right rudder so that we wouldn't roll over.

The countdown to fifteen was over and I signaled Parker to leave. At the same time I was unbuckling as he headed for the bomb bay. I started to pull back the throttles on the good engines, rolled in some trim, but when I took my foot off of the rudder, it still wanted to roll. The only way out for me was to cut back the power and trim for a glide. As I climbed to the catwalk, I saw some cows go under me. They were BIG as hell! I was way below bailout altitude. I knew there was no way to get out except jump, so I dove out and pulled my ripcord at the same time. I remember my foot hitting the center bulkhead and as the rudders went by, I could see the chute coming out and I was parallel with the ground. When it opened, I swung 180 degrees like a pendulum. I remember looking at my ripcord and my fingers gripped tight around it. The thoughts raced through my mind that we were told we had to bring it back or pay for it. The crazy stuff that passes through your mind when you think you're going to die. I thought you were supposed to see your whole life pass before your eyes, and not the price of a ripcord. With that, I threw it away and grabbed both risers as I was starting to swing back in the other direction. Unfortunately the ground came up to meet me on that swing. I slammed into the ground, but luck was with me that day. I hit in a marsh and my legs went in all the way to my hips.

After crawling out, I was met by four men in drab uniforms with no markings, but each had a rifle that looked six feet long. They started to speak in what I recognized as Polish. Oh, how I wished I had listened to my Grandmother, who tried to teach me her language. With my hands up, I pointed to my leg pocket and with a slow move; I pulled out a pack of cigarettes and the American flag armband, which I showed them. I gave them my cigarettes and then they marched me to a small town and into the local pokey where I found my co-pilot. They held us a day and by that time. We were both hungry. About noon the next day, they brought us a bowl of jellied meat with vegetables and black bread. It was the best they had and after thirty-six hours we were both darned hungry.

That night, we were taken from the cell and put into an old army truck with a red star. We bumped along very slowly for an hour or two and then pulled up to an old barn. It was dark; we weren't sure where we were. As daylight broke, we could see it was an old barn with wide cracks between the boards and some straw scattered on the floor. We also had some company. There was a B-17 crew that had landed on the strip, only to have the machine gun emplacements open fire on them. The barn we were in was a part of the airfield. We introduced ourselves to the other crew and traded stories. It seems that the Russians would shoot at anything that didn't have a red star on it. The next day, two more of my crew showed up. We talked over the events of the day before and they didn't know if everyone had made it. Then two days later, the last of my crew was brought to the barn. I should add that the barn was constantly guarded by the Russians with automatic type weapons.

That's when I learned the heart breaking news that Hans Niichel and Ken Olsen, my tail gunner were both dead. Provo, Tater and Carlson had attended their funerals in a small town, but they didn't know the name or where it was. They told us that they were both given a High Mass funeral, as they were both Catholics. After the shock was over, we tried to figure out what had happened. Both were found with their chutes fully strung out, but they had not opened. Further speculation as to what happened would not bring them back. I still had one man missing, no one but the engineer had seen him and it was confirmed that his chute opened but he disappeared behind a ridge of trees. That was my other waist gunner, Russell Hughes.

They kept us in the barn for several more days. We were only taken out for breakfast and supper at what we believed was the Enlisted Men's Mess. During the daylight, we could watch through the cracks in the boards and the one thing that angered us the most was watching the Russians march a hundred or more women in a column of two out to the strip. The women were barefoot or had burlap or some kind of wrapping on their feet and each one was carrying a broom that looked like the broom carried by the witch in *The Wizard of Oz*. It had snowed quite heavily the day we arrived and they were going out on the airstrip to sweep it clean for the fighter planes. While we watched through the cracks, we could see the women sweeping the runway. One of the fighters took off, pulled up his gear, and dropped back down buzzing the runway right toward the area where the women were sweeping, causing them to scatter and dive for the ground. A young German boy, who they let come to the barn, and who spoke both Russian and English, told us it was a game the fighter pilots played to see if they could cut off any of the girls' heads. He also told us that when the Russians took the town, there were very few German prisoners taken. All these women workers were considered to be German sympathizers and were therefore treated as prisoners.

Some trucks pulled up to the barn and both the B-17 crew and our crew were loaded and moved out. We pulled out of the airfield and headed toward town. None of us could figure out what was going to happen next because each truck had a guard with his favorite automatic weapon.

About thirty minutes went by and we pulled up to a building, which turned out to be a hotel in downtown Lodz. There we were unloaded and marched to the second floor. Each crew was divided up into two rooms. Out of our ten-man crew, there were only seven of us. Besides the two who had died, we were still missing our waist gunner. Either they had not found him or were holding him someplace else.

The next morning, we were loaded into the trucks again. I told the crew that this was getting to be a pain in the butt. The trucks headed for the airfield. I said, "Well, back to the barn and horsemeat stew with black bread." To our surprise, we were unloaded at a different building. It was the Officers' Mess and we were all seated at a large table with the Base Commander, a Russian Colonel, who sat at the head of the table. By this time all of us were nearly starved. Sometimes we had only one meal a day or just black bread and potato tea, but we decided that beggars can't be choosers.

We finished off breakfast about 10am with a toast by the Colonel to Stalin. There was no water on the table, just large glasses of clear liquid, Vodka. The toast was a chug-a-lug routine. Then it was back in the trucks and to the hotel. By the time we reached our rooms, most of my crew, who had not previously done much drinking, were bombed out of their gourds. That evening about eight, we were taken back to the field for supper which lasted until about eleven o'clock. I can't remember each meal but it consisted mostly of black bread, beet soup, potatoes, cabbage and a dish of meat suspended in a jelly type material with beets, carrots and other vegetables. The only satisfaction we got from eating this kind of food was the fact that the Russian Colonel had to eat it too. There never was any water on the table, but always large pitchers of vodka. If you drank any from your glass during the meal, someone would reach over you and refill the glass from one of the pitchers. I guess this was to make sure that we had a full glass for the toast at the end of the meal. This procedure went on for several days.

On the first night, after we got back into our second story rooms, a man outside of our windows on the main street signaled to us. The windows were seven or eight feet high French doors, opening on to a balcony. He indicated that he had something for us. Using our American know-how, someone quickly made a rope out of the bed covers. We tied the makeshift rope to the railing; it was about twelve feet down to the sidewalk. We pulled him up as he hung on to the rope. When he was in the room, we got the other crew members from the next room. Our conversation with him consisted of gestures and picture drawings, as he knew very few English words. It was like playing a game of charades. He brought us five photos that someone had recently taken and somehow had been developed and printed. They were from the little town that had held the funeral for Hans and Ken Olsen. They showed the burial procession, and the flower covered graves with wooden crosses and nameplates showing the men's identity. The next two nights, we had more visitors; this time one spoke a little more English. They brought with them several large packets of envelopes and asked us if we would mail them to the USA when we got back to England. It was very clear that the Russians were not letting anyone in Poland contact the outside world. Most of them had relatives or family in America and they had had no contact for over eight years. They told us how the Russians mistreated them. Now we had a problem. How would we get these letters out of Poland, if and when they ever let us out! As I was the only one who had kept his parachute, we unrolled it, put the packets of letters in and rerolled the parachute into a nice, neat ball. Then I used the shroud lines to tie it up. The Russians had seen me carrying it around and hadn't bothered to look at it, so we felt we were safe.

By now we had been confined for over two weeks, and there seemed to be no hurry to let us go. At the evening dinner that night, it was the same routine. The Colonel kept asking us about our bases and if it was true that all Americans had guns in their houses. He would question us about our radios and types of call signals. My crew would not answer any of his questions. Once in a while, we gave them a wrong answer.

The Captain from the B-17 crew, warmed by the vodka, was talking too much. I finally got mad and told him to clam-up. In turn, he threatened to Court-Martial me when we got back to England. That did it. I told my crew to do what the Colonel wanted and not follow me. The meal was over and it was time for the toast of vodka to Stalin. Everyone stood up except yours truly. The Colonel asked the German lad who was interpreting why I was not standing. I told him to tell the Colonel that if we were going to be treated like prisoners we wanted to be treated under the rules of the Geneva Convention, and have the Red Cross notified of our internment. When the interpreter told the Colonel what I said, his face turned beet red, he made a fist, and slammed it on the table. He shook his finger at me and speaking in a loud voice said, "You smart, young Lieutenant, in twenty-five years, we will control your country without firing a shot. " Well, at least I knew I wasn't being shipped off to Siberia. We were immediately loaded into the trucks, taken into town and shoved into our rooms. The next morning they got us up early and again took us to the airfield. This time, they did not stop at the Officers' Club, but instead, they took us the Enlisted Men's Mess. I said to my crew, (as we ate a breakfast of black bread and tea), "I think I said something wrong last night."

The B-17 crew was also with us and their Captain was not happy with me, but I could have cared less. Breakfast was a hurried one and then it was back into the trucks again. We kidded about how cold it was in Siberia. The trucks moved out, but this time we were headed for the airstrip. They parked about a hundred feet from a DC 3 with a big red star on it. Now we were getting worried. The guards prodded us with their guns to get off the truck. As we neared the plane, one of my crew shouted, "Hey, there is a US Army Major there." Oh, were we glad to see him. He was a Flight Surgeon and he told us that we were being flown to Poltova, Russia. It was the only airfield the Russians allowed the Americans to use. It was shared with the Russians half-and-half.

As soon as everyone was on board, the Russian pilot and co-pilot started the engines and off we went. No engine run-up, no mag check, just straight up into the Wild Blue. After about fifteen minutes into the flight, I said, "I wish I could get my chute on." I think most of my crew answered me at the same time. "What the hell good would that do you, we are only fifty feet above the trees." Everyone of sat with clenched fingers, grabbing the plank seats so tightly that our knuckles turned white. None of ever had a ride like this; we buzzed the trees all the way to Poltova. At last, we were on the ground and were taxiing toward a line of American and some US planes. After we were unloaded, we were told that no Americans were allowed on the Russian side of the airfield.

They had jeeps waiting for us and a meal of American food, then an issue of clean clothing. Walking in the electric or fleece-lined boots for more than two weeks had given us blisters and athlete's foot. Next it was off to the showers, a shave and a smoke (These were the first cigarettes since we bailed out.) For some of us, that was worse than the bad food. We were taken to debriefing, at which time I turned over all the letters from the Polish people to a Red Cross Officer.

After this, our return trip to England was rather routine. We left Poltova in C-47s for Teheran, Iran, then on to Cairo, where we stayed overnight. The next day it was on to Athens, Rome, and Paris. This was an all expense tour of Europe by courtesy of the ATC. We left Paris for London and then by truck to Old Buckenham and the 453rd. As we entered our base, there were several 6 x 6 trucks moving out, loaded with bomber crews and personnel. All were waving and hollering, goodbye.

Once again we reported to Intelligence and learned that the base was disbanding. The men were going home to train in a new bomber, the B-29, which was going to be used in the Pacific theatre. But our excitement was short lived; we were told we were being reassigned to another bomber group as soon as they could replace my missing crew members. We were going to the 467th Bomb Group at Rackheath and not too thrilled when we found out that we were not going home. Just a few days before we were transferred, my crew came running over to our barracks, where only Parker and I lived. We couldn't believe it. Who was with them but our missing waist gunner, Hughes. His experiences would make a story if its own. It seems he landed behind a hill, near a road and before he got out of his chute, several Russian tanks came up, stopped, pulled him into one, and off they went to the front lines.

Another part of the missing puzzle was found in Dave Patterson's article, *A free Trip to Russia*. His B-24 went down on the same day ours did, only they landed at a small field twenty miles northwest of Lodz. My three crew members, who were at the funeral were taken to the hospital where Dave Patterson was and then were brought to the barn to join us I have since learned the name of the town where Hans Niichel and Ken Olsen were buried from some correspondence that Dave Patterson had from the Historical Dept. in Montgomery, Alabama. So, the puzzle of March 15, 1945 is at last almost completed. Some answers will never be found.

In all probability, we were the only B-24 crew in the 2nd Air Division to be shot down by American-built fighter planes flown by Allied pilots. OR WERE THEY REALLY OUR ALLIES?

I feel thankful for my membership in the Second Air Division, for the many new friends I've made and for the help I received to find more of the missing pieces of the puzzle of that last combat flight.