

# Bringing up the Rear

By Al Soltau (453rd)

## A VETERAN AIRMAN DEFINED

**Too scared to protest**

**Too proud to admit it**

**Too dumb to quit**

I have never had the urge or felt the need to participate until I received the June 1979 Newsletter and read Delmar Wangsvick's story. "We were the Target".

My reason for participating now is that I also went to Brunswick that day. I saw the same fight from a different angle. Del Wangsvick's story placed him in the nose turret of the first aircraft in the formation. I was the tail gunner in the last ship in that formation. I was tail gunner on Lt. Richard C. Holman's Crew 16. We were also part of the original 453rd BG, 732nd BS, Cadre.

I never learned who Dick made mad but it seemed like we drew the Purple Heart slot in the formation more often than would be considered normal. On this mission, again, there was "Pug" (No. 42-52147) stuck on the very end as though it was someone's afterthought. I don't recall how many missions I flew before I found out there was someone else in the war besides the Germans and me. The sky was always clear behind the tail of the last aircraft.

On this particular mission however, this was not the case and I believe luck played a bigger part in getting us home from Brunswick than anything we personally did. Omitted from Del Wangsvick's story was the fact that some replacement crews were with us that day. I don't recall how many, if I ever knew. Col. Miller seldom took this up with Staff Sgts. At any rate, the new crews were placed in the middle of the formation with the veterans (Veterans i.e. – too scared to protest, too proud to admit it, too dumb to quit) flying the perimeter.

We were almost to the target when we heard the alarm that the yellow noses were up. The alarm was the usual military word exchange over the intercom I assume was used in most aircraft. "Christ is that flak?" – "H--- no! Its fighters" "Are you sire its fighters?"—"H--- yes! I'm sure it's fighters"—"Where?" – "Everywhere!" After this exchange you could usually expect to hear Dick Holman's calming voice, a pitch or two above normal, "Get the H-- off the G--D--- horn and why in the h--- doesn't that SOB close it up." We always worried just a little about Dick Holman's language in this type of situation since the rest of us were praying to all the known deities and trying very hard not to miss any.

Almost immediately after this word exchange, although I had not seen any enemy aircraft, a double row of 20mm were coming from the front of the formation and exploding directly above the tail turret. These were followed by the beautifully ugly underside of a FW190 almost clipping the upper edge of the vertical stabilizers. Fortunately for us his aim was off and he had missed us. Unfortunately, so was mine as he appeared healthy as he flew out of range. He did however, succeed in disrupting the formation as almost immediately a B-24 settled in behind us. He had hardly settled in when he was hit and disappeared. It seemed as though before each pass by the FW190's a B-24 would move behind us, get hit and go down. The only one I had time to recognize was Lt. Joe Dejarnett who slid in behind, a little low and to the right. He did not quite make it in to tight formation when he too was hit. Although I saw no flame there must have been fire, as the aircraft appeared to crumble in midair. I saw no chutes and no opportunity to look for any later.

Although the FW's hit us again after the target, it did not appear they did so with the same eagerness as before. I'm sure there are other crews who would contest this statement. At any rate we were among the battered remains that made it home that day.

Ironically, exactly one month later May 8,1944, we returned to Brunswick, again the last ship in the formation. This time we were not so lucky, we stayed in Brunswick.

I'm sure some of the names of Crew #16 will be familiar to Del Wangsvick and others, Lt. Charles Rudloff, flying as a replacement co-pilot, Lt. Ed Farrel, navigator, Lt. Melvin Finkle, bombardier, T/Sgt. Vern Cummings, T/Sgt. Charles Farmer and S/Sgt. Don Sliff all died that day. Lt. Ray Keith flying as pilot, S/Sgt. Harley Jarvis, flying as replacement ball gunner and I were wounded. The radio operator, S/Sgt. Dave Finkle, who managed to get out unhurt, landed near Sgt. Jarvis. Before he was captured he has milked a German cow and was busy milk bathing the badly burned Jarvis when the Germans found them. The Germans later sent Jarvis home.

Another touch of irony, I am writing this exactly 35 years to the day, May 8,1979, after our second trip to Brunswick. As I write, the clearest recollection I have is how few of those who went down on the trips to Brunswick, survived to become POW's. This I guess is further testimony that the pilots and the FW190s of Goering's Yellow Noses were the best Germany had. I don't believe that statement will be contested by anyone from the 453rd.