

90th Bomb Group - Mission to Wewak New Guinea - 1 December 1943

On December 1, 1943, 1st Lieutenant Earl. E. Starkey was co-pilot and one of ten men of the crew of a B-24D Liberator on a mission to bomb Wewak, New Guinea. The pilot and aircraft commander was 1st Lieutenant Harold C. Mills. They were in the 320th Bomb Squadron of the 90th Bomb Group (Heavy), nicknamed "The Jolly Rogers." Others in the crew were 1st Lieutenant Lloyd Page - Navigator, 1st Lieutenant Leonard Caiola - Bombardier, Staff Sergeant George Brunner - 1st Engineer/Top Turret Gunner, S/Sgt Thomas M. "Buddy" Andrews – Engineer/Right Waist Gunner, S/Sgt Victor Belz – Left Waist Gunner, S/Sgt Phillip G. Smith – Tail Turret Gunner (substituting on this mission for S/Sgt Robert Daner who was sick that day) and S/Sgt Jerold Swann – Radio Operator/Belly Flexible Gun Operator, S/Sgt Leo Dziubaniuk-Gunner. This crew had flown a new B-24 from San Francisco to Townsville, Australia, in September 1943. On this day, they had only been flying in combat for about two months.

There were four squadrons, 319th, 320th, 321st and 400th, with the number of planes varying by squadron during this mission. There were a total of 22 B-24's flying this group mission.

The 90th was based at Five Mile Aerodrome (Ward's) at Port Moresby, New Guinea, on the south coast. The one-way flying distance from Port Moresby to Wewak is about 480 miles. The official flight record for the round trip flying time of the Mills crew for this mission was 7 hours, 35 minutes. Though the 90th Bomb Group flew many dangerous missions during the war, Wewak was the deadliest target of the entire war for the men and aircraft of the 90th.

The standard procedure was to climb to 18,000 feet to clear the Owen Stanley Mountains in central New Guinea with peaks over 13,000 feet high. The crews breathed oxygen through their masks and wore heavy clothes against the cold temperatures at altitude even though they were flying above very hot and humid equatorial temperatures at the surface. The squadrons would fly north beyond the New Guinea north coast and turn south for the bomb runs to approach from the sea at about 10,000 feet. There were always heavy anti-aircraft ground fire (flak) and a swarm of fighters to defend against.

Lt. Vineyard and his crew had flown a pre-dawn reconnaissance flight in a solo B-24 over the Wewak Aerodrome which probably alerted the Japanese to an impending attack.

This mission was a full group effort led by Major Ellis "Brownie" Brown. The basic plan called for the fighter-escorted main body to proceed directly up the Markham-Ramu valley to the target, while the 321st was to split off to the north and approach Wewak from seaward to try and confuse the defenders. The mission was to bomb the dispersal stores and supply areas around the busy Japanese aerodrome.

The Japanese were ready. Anti-aircraft fire over the target was heavy, intense, accurate and deadly. Somehow, the P-47 fighter escort was too high, and as the bombers began their run-in to the target, the main body of the group was strung out due to weather. A swarm of Japanese fighter aircraft had been scrambled in time to intercept the American intruders.

Technical Sergeant Gordon Bixler, the nose gunner of Captain William Martin's B-24, recalled the mission as the roughest of his career. All combined, the group's gunners fired more than 8,000 rounds of .50 caliber machine gun ammunition at the enemy fighters that one day. Amid the confusion and intense battle, T/Sgt. Bixler witnessed the demise of Captain Lawrence

N Smith's B-24 and crew of the 320th upon being hit by intense anti-aircraft fire. The Mill's B-24 was trailing immediately behind and below the doomed Smith aircraft. Captain Joseph Rodenberg was leading the attack of the 320th. Capt. Smith's aircraft was behind Rodenberg's aircraft in the slot. The squadron made a second run over the target (second runs are extremely dangerous) and, at bombs away, flak exploded beside Smith's number two engine.

The 320th had become separated from the rest of the group. Smith's engine was smoking and he reported his aircraft was losing speed. Rodenberg slowed the entire squadron to try and cover Smith's crippled aircraft when Japanese fighters attacked in large numbers. The attacks slowed Smith's plane even more causing his aircraft to lose altitude. The Mills/Starkey B-24 was now right behind the Smith plane. The Mills B-24 was flying through thick smoke which was vaporized oil from the damaged B-24 engine. Mills reported they could then not see out of the windshield of their own aircraft from the coating of oil. They had to try to maintain formation by using their side cockpit windows only.

The Mills B-24 was under heavy Japanese fighter attack from front and rear. At this time, the squadron was under attack by an estimated thirty Japanese fighter aircraft. Nose, waist and tail gunners were firing continuously. Their gunners were later credited with having shot down two Japanese fighter aircraft but not before one enemy fighter had fired a 29 millimeter cannon shell into the tail turret, knocking out the tail gun and severely wounding tail gunner S/Sgt Smith.

S/Sgt Buddy Andrews, right waist gunner, says in his diary, "The tail gunner was hit in the head and the leg. A groove cut to the bone across his forehead. He crawled out of his turret and tapped me on the back. There he was, standing with blood all over him, which scared the fool out of me. He said later that he thought I was going to jump out the window. On the way home (Lt.) Caiola (bombardier) came back to help give first aid. I had a morphine syringe and passed it to (S/Sgt) Belz (left waist gunner). He passed it to Caiola, who passed it back to me. (S/Sgt) PG Smith, the one who was hurt, said to give him the damn thing so he could inject himself. Finally, Caiola gave him the shot."

Andrews, continues in his diary, "Our plane was shot up pretty badly. Our plane had some armor plating on it. By my position, we had a quarter inch (thick) piece (of armor) that one 20 mm shell had hit and exploded, putting many holes into the side of the plane. If this armor had not been there, I would have been hit in the chest. We were all lucky that day. (Back) On the ground, they counted over 250 holes, large and small, from flak and fighters firing at us."

In the meantime, Captain. L.N. Smith's plane, nicknamed "Lobo," had spiraled into the jungle, with several parachutes seen deployed by men exiting from the burning plane. Japanese fighters were seen strafing the men as they descended by parachute to the ground. The B-24 and its 12-man crew were never seen again although a later Japanese propaganda broadcast used the name of one of its crew as having been captured. According to knowledgeable sources, captured air crew members were usually tortured and murdered, in violation of the Geneva Convention.

Lost, and presumed killed in action were, Captain Lawrence N. Smith – pilot, 1st Lt. George Dempster – co-pilot, 1st Lt. Harry Stoll – navigator, 1st Lt. Kenneth Twitty – bombardier, Flying Officer (Australia) Daryl Stewart – observer, T/Sgt John Lenaghan – engineer, T/Sgt Paul Waite – radio operator, gunners S/Sgt William Gotcher, S/Sgt. Carl Canady, S/Sgt Sidney Baggett, tail gunner S/Sgt William Bndy and photographer Mercy Rendon Jr.

At the same time, the battle raged in the other squadrons. A plane of the 319th, piloted by Lt. Richard Adams, nicknamed “Pistol Packin Mama” was hit by flak in the number three engine but was able to maintain formation to continue the bomb run. Lt. Fred Blaney, aboard Adams’ aircraft, was lead bombardier and the 319th Squadron’s bombs were dropped on the target on his order. The Adams plane was then attacked by Japanese fighters. It was hit again by flak which set the number four engine on fire. The crew managed to extinguish the fire but it became obvious the stricken B-24 would not be able to return to its base at Port Moresby. Because it was near the coast, the Adams plane was prepared by the crew to ditch in the ocean.

The crew desperately jettisoned everything in the plane to lighten its load and reduce the danger of flying debris upon impact. Lt. Stanley Robeck, also of the 319th, followed the stricken plane with his own B-24 and crew. Adams tried to ease the big, lumbering bomber to a water landing between Long Island and the coast of New Guinea. The B-24 had a poor record of making any kind of water landing. The big bomber cartwheeled as it hit the water. Though Adams and crew on the flight deck survived, the crash into the water killed four of the men upon impact. Afloat in life rafts in the water, the survivors had to wait 24 hours for rescue. Lt. Robeck had noted their position and made his report on return to Port Moresby. The men in the rafts were rescued the following day by U.S. Navy PT boats based at nearby Finschafen while P-47 AAF fighters flew overhead to cover against an attack during rescue which did not occur.

Lt. Adams - pilot, Lt. John Heathe – co-pilot, Lt. Glenn Nations – navigator, Lt. Blaney – bombardier, T/Sgt Joseph Hatcher – engineer, and T/Sgt Lawson Johnson – radio operator, survived the crash, although Lt. Heathe was knocked unconscious and was rescued from drowning by the enlisted men. Killed were gunners S/Sgt William Ball, S/Sgt Lewis Butt, S/Sgt Phillip LaGarde Jr., and S/Sgt Mitchell Balut.

The Japanese attacks scored another B-24 downed from the 321st squadron. Under attack by enemy fighter aircraft, the B-24 nicknamed “Ten Knights in a Bar Room,” piloted by Lt. Oliver Sheehan, was hit in the number two engine by enemy fire. At first, the only sign of trouble was a trail of smoke from the engine. Soon, however, an intense fire with blue flame erupted from the fuselage behind the wing. Probably fed by the plane’s oxygen system, the intense fire quickly buckled the top of the fuselage. Just after three parachutes were seen exiting the aircraft, the tail separated from the plane. It was quickly followed by a separation of the wing from the plane. The separated sections of the burning plane fell quickly into the dense jungle below, not far from the Sepik River, as comrades in other planes flying nearby watched in horror.

For twenty-six years, nothing was heard about the fate of Sheehan’s aircraft. Around 1970, some New Guinea native children playing in the jungle discovered wreckage of an aircraft. A search crew was alerted and they came to the site. The separated tail section was found with the aircraft number visible and confirmed to be that of “Ten Knights in a Bar Room.”

Skeletal remains of six persons were found along with some personal effects in the main fuselage wreckage. The tail section was found about one-quarter of a mile from the main wreckage with the remains of the tail gunner, Staff Sergeant Thomas D. McNamara, still inside. The tail had separated in flight so McNamara was the only person whose remains were found intact in one place. The remains of SSgt. McNamara were laid to rest in the family plot in St. Louis, Missouri, in May of 1971. His widowed mother had been waiting for some news of her son for more than a quarter of a century. The remains of the others found were laid to rest, with full military honors, in a group grave at Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery, St. Louis. A single monument, with

the names of the nine lost airmen marks the grave. No trace was ever found of the three men who were thought to have parachuted from the aircraft.

The lost Sheehan crew were 1st Lt. Oliver Sheehan – pilot, 2nd Lt. Robert Rothwell– co-pilot, 2nd Lt. Wendell Rawson – navigator, 2nd Lt. James Gebbie – bombardier, T/Sgt Uhland Adair – engineer, T/Sgt John Haggerty – radio operator, S/Sgt Rocco Bobbora, asst. radio operator/gunner, S/Sgt Raymond Phillips – asst. engineer/gunner, S/Sgt Richard Wall – gunner and S/Sgt Thomas McNamara – tail gunner

I, Randall Starkey, son of 1st Lt. Earl E. Starkey, am grateful to those who have preserved the above information. I am indebted to Wiley Woods who wrote *Legacy of the 90th Bombardment Group*, John Alcorn who wrote *The Jolly Rogers*, Michael Cundiff who wrote *Ten Knights in a Bar Room* and especially to Thomas “Buddy” Andrews, of Whitmire, South Carolina who survived the mission aboard my father's B-24 that fateful day. Without Buddy's assistance, good memory and detailed diary, much of this story could not have been told. My father never shared combat experiences. Buddy is the last surviving member of the ten men aboard my father's aircraft. At this writing, Buddy is 98 years old and in good health with an exceptional memory.

During its World War II service, from 1942 through 1945, the 90th Bomb Group of the Fifth Air Force, lost over 800 men, mostly ten at a time. They never came home. More than 200 U.S. aircraft of all types and from all units in the theater remain lost in the dense jungle and rugged mountains of Papua, New Guinea, to this day.

More details on the three lost B-24 bombers and crews of this Wewak mission can be found online at:

“Ten Knights in A Bar Room” - 1st Lt. Sheehan - 321st Squadron, 90th Bomb Group
<http://www.pacificwrecks.com/aircraft/b-24/42-72806.html>

“Pistol Packin Mama” - 1st Lt. Adams - 319th Squadron, 90th Bomb Group
<http://www.pacificwrecks.com/aircraft/b-24/42-41209.html>

“Lobo” - Capt. L. N. Smith - 320th Squadron, 90th Bomb Group
<http://www.pacificwrecks.com/aircraft/b-24/42-40830.html>

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