

The first B-17 Mission, 8th AF WWII

41-2578	<i>Butcher Shop</i>	340 BS	Col Frank A. Armstrong, and Maj Paul W. Tibbets
41-9125	<i>Prowler</i>	342 BS	Lt Alexander Blair Jr.
41-9026	<i>Baby Doll</i>	342 BS	Lt James M. Sammons
41-9042	<i>The Berlin Sleeper</i>	342 BS	Lt George D. Burgess
41-19043	<i>Peggy D</i>	342 BS	Capt William B. Musselwhite
41-9017	<i>Heidi Ho</i>	342 BS	Lt Walter F. Kelly
41-19023	<i>Yankee Doodle</i>	414 BS	Lt John P. Dowswell
41-9089	<i>Johnny Reb</i>	414 BS	Lt Richard S. Starks
41-9103	<i>Dixie Demo</i>	414 BS	Lt Clarence L. Thacker
41-19021	<i>The Big Bitch</i>	414 BS	Lt Claire M. Smartt
41-9030	<i>Big Punk</i>	414 BS	Lt William P. Saunders
41-9100	<i>Birmingham Blitzkrieg</i>	414 BS	Lt Thomas H. Border

17 was not "too much airplane" for any one man, the complexities of its operation were too much for any one's memory. This plus other precautions, besides a well thought out campaign of history making flights, worked, for the YBs flew more than 9000 hours totaling a distance of 1,800,000 miles (equivalent to 72 times around the earth at the equator) without serious accident. The publicity garnered from these flights sold the aircraft to the public and after Hitler marched into Poland on September 1, 1939 the future of the B-17's role in WWII was no longer in doubt.

On 17 August 1942 the first mission of the 8th Air Force B-17Es took place, six Aircraft of the 97th Bomb Group attacked Rouen in northern France, and six flew a diversion. The bomb load was 45 x 600 pound bombs. Thus began the four engined heavy bomber offensive against Nazi Germany.

Despite the worst fears, the 12 B-17Es that flew the 8th Air Force's first heavy bomber raid returned with only superficial damage to two aircraft. Its leaders believed the formations might not have been so fortunate had everything gone according to plan. For the attack the two squadrons had flown one behind the other, bombing by three plane formations. Each flight leader flew approximately 150 yards apart. Col Armstrong, who was in "Butcher Shop" in the first squadron, arranged with Capt. Flack flying in "Yankee Doodle," the lead of the second, to radio a message when his unit had bombed, at which Armstrong would turn his squadron to the right allowing the second squadron to join to make a large single formation for better defense against possible fighter interception. Having bombed, Armstrong continued to fly straight ahead, waiting for the radio signal. No signal came. Then Major Paul Tibbets, Armstrong's pilot, spotted Flack's formation out to the right. At that moment a number of anti aircraft shells burst between the two squadrons, in a position to where it was estimated the lead squadron would have turned had it received Flack's 'Bombs Away' signal.

Fortresses and aircraft commanders that flew Mission No 1 all were of the early production model E, the serial numbers were prefixed with a 4.

While Col Armstrong is listed as pilot in 97th BG records, Tibbets was on the plane as well and was certainly the more experienced of the two at the controls of a B-17. Armstrong's crew were mostly members of Lt Glen Leland's and the B-17 was that

assigned to Lt Butcher. Of the 111 men who flew to Rouen, 31 were later missing or killed during hostilities. The copilot of "Johnny Reb" was killed four days later and the pilot wounded; the rest of the crew were missing over Lorient on 21 October. Lt William Tingle, copilot of "Baby Doll," and Lt Harry Erickson, bombardier on "Peggy D," were also missing on the same Lorient raid. All nine men who had flown "Birmingham Blitzkrieg" were MIA over Tunisia in December 1942.

Maj Paul Tibbets was the pilot of the B-29 "Enola Gay" that dropped the first Atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan in August of 1945 that, with the bombing of Nagasaki a short time later, ended WWII.

The crew of "Prowler" except bombardier Lt William Lewis who was not present went down over Sicily in April 1943. The bombardier on "Big Punk," Lt George Ludolph navigator of "Dixie Demo," Lt Jim Watson; and the tail gunner on "Yankee Doodle," Sgt Ray Lewis, were also lost over Sicily flying with other crews. Sgt Robert Nichols, waist gunner on "The Big Bitch," went down with another crew over Italy in August 1943. George Burgess, pilot of "The Berlin Sleeper," completed his tour and returned for a second as squadron commander in another group in Italy only to be killed in a crash. The Fortresses that participated were, along with other B-17Es, transferred to the 92nd BG on 25 August 1942 for use in operational training. In the spring of 1943 the B-17Es were dispersed among other training units and operational B-17 groups where they served for target towing and transport duties. Those that survived to the end of hostilities were broken up at base air depots in the UK.



The Crew of the Memphis Belle

The Memphis Belle

The story now skips forward to May 17, 1943. It was a triumphant day for Capt. Robert K Morgan, and several of his crew members of the 91st Bomb Group, 324th squadron. They became the first Eighth Air Force bomber crew to complete a tour of twenty