

# **A PERFECT JUNE MORNING**

**(or The LAST FLIGHT OF THE NAUGHTY ANGEL)**

**Naughty Angel was the name of B-24 #42-52318 built at Willow Run, MI and was one of the original air echelon planes flown to Giulia Field with the 757th BS, 459th BG of the 15th Air Force. Painted olive drab, at one time after a mission in April, it returned with extensive combat damage and had the right wingtip replaced by the ever capable ground crews. That wingtip was never painted and remained NMF. According to group members the plane was easily recognizable and was frequently used as lead or deputy lead in it's box as a result. By the beginning of June the ship had about as much air time as any of the remaining originals in the squadron and the original contingent. Flight crews had shot down several German fighters and she had unloaded many tons of bombs on enemy targets. Several crews had flown the aircraft and she had always brought them back in spite of flak, fighters and fatigue. Like other planes there was a personality aura to the thing that was unique. None other was like her.**

**On June 9th, the regular crew of Pilot Lts. McManus and Strong, was to fly the aircraft to Munich to bomb marshaling yards. They had been told this would probably be their regular aircraft when they were flying missions and had been promised an engine change when they returned as the units had acquired the necessary hours of operation (confirmed by Sgt. Guthrie). McManus and Strong were also due for R&R on Capri and had packed their bags with the anticipation of leaving soon after they got back from the mission. As they were preparing to depart that morning, a jeep drove up and a Navigator, Lt. Lindberg, was offered a chance to fly his first mission. His crew was new and Lt. Henning, his regular pilot had been grounded some days before for a leg injury suffered in a recent motorcycle accident. Lt. Van Horn, the Navigator McManus' crew had trained with, hadn't flown with them since they reported to the Group on the previous April 29 with a new Radar ship. Van Horn was a radar navigator. Four of their crew had also been assigned to the 376th, as they had come over by boat, and had only recently been located and reunited in the 459th on May 26th.**

**Described as a perfect June day, on the morning of June 9, 1944, 39 B-24's**

of the 459th BG took off and after forming up over the Adriatic along with other Bomb Groups proceeded toward Munich, Germany on mission #56, the 459th's first penetration into Germany proper. Described in the group diaries as "the worst day since Ploesti" and "a Black day for the 459th," it was indeed a less than successful day. Five aircraft were shot down and 50 crewmen lost to the group of whom 35 were captured (14 KIA) and liberated at the end of the war. Two men evaded and returned to Allied control several weeks later.

As the group was flying over northern Italy, fighters from the Udine area of Goering's Squadrons attacked the formation and shot down Lt. Benjamin Paschal of the 759th with the loss of 1 crewman. Not too many minutes later Naughty Angel, the well-known plane in the 757th flown that day by Lt. Gene McManus (co-pilot was Glenn M. Strong Sr.) in D-7 position, or tail end Charlie was shot up by a flock of FWs and after losing 3 engines went down near Lienz, Austria (not Linz, a different town) with all 10 bailing out, but 1 chute unfortunately failed. Some 20 minutes later Me-109's (or possibly the same FWs) shot down the 759th's Lt. Edgar Ferguson, who had fallen back from B-4 with mechanical problems. The seven survivors included John Guinn #228 Bombardier and Ben Nozicka #821 Co-pilot who was blown clear when the plane exploded. Over the target direct flak hits took down the 758's Walter Michaels in C-5 with only the Navigator getting out. Just past the target, the 758's Lt. Oleson lost two engines to flak damage and headed to Switzerland. They nearly made it, but were short when they force landed at Bregenz with no injuries.

MACR #6179 and other diaries witness's describe McManus as being attacked by the fighters. In the words of the seven of the crew as they approached the escort rendezvous point this is what happened:

As the group was in the Udine, Italy area approaching the Tyrolean Alps and climbing Naughty Angel was flying tail end Charley. The engines were tired and though they were keeping up, it was a strain. 2nd Lt. Fred Lindberg, flying his first combat mission, announced the escort was due to pick them up. The crew recalls "We were supposed to be escorted by P-47's on their first mission. Normally, any aircraft in the vicinity we weren't sure of that turned in our direction would draw fire. At the rendezvous point, the fighters came out of the sun and before we could react, we were under attack. They had made the first pass with the group firing virtually not a shot." According to McManus, "They turned out to be FW-190s and

they opened fire. It was like the 4th of July with tracers going every which way."

McManus heard Val Bleech, the tail gunner, over the intercom say "Here come the P-47's" Then someone shouted "Who's firing at those 47's?"

Moses came back "Those aren't 47's, they're shooting at us." "Give 'em hell" McManus replied. McManus further relates "They flew past. I saw a lot of Focke-Wulfs." John Folcik (#283) the radio operator, was in the nose turret and saw "a lot of tracers going past and FW's diving below me."

They seemed to have been coming from everywhere.

Gene McManus relates, "Needless to say, they did a lot of damage to our aircraft. #3 engine went fast and wouldn't feather and we now had a runaway prop. I remember Glenn looking at the bomb bay and saying something about a fire (probably #3 engine as no one recalls a bomb bay fire). #1 was next, but it feathered and that was a big help. I salvaged the bomb load so as to lighten the aircraft and keep it flying. #4 engine was going and losing power." Julius Moses the flight engineer relates " I was looking out the turret and #3 was on fire, I yelled into the intercom 'Glenn, feather #3!' I guess it didn't work because nothing happened, either that or the intercom was out." McManus continues " About that time we were on the way down and it was pretty apparent this was it. I looked out the left side just about the time a German pilot flew up to the left wing. He looked over at me, saluted and did a split-ess and left. I gave the order to abandon ship and Glenn departed. The aircraft was almost uncontrollable. I set the alarm bell though I'm not sure everyone heard the order. (In fact, they couldn't.) I had been trying to hold it level to give everyone a chance to get out. I got out of my seat and disappeared out the bomb bay after pushing Lindberg out ahead of me."

Sgt Julius Moses Eng./Top Turret "I was shooting so close I could see the tracers going in the belly of one and it was an FW. Somebody told me I got him, but I don't know because I didn't see it go down. I think I might have got another, but I was shooting so fast I should have worn out the barrels and there were so many I couldn't be distracted." Sgt. Robert L. Hendrix, firing from the left waist, was wounded and "The bullet that hit me was from an FW coming from below and went by me. After 20 some missions I knew the difference. I'd shot down at least a couple before, though I never confirmed it. I didn't get any that day." Sgt. Marvin Guthrie had just entered the ball turret and couldn't see a thing as the inside had hydraulic fluid leaking onto the ports. Val Bleech recalls "My tail turret hydraulics

were shot out and the right rear stabilizer and rudder was shot off along with it. ( No wonder it was hard to control the aircraft!) The Plexiglas was so opaque from bullets impacts, I couldn't see a thing." All agree, suddenly everything went dead. With #3 engine was on fire and wouldn't feather.

Two others were shot up and failing and McManus and Strong were having trouble flying it level. Mac noticed the communications were dead and looked at Lt. Strong. "Get out Glenn!" Bailout order was given though it couldn't be heard in all parts of the ship and the buzzer was out, but everyone knew it was time to go.

Folcik too noticed everything was too quiet and came out of the nose turret noticing nobody on the flight deck. He pulled the nose wheel release and went out. Lindberg, Strong, McManus, Spargo and Moses were out the bomb bay. Moses came down from the top turret with a pencil sized gash on his cheek from an FW 190 machine gun round and as he headed for the bomb bay Spargo was crouched there looking down contemplating his jump. He yelled "Jump John, We've got to get out of here!" and shoved him out with his foot. Moe jumped and was apparently the last out " Right after I jumped The plane started its spin and we were pretty low by then."

In the tail section, Bleech and Guthrie fortunately had their turrets stuck in a position where exit was still easily possible. Sgt. Bleech after climbing out of his stuck turret had opened the belly hatch and on going back for his parachute noticed a body go by, obviously someone bailing out. Guthrie gave Hendrix a shot of Morphine. In the midst of this havoc they were still shooting at the attacking fighters. As the intercom was dead, they all figured it was time to go. Bleech tied off Hendrix's chute to a heater cord and pushed him out after the others had jumped, then he too was out. Vincent Marimpetrie, R. Waist Gunner, was the only casualty when his parachute failed to open properly. "Pete" had secured himself a silk chute and felt it was the best to have. It had apparently been damaged by an incendiary round.

To a man the one comment is "We were scared shitless." John Spargo, the bombardier, concluded "The loneliest feeling in the world is knowing you are going down and you are watching the rest of the formation fly away knowing they can't do a thing to help you."

McManus reported one fighter disintegrating at about the 9:00 position. Bleech saw one pilot bail out and descending under a unique black parachute and another fighter streaming smoke as it descended earthward

apparently out of control. Moses had another in his sights "...so close I could see his face." He was pretty certain they got that one too and Bleech agrees. Had Naughty Angel take out four fighters before going down? She very well may have with an experienced combat crew aboard. At any rate they did not let go without a fight. Had the plane been attacked so aggressively by being recognized by the on unpainted wingtip after returning from so many missions? Very possibly. After all had bailed out, Naughty Angel went into a side slip and crashed in a ball of fire into the base of an Alpine mountain.

Val Bleech recalls "Mac and I about collided in our chutes. I tried desperately to control my swinging and to avoid a collision, but to no avail. In class, they told us to control direction by pulling on one of the risers, but my chute didn't have risers, just 24 shroud lines from the metal plate on my chest. I gave up on this activity when I literally crawled up one of the lines until half of the canopy collapsed. Mac landed in a small fruit tree in front of a house and while he was disentangling him self the lady of the house ran out with a slice of bread and a glass of milk. The German soldiers arrived at about the same time, so I don't think he had time to eat the snack. I landed in a field which belonged to the biggest, fiercest, meanest bull that Germany could provide. I hit the ground in a downward swing and had the wind knocked out of me. It was an eternity before I could breathe, but fortunately the bull didn't immediately charge. I had a chance to hop over a split rail fence, but the bull persisted in following me all along the fence, bellowing and pawing the ground. I almost shot him in self protection and I almost shot the civilian that captured me. Two of my wiser decisions not to.

Folcik came down in a tree and was trying to free himself when Hendrix came along and helped him down despite his wound. Folcik sat him down as two youths came along, one with a pistol. The older one pointed it at Hendrix and said something in German. Hendrix looked at the pistol and said, "You think you're going to do something with that pea-shooter? Those guys up there just got done trying to kill me". The lad said in English, "Are you hurt"? and noticed his wound. He then proceeded to offer some assistance. Hendrix was later sent to the military hospital at where he was treated.

Guthrie was immediately captured by two home guard people who were promptly chastised by the military guard he was turned over to because they hadn't bothered to disarm him, He still had his loaded .45. Lts. Strong

and McManus at one point were stood against two trees about 20 feet apart while the home guard took turns pointing their old rifles at them and pulling the triggers on empty chambers. "It was scary," says McManus.

They were all taken to the town jail with the exception of Moses. He landed in a gully and was captured near dusk. He had been beaten and was relieved to have been turned over to a Luftwaffe officer who saved him further misery. The officer treated him fairly, but nevertheless he was put in solitary confinement by the local Gestapo on suspicion of being Jewish, but was released to the Luftwaffe later when they were convinced otherwise. Val Bleech relates, "They emptied the drunks out of the jail and we stayed there overnight. Unluckily I drew a cell all by myself and damn near froze to death. The other guys shared a cell so they were warmer with two blankets versus me and 1 blanket. They then put us on a train for Frankfurt where we got split up and the enlisted men were all sent to Luft IV."

McManus says, "No one seemed to live in Frankfurt. It had been bombed by the British in retaliation for the bombing of Coventry. People used Great Railroad Station as a meeting and gathering place. When they spotted Glenn and me they must have figured a lynching would be a perfect way to spend some time. Our German guards were very professional and kept the mob away. In my opinion a very close call. WHEW!"

Epilogue - Naughty Angel as part of the original air echelon and had been flown to Italy by Lt. Philip McLaughlin. On July 28, 1944 now Capt. McLaughlin was piloting a Mickey ship flying in A-2 over Ploesti. Aboard was Lt. William Van Horn-Radar Navigator and according the best determination it was the same ship he, McManus, Strong, Folcik, Guthrie, and Moses had flown over and delivered to the 459th on April 29. The ship took a direct flak hit in the bomb bay just after bombs away and exploded shortly after. There were two survivors, Lt. Hawkins and Lt Webb.

Lindberg's regular crew with Lt. Albert Henning were shot down over Moosbierbaum, Austria two weeks later on June 26th and also taken prisoner. Lindberg's fate was clear.

Lts. McManus and Strong were delivered to the South Compound of Stalag Luft III along with Lindberg on June 22nd. Spargo was sent to West Compound. The rest of the crew spent the remainder of the war at

**Luft IV. Hendrix after being treated and recovering from his severe wound was sent to Luft IV. With the exception of Hendrix and Guthrie being sent to Luft I all others were eventually evacuated to Moosberg and were liberated by Patton's forces on April 28, 1945.**

**Patton's first words to them were "I'll bet you sons of bitches are happy to see me." They were.**