

War Era Story Project 2012

Submitted by: Shirley Rough

Current home town: Beavercreek, Ohio

Age: 59

AN EIGHTH AIR FORCE BOMBER STATION, ENGLAND. – With a dying man on board, two engines out of commission and the right wing virtually in shreds following attacks by Nazi jet-propelled fighters, the B-17 Flying Fortress *Band Wagon II* piloted by 1st Lt. Thurman M. Geren, Delta, Ohio, was flown for two hours until friendly territory was reached, where the crew bailed out behind enemy lines.

En route to a mission to Ingolstadt, *Band Wagon II* quivered from nose to tail when two “Jerries” shot out of the clouds and opened fire. One side of the 401st Bomb Group Fortress was sprayed with 30 MM shells. Holes caused the right wing to gape open. The flap elevator controls and taileron were ripped, and engines 3 and 4 stopped functioning. Another projectile made a direct hit on the top turret and struck the gunner in the head. The bomber reeled out of the formation and began to lose altitude, but at 13,000 feet, Lt. Geren and his copilot 2nd Lt. Eugene E. Collis, Westerville, N.J., regained partial control and decided to make a try for friendly territory.

Four 1,000 pound bombs were salvoed, but six others stuck in their racks, bent by enemy shells, and 2nd Lt. James E. Deyo, Oelwein, Iowa, bombardier-navigator, went to work. Although his navigation instruments had been knocked out, he gave Lt. Geren the proper heading to avoid flak areas, helped the injured engineer out of the top turret and dressed his wounds. He then went into the bomb bay and, with the bomb bay door crank, knocked the six bombs off their shackles.

It was a Trojan task to get the bomber back to friendly territory. Because of the damage to the wing, she stalled out at 140 miles an hour, and it was necessary to boost the two good engines to maximum power to maintain a high air speed and keep the nose down to prevent a stall. Bad weather made the pilots’ job even more difficult. Using dead reckoning navigation, Lt. Deyo directed the crippled craft until it reached the vicinity of Saarbruecken (Germany), where Lt. Geren notified the crew that because of the battle damage and the shortage of gasoline, they were to prepare to bail out. He knew it was impossible to attempt a landing.

The injured gunner’s parachute was tied to the static line and he was dropped toward the ground. Other crew members followed and, within seconds, commander Geren went out. *Band Wagon II* slipped into a spin and crashed. The crew came down in an uninhabited area and soon were in the hands of AMG men (Italian Allied Military Government) who put them up for the night in former German officers quarters and then took them to a nearby airfield where they were flown back to England. The wounded engineer was dead when rescue parties reached his body.

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This was Lt. Thurman Geren's last mission. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for bringing his crew to safety. He returned to fly over 100 missions in the Berlin Airlift, Operation Vittles. This is the actual ripcord from bailing out of the flight.

