

Robert H. Beck
Waist gunner on the 423rd Sq Harold Brown crew
Reported to the 306th Bomb Group at Thurleigh on 17 July 1944

Preface:

Robert Beck in late November 2012, spoke with then-volunteer Secretary Barbara Neal, who called him in Maryland to relay a message from a crew mate's widow who was concerned since she had not heard from him in a while, and to ask him about his crew mates for working on obituaries. During the call, he spoke of the following article-letter that he had written about the 423rd Squadron. Sometime since October 2007 he sent it to the Editor of the "306th Echoes." Even though he realized it likely needed some editing, he sent it because in all his years of reading Echoes, Beck could count only three stories about the 423rd. He was quite irritated that he had never received any response from the Editor. The Secretary asked that he send her a copy of it, and she would see what she could do. The conversation continued, on other topics, including his brief recap about his life (further below).

In early July 2014, Beck got a "Round Tuit" and sent to the Secretary a package of material including his article-letter, along with his response to the 306th Questionnaire. The Secretary called Beck on 24 July 2014, confirming receipt of his package; she called him again nine months later, on 21 April 2015, wishing him Belated Happy 95th Birthday, and asking for his permission to post his article-letter at our website. Beck gave his permission for us to post his material, saying "Fine, if you think it's worthwhile." Beck's package included excellent photocopies on cardstock-quality paper (scans are included in this compilation, for posting at our website):

- his 7-page typed letter-article, which included no date or return address;
- a sharp version of his Harold Brown crew photo, with names Beck had earlier written on the back and noting he was now in 2014 the only surviving crew member;
- his personal Operational Sortie Record;
- his personal Flight Record;
- copy of their plane's brown leather 8" diameter patch showing the name "Busman's Holiday" on a B-17 superimposed on the 8th Air Force insignia; and
- two pages from Russell Strong's book, *First Over Germany: A History of the 306th Bombardment Group* (the 4th and 5th pages in Chapter 21 "Routine Missions? October - December 1944") covering the 22 October 1944 midair collision between the planes of 1st Lt. Harry J. Alyea, leading the high squadron, and Capt. Joseph B. Mathis, pilot of "Lilly Marlene" and veteran of a year's flying with the 423rd [NOTE: in the Library section of our website, www.306bg.us, Strong's entire book is available for individual, non-commercial use, for which a donation is requested to the 306th Bomb Group Historical Association]

Beck's late November 2012 recap of his life included:

- He married in 1957; his wife Barbara died in November 2002. They had two sons and one daughter; his daughter gave him three grandsons, then ages 20, 14, and 6. The arrival of that youngest grandson, Beck wryly noted, meant "no space for Grandpa to move in with them." He noted he was then

pondering selling his house and moving into an apartment in the next year, since maintaining a house was getting to be too much for him.

- Beck had enlisted early in the Army Air Corps. He was encouraged to go into the Infantry while waiting the call to report to the Air Corps, but he said no, he could not do that as he was sole support for his mom.

- In 1943 he was called up. He attended gunnery school; bombardier school; and then six weeks of navigator school, from which he "washed out due to the ground calculations, though did fine in the air."

- He then was sent to Dallas for engineer school, but they closed that school down, formed up the crews, and they were all sent to England, arriving in mid-July 1944.

- After Thurleigh, while still in the service, for a while he fought forest fires in Washington state. He sailed on a tanker for about six or seven months.

- After he got out of the service, in about April or May 1945, he worked in construction for a while, and dabbled in real estate.

- His career was as a salesman, "selling in various fields over the years." His 2018 newspaper obituary published in the *Carroll County Times* in Maryland, noted that he sold building supplies, and was very social.



4484



Dear Sir:

I was a gunner on Lt. Harold Brown's crew in the 423rd squadron from July 1944 to January 1945. The reason for this letter is to recount some of our experiences during that time. In all of the issues of 'The Echo' I've received there were only three in which the 423rd was mentioned. Hopefully after reading this material you might consider it for a possible write up.

Our crew consisted of the following: Pilot Lt. Harold Brown, co-pilot Lt. Daryl Phillips, navigator Lt. William Guilfoyle, bombardier Lt. Leslie Berry, engineer Tony Thomas, radio operator Chas Fatica, ball gunner Marvin Barker, tail gunner John Ferrari and waist gunner Robert Beck.

It's important to note that the officers all flew a mission or two for orientation. Because of this, they all completed their missions before the rest of the crew. On the first mission that the navigator Guilfoyle flew, a piece of flak hit him in the corner of his right eye. Fortunately it didn't do any real damage, but earned him a Purple Heart as a result.

At our first meeting as a crew, Lt. Brown informed us that "if anyone wants to be a hero find another crew. My job is to do two things – drop bombs and get us all back safely," and he did just that.

Attached to this letter is a copy of a report that Lt. Brown gave at de-briefing of a mid-air collision that happened over the Channel. I don't have the date but it's in Brown's report. At the time of the briefing no one knew that tail gunner had landed in the channel, he was the sole survivor. He was picked up by Air Sea Rescue and was returned to base. They offered him some R&R, but he refused since he only had a couple more missions to fly to finish his tour. The next mission he flew, the plane was shot down and he remained a P.O.W. for the rest of the war. Fate is a fickle lady!

The next paragraph is important because it explains how I was able to do what is later re-counted.

As an air force cadet I was classified as a bombardier/navigator but to my dismay I "washed out" for ground school navigation. I went through bombardier school, gunnery school and my flight navigation was okay. Because I was the waist gunner, I was able to move around more freely than the rest of the crew. Of all of the missions we flew, the one to bomb the small German town of Gera near Merseburg was one of the most dangerous, since it was in the heart of the oil refineries, and the flak was intense. Coming off the target we lost the right in board engine so it had to be feathered, and we began to lose altitude. We were hit again and lost the left outer engine so now we were on our own – a 'sitting duck'. Lt. Brown put out a 'may-day' call and shortly after, two P51's answered. They escorted us to a field that had been used as a German fighter base. The Nazi flag was still over the fireplace in the building that had been the officers club. We now had two engines feathered, the hydraulic system was shot up, and we couldn't get the wheels down so we were set for a crash landing. The tail and ball gunners, radio operator and myself were in the crash position sitting with our backs against the bulwark between the waist and the bomb bay, knees up and our parachutes behind our heads. As we were letting down for the approach, we ran into a temperature inversion that iced up the cockpit windows so now Lt.

Brown couldn't see the field. He called Berry the bombardier to see if he could see the field and Berry said that he could, so Brown said, "you'll have to guide me in". Shortly after that the Lt. was able to get his window open in order to stick his head out and at that point was able to see part of the runway. So between the pilot and the bombardier they brought the plane in on it's belly. The props were all bent up, the ball turret was a wreck and the plane was full of holes. The good part of all this was no one was injured and we were listed as MIA for four days before we were flown back to our field.

The pick-up plane was a stripped down B-17 and when the pilot landed he didn't stop but just slowed down. We had to run to catch up so we could throw our gear into the plane. He flew so low over the channel that we all swore we could hear the waves hitting the bottom of the plane. When we landed we had to reverse the process because he had another 'pick-up' crew and he was in a hurry.

There are a couple of other incidents that I would like to share, like the following:

We were leaving the target when we realized that there were six bombs left in left bay. They hadn't released when the bombardier hit the salvo switch. Lt. Brown called me on the inter-com and asked if I could release them and I assured him I could. I took off the flak vest, Mae West and unplugged the heated suit. I hooked up a 'walk around' oxygen bottle and went up into the bomb bay. We were still at 25000 feet and the flak was still flying. I picked up the hook, it was a tool designed just for this type of emergency. I couldn't reach the bombs on the left side so I had to put my left foot on the step that was on the side of the plane. My right foot was on the catwalk that went thru the bomb bay. So there I was at 25,000 feet straddled, looking down at flak bursting and hearing it hit the plane and trying to reach the shackles that held the bombs. I

managed to release the three on the left, the three on the catwalk side were easy. I called the pilot and informed him all six were gone, he then closed the doors and we flew back to our field.

Another occurrence happened when we were late taking off so we missed the rendezvous point, this meant that if we couldn't find a spot in 'the stream' we would have to abort and lose a mission. So we had to make a decision to abort or go into occupied territory. If we could find a target, we could count this as a mission rather than and 'abort'. We were flying with a 'Toggeleier' since Berry our crew bombardier was in the hospital. Shortly after entering enemy territory, Lt. Brown called on the inter-com and asked if I remembered how to use the bombsight and I told him I did. He then told me to come up to the nose and take over the sight. He never told me the reason why and I never asked. We were pretty sure that we wouldn't run into flak or fighters since the Germans were pulling back and taking the guns and fighters with them.

It was a beautiful day, sun shining, and no clouds, so visibility was good. Looking ahead I could see a string of barges tied up to a pier. I called them off to Lt. Brown and he asked if I could hit them, I told him I was sure I could. I set the Intravolometer on train so the bombs would drop one at a time rather than salvo.

The Germans would mount flak guns on barges and move them up and down the channels and catch our bombers on the way to and from their targets. By this point the guns were hard to pin point. I hoped that the barges I had in the sight were some of them. Hopefully we could catch them by surprise. I lined them up in the sight and when the indices in the sight met, the bombs dropped and marched up the string of barges and blew them and the piers into pieces. So we accomplished another mission and returned back to our field.

At another time, again I don't remember the mission or the date, we were leaving the target and still getting heavy flak, I happened to look up to the radio room and saw that Fatica's head was lying on his desk. I called the pilot and told him I was going to check because he wasn't answering on the inter-com. I strapped on an oxygen bottle and went up to the radio room. Flak had cut the oxygen hose and the radio operator had passed out. I quickly hooked up the emergency hose and plugged it into his mask. Fortunately I got there in time to revive him. His right hand was lying on the table and there was a hole between his thumb and first finger where a piece of flak had come through. Over the years we stayed in touch and he always thanked me for saving his life. 'Chuck' was nineteen and was the youngest of the crew but he died in May of this year while jogging. His wife had died previously, but he went on and lived a full life. He was a good friend, those of us still living will miss him.

The next two tales have to do with our tail gunner, John Ferrari. He had missed a couple of missions with us because of a stay in the hospital. Toward the end he had to fly with other crews. On one of his last missions the 306th was to meet a group from the 15th A.F. to bomb Munich, Germany. The 306th was on time at the rendezvous but the 15th was late so the 306th left for the target. The 15th coming up from Italy appeared at the target just as the bombs were released. They were above the 306th and their bombs fell thru the 306th formation. As luck would have it none hit any 306th planes but John said one came so close he could read the numbers on it.

Since he was a tail gunner with no crew he never knew when or what crew he would be with. The Ops. Officer gave a week's pass so he went into London and the third day he said he got lonely since he had no one to 'pal with'. He returned to base and asked the Ops. Officer to give him a 'milk run' so he could finish his 35th mission. The next day he went to briefing and found the target was

to be Berlin. He said it was the worst mission he'd ever been on. The German fighters were flying thru their own flak to get to the bombers. With P 38's and the 51's you were afraid to shoot. The 'milk run' could have been his last mission in more ways than one. After he returned back to the states, being in the reserves, he was called up and went to Korea to fly 18 missions on B 29's.

There are a couple of other incidents that I would like to share that may prove of interest. As you probably know the winter months in England are cold and foggy making flying a problem. There was an R.A.F. emergency field set up if the returning bombers couldn't use this field in the event their fields were 'socked in' meaning they couldn't land in which case they diverted to the R.A.F. field, named Carney in northern England. They had an extremely wide runway, in fact if there were red flares indicating wounded aboard, they might land two planes at a time. On each side of the runway there was diesel fuel burning and the reason for that was to burn off the fog. In the month of January we landed there more times than we did at our own field.

After landing one time we found a hole in one wing that a B8 shell had gone through. On another occasion we were letting down to land when Tony our engineer who was standing in the top turret yelled to the pilot "dive down", since the pilots were trying to land their attention was on the field while Tony's was watching for other aircrafts. At that point two things happened, we dove and the Mosquito pulled up. He missed our vertical stabilizer by inches, another of the fickle finger of fate working again.

On our base we didn't sleep in the Quonset huts with the rest of the crews, we had our own hut. We took the wood that the replacement wings came in, dug a shallow trench and stood them up in the trench and set the tent pole up and pulled the tent over the sides of the crates, fixed up a door and put a window in it. We put a floor of cement blocks one inch thick and two feet square. Then we took a

walk-around oxygen bottle and filled it with waste oil, added a small tube on the bottom and hung it on the tent pole so the tube would drip oil into the stove. Needless to say come winter, we were nice and cozy and warm. Also there was a potato patch on the farm behind our hut and we would 'borrow' some to fry with our eggs when we could get them.

These are just some of the incidents and occurrences that happened, I have many stories. Along with Lt. Brown's briefing report of the collision I've added copies of our flight records, missions flown, targets lengths of time. There is also a crew picture with the names of crew, and the names of the crew that are still with us. A copy of the squadron insignia and a picture of a leather 80th A.F. patch that one of the fellows made.

I'm hoping this letter and its contents will prove of interest after all these years. If you decide to use it, it will need editing...it's been a long time since English class.

If you do read this and have any questions, please feel free to contact me at #410-922-5438. I would appreciate if you could let me know that you received this information. Thank you greatly for your time and attention.

Respectfully,

S/Sgt. Robert H. Beck
423rd Sqdn. 306th B.G.

NAME BECK, ROBERT H.

SQUADRON

423rd

GROUP

306th

RANK S/Sgt.

DUTY

Aerial Gunner

SERIAL NUMBER

13112997

Date of Missions	Group Mission Number	Individual Mission Number	Location of Targets	Country	Time	Oper. Total Time
July 28, 1944		1	Merseberg	Germany	9:15	
Aug. 5, 1944		--	Abortion		4:20	
6		2	Stendel	Germany	9:25	
7		3	Montbartier	France	8:20	
8		4	Caen Area	France	6:00	
12		5	Chaumont	France	7:25	
13		6	Rouen Area	France	4:40	
14		7	Chivres	Belgium	7:30	
15		8	Frankfurt-Eschborn	Germany	7:55	
24		9	Vorden	"	9:30	
25		10	Peenemunde	"	9:35	
27		11	Wilhelmshaven	"	8:00	
Sept. 1, 1944		--	Abandoned		6:20	
3		12	Ludwigshaven	Germany	8:15	
5		13	Ludwigshaven	"	8:30	
11		14	Lutzendorf	"	8:00	
13		15	Merseberg	"	8:45	
22		16	Kassel	"	7:35	
27		17	Koln	"	6:45	
28		18	Magdeburg	"	8:55	
Oct. 7, 1944		19	Ruhland	"	10:00	
9		20	Schweinfurt	"	8:45	
14		21	Koln	"	7:20	
22		22	Hannover	"	7:40	
Nov. 2, 1944		23	Merseberg	"	8:00	
4		24	Harburg	"	8:00	
5		25	Frankfurt	"	9:00	
16		--	Abortion		5:00	
21		26	Loerarden	Holland	7:25	
29		27	Mishurg	Germany	8:00	
30		28	Gera	"	9:00	
Dec. 9, 1944		29	Stuttgart	"	9:30	
11		30	Frankfurt	"	9:00	
12		31	Merseberg	"	7:00	
15		32	Kassel	"	8:00	
24		33	Giessen	"	9:00	
30		34	Mainz	"	7:30	
Jan. 7, 1945		35	Urskirchen	"	7:00	500:10

CERTIFIED CORRECT.

THOMAS E. WITT

Major, AC.

Ops. Officer,

306th Bomb. Gr. (H)

CONFIDENTIAL

