

“Mary Ruth” Memories of Mobile ... We Still Remember

by Lowell L. Getz



“Mary Ruth” Memories of Mobile crew. Kneeling from the left: James P. Feerick, bombardier; William R. Brown, tail gunner. Standing, from the left: Henry “Maurice” Crain, ball turret gunner; Raymond Litzo, right waist gunner; James O. Akers, flight engineer/top turret gunner; William “Glenn” Allen, left waist gunner; Richard O. Maculley, radio operator; Vincent J. Bliley, navigator; Kenneth L. Brown, pilot; James H. Quenin, copilot. Sgts Allen and Maculley were killed when the “Mary Ruth” was shot down on 22 June 1943. (Kenneth Brown)

There was an unusual sense of anticipation at one of the hardstands at USAAF Station 121, otherwise known as Bassingbourn, England, that early Monday morning of 17 May 1943. On the hardstand was B-17F Flying Fortress, No. 41-24485, *Memphis Belle*, 324th Bombardment Squadron, 91st Bombardment Group (Heavy), VIII Bomber Command.

Crew Chief Master Sergeant Joseph M. Giambrone was busily overseeing the last minute ground crew maintenance work. Today’s mission, to the German U-boat pens at Lorient, France, was special for the crew of the *Memphis Belle*. If they returned, the pilot, Captain Robert K. Morgan, and his ten-man crew would have completed 25 combat missions. Anyone completing 25 missions would not fly any more combat and be sent back to the States by VIII Bomber Command. *Memphis Belle* would fly her own 25th mission two days later when First Lieutenant Clayton L. Anderson and his crew flew her to the U-boat yards at Kiel, Germany.

Major William Wyler (the renowned Hollywood movie director) and Hollywood cameraman, Captain William Clothier, had flown several missions on the *Memphis Belle*, including one to Heligoland Island the previous Saturday, to film air combat action. On 13 June Captain Morgan and his crew would leave Bassingbourn to fly the *Memphis Belle* back to the States. There they would receive three months of well-earned public acclaim at War Bond rallies throughout the country. From film taken Saturday and on the other missions, Major Wyler would produce the highly acclaimed documentary movie, ‘The Memphis Belle.’

At nearby Bassingbourn hardstand that same Monday morning, another ground crew, headed by Master Sergeant Bert 'Black Jack' Pierce, 28, from Harrison, Arkansas, was also busily engaged. They were preparing B-17F Flying Fortress No. 42-29536, "*Mary Ruth*" *Memories of Mobile*, 401st Squadron of the 91st Group, for today's mission to Lorient.

The crew quietly went about its pre-flight routines. The flight deck crew: pilot, First Lieutenant Kenneth L. Brown, 24, Hodgenville, Kentucky, previously an Aircraft Armorer Staff Sergeant; co-pilot, Second Lieutenant James H. Quenin, 26, Fort Smith, Arkansas, formerly a Signal Corps Sergeant. The nose crew: navigator, Second Lieutenant Vincent J. Bliley, 26, Ottumwa, Iowa, a former staff artist for the Ottumwa, Iowa Courier; bombardier, Second Lieutenant James P. Feerick, 24, New York City, who earlier had completed a year's enlistment in the 102nd Engineers, 47th Division, New York National Guard. The rest of the crew: flight engineer and top turret gunner, Technical Sergeant James O. Akers, 23, Starbuck, Minnesota, a construction worker in Idaho when he enlisted; radioman, Technical Sergeant Richard O. Maculley, 19, Chester, Pennsylvania, recognized for his artistic abilities, who left High School at the age of 17 to enlist; ball turret gunner, Staff Sergeant Henry 'Maurice' Crain, 41, 'Pops' of the group, originally from Canyon, Texas, with a Bachelors Degree in Journalism from the University of Texas, who had been working as a city editor for the New York Daily News and as a literary agent; left waist gunner, Staff Sergeant William 'Glenn' Allen, 21, Athens, Georgia, who was operating two small neighborhood grocery stores when he entered the Service; right waist gunner, Staff Sergeant Raymond Litzo, 22, Denver, Colorado, who was attending the University of Denver, majoring in Business Administration and a member of the golf team when he left school to join the Army Air Corps; tail gunner, Staff Sergeant William R. Brown, 22, Eldorado, Illinois, who had been working for a PepsiCola distributorship.



Loren and Mary Ruth Roll, wedding photo; March 1943. While flying No. 42-29536 to England in March 1943, First Lieutenant Loren Roll and his crew had to stay over in Mobile, AL for several days while the aircraft underwent repairs. On Friday, 12 March, he met Mary Ruth King in his hotel lounge. They began talking and then dated for the next week. On Friday the 19th they were married. The crew arranged to have painted on the nose of the plane, "*Mary Ruth*" *Memories of Mobile*. Loren and his crew flew No. 536 on to England, via Brazil and North Africa, leaving her at an English air base in southern England. They never saw No. 536 again. For more details, see web site: http://www.ideals.uiuc.edu/html/2142/183/love_story.html. (Loren Roll)

There was nothing unique about "*Mary Ruth*" *Memories of Mobile* to attract attention of a Hollywood director. Today's mission would be only her third over enemy territory. The nose painting was not sufficiently artistic to warrant inclusion in any of the books that would appear in later years depicting 'nose artwork' of military aircraft. There was no painting of a perky bathing

beauty such as *Memphis Belle*. Rather, there was simply “*Mary Ruth*” *Memories of Mobile* in plain block dark yellow letters. No. 536 had been named by an unknown crew back in the States. When Lieutenant Brown and his crew were assigned the already-named plane, superstition prevented them from making a change.



Original nose art of “*Mary Ruth*” *Memories of Mobile*. Loren Roll had the nose art placed on his plane at the repair facility in Mobile after he and Mary Ruth King were married. (Loren Roll)



A close-up of the nose art of “*Mary Ruth*” *Memories of Mobile*. The original nose art letters were over-painted in block yellow, but retaining the original letter sizes, by the paint and fabric shop at Basingbourn when she arrived there and assigned to the 401st Squadron. (Ray Bowden)

“*Mary Ruth*” *Memories of Mobile* would fly four more combat missions. On 29 May she would fly to ‘flak city’, St Nazaire, France.



Joe Harlick Photo T431E
ST. NAZAIRE, FRANCE U Boat Pens 29 May 1943 Alt. 23,800 Ft.

St. Nazaire, 29 May 1943: Strike photos, as the bombs were hitting. The “Mary Ruth” flew the No. 2 position (right wing of the lead plane) in the No. 2 element of the high squadron on this mission. Note the precision of the bombs in hitting the sub pens; a few are exploding in the water immediately in front of the openings to the pens. (Joe Harlick)

On 11 June the “Mary Ruth” would attempt to go to the docks of Bremen, Germany. When Bremen was found to be clouded over, the Group would divert to Wilhelmshaven. The day *Memphis Belle* and her crew would leave Bassingbourn to return home to the States, “Mary Ruth” *Memories of Mobile* once again would fly to Bremen. This time she would be successful. On 22 June *Memphis Belle* and her crew would wind up their three-day ‘tour kick-off’ celebration in Memphis, Tennessee. Earlier that day the now sleek “Mary Ruth” would become a scattered pile of smoking rubble in a forest 4 kilometers west of the small village of Wulfen in the Ruhr Valley of Germany. “Mary Ruth” *Memories of Mobile* would not quite make it to her final target, the synthetic chemical plant at Huls.



Audio Visual # K026 Joe Harlick Collection C3030
MARY RUTH 42-29536 LL-A In formation over France May 1943

B-17F No. 536, “Mary Ruth” *Memories of Mobile*, on a combat mission to Huls, Germany, 22 June 1943. She was shot down later on this mission. The B-17 in the upper left, No. 475, “Stric-Nine”, was shot down over the Channel 10 July 1943. The plane from which the picture was taken, No.069, “Our Gang”, was shot down 17 August 1943. (Joe Harlick)

Three flights of two FW190s in a frontal attack from slightly high off the right wing of “Mary Ruth”, about ten degrees to the right, would set the No. 4 engine afire, damage the cockpit

flight controls, and knock out much of the electrical system. “*Mary Ruth*” would drop out of formation. From all sides, FW190s would then attack the now alone “*Mary Ruth*”, their 20mm cannon shells exploding in the cockpit destroying more controls. The bail-out bell would be rung. Sergeant Akers would leave the top turret just before it blew up, throwing exploding ammunition into the cockpit. Lieutenant Brown would struggle to hold the plane level as the right wing burned away, all the while exploding shells sending fragments of the instrument panels into his head and face. Lieutenant Feerick would make two frenzied trips from the bombardier compartment to the bomb bay to work on the shackle mechanisms of two bombs with a screwdriver, eventually causing them to fall free. This would allow the forward crew to escape by squeezing around the unsalvoed bombs. Lieutenant Brown’s efforts would buy time for the rear crew to get to their escape hatches. For his efforts on behalf of the crew, Lieutenant Brown would be awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. Before all the crew could bail out, the outer wing would blow off throwing “*Mary Ruth*” into a spinning downward dive, the centrifugal force of which would prevent the remaining crew from leaving the plane. Almost immediately thereafter the “*Mary Ruth*” would explode, throwing free all but Sergeants Allen and Maculley, who would remain trapped within the falling fuselage.

In a few minutes it would all be over. “*Mary Ruth*” *Memories of Mobile* would be no more. Sergeants Maculley and Allen would lie dead in the wreckage. The remainder of the crew would float to the earth and soon be prisoners of war. Lieutenant Brown and Sergeant Crain would manage to evade capture for five days before being taken prisoners. Lieutenant Quenin would sustain compound fractures of both legs when his parachute opened. His legs would escape further injury when landing as he would fall through the tile roof of a farm shed on his shoulder and be suspended above the floor by the parachute. But, he would be shot through one of his legs while being captured by German infantry.

The officers would be sent to the South Compound of StalagLuft III near Sagan, Silesia, spending most of their time in captivity. Because of the severity of his injuries, Lieutenant Quenin would be removed from StalagLuft III on 16 February 1944 and repatriated through Lisbon, Portugal, arriving back in the United States on 15 March 1944. On 27 January 1945, Lieutenants Bliley, Brown, and Feerick would be forced by the Germans to take part in a freezing cold ‘Death March’ and then packed in small train cars enroute to Stalag VII-A at Moosburg near Munich. There they would be liberated by Patton’s Third Army on 29 April. The enlisted crew would first be sent to Stalag VII-A at Moosburg. After six months they would be moved in railroad box cars to Stalag XVII-B near Krems, Austria, and held there until early April 1945. They then would be marched up the Danube River to Braunau, Austria, where they would be liberated by advancing Americans.

There would be no War Bond rallies or heroes welcome for the crew of “*Mary Ruth*” *Memories of Mobile* when they returned. Only families and friends celebrated their homecoming. Lieutenant Brown remained in the Air Force to fly B-29s in Korea and B-52s in Vietnam, eventually retiring as a Colonel. He obtained a Masters Degree from the University of Arizona. Afterwards he served as an administrator in the University Medical School until retiring again, this time to his golf game in La Jolla, California. Lieutenant Quenin recovered from his injuries to return to flight status to fly in the Berlin Airlift. Later he served as Director of Materiel for the 505 Tactical Air Control Group, and flew a few ‘unofficial’ missions, in Vietnam, finally retiring, as a Lieutenant Colonel, to sell real-estate in Costa Mesa, California. Lieutenant Bliley returned to civilian life to own and operate an oil distributorship in Milwaukie, Oregon. Lieutenant Feerick became a Captain in the New York Fire Department and later served as an administrator at Mt. Sinai Hospital, and then as an Ordained Deacon in the Catholic Church.

Sergeant Akers remained in the Army when the Air Force split away, serving in Korea., retiring as a Warrant Officer to Colorado Springs, Colorado where he would engage in a number of business ventures and work for the U.S. Postal Service. Sergeant Brown remained in the Air Force as a supply sergeant, eventually retiring to become manager of the P. N. Hirsch Department Store in Humbolt, Tennessee. Sergeant Crain returned to New York to resume his pre-war activities as a literary agent, operating his own agency. Sergeant Litzo returned to Denver to work for Boyd Distributing, a major appliance distributorship, and to continue his avocation with golf. Sergeant Pierce left the Service to return to Medford, Oregon to become a manager for Modoc Orchards, where he had worked prior to enlisting. Sergeant Allen's body was returned to the Oconee Hills Cemetery in Athens, Georgia. Sergeant Maculley's remains were interred in the American Cemetery at Margarten, The Netherlands.



The grave of Staff Sergeant William “Glenn” Allen in the family plot in the Oconee Hills Cemetery in Athens, GA. (Agnes Davis)



Grave of Staff Sergeant Richard Maculley in the American Cemetery at Margarten, The Netherlands. (Ron Raaijmakers)

“Mary Ruth” Memories of Mobile would be a part of history, even if mainly as an unnoticed participant. Her first mission to Kiel, on 14 May, had been the longest and farthest of VIII Bomber Command to that date. The seventh, and last, mission would also be historic. This would be the first ‘Maximum Effort’ mission against the German fighter plane industry and the first ‘Maximum Effort’ daytime mission flown by VIII Bomber Command into the Ruhr Valley.

The airmen associated with the *“Mary Ruth”* would typify the thousands of ‘Black Jack’ Pierces who worked frantically, often under almost impossible time and physical constraints, to repair and maintain ‘their’ planes so as to ‘loan’ them to the air crews for the next mission; the thousands of Ken Browns and Jim Quenins who wrestled their bomb-laden planes off runways and struggled to keep them in the air when hit by flak and fighter cannon fire; the thousands of Vince Blileys who made certain the planes slipped into the proper places within their Elements as the formations came together, were on time and on course to the targets, and navigated them back to base when crippled by flak or fighters and had to leave their formations; the thousands of Jim Feericks who stared into the face of head-on attacking Luftwaffe fighters and listened to the clatter of flak tearing through the Alclad aluminium skin of the fuselage, while keeping a steady hand on the Norden bombsight to make certain the bombs were placed on the target; the thousands of Jim Akers, who kept the planes’ flak-shattered equipment working, as well as manning the upper turret guns; the thousands of Bill Browns, Maurice Crains, and Ray Litzos who did their best to keep at bay the Me109 and FW190 fighters; and the thousands of Dick Maculleys and Glenn Allens who all too frequently died with their planes. As such, the crew of *“Mary Ruth” Memories of Mobile* epitomizes the unselfish dedication and ultimate sacrifices made by those who struggled to keep the planes flying and who flew and died in relative obscurity in the air over ‘Fortress Europe’ during the period of 1942-1945.

The crews of *Memphis Belle*, of *“Mary Ruth” Memories of Mobile* and the hundreds of other planes in VIII Bomber Command were not concerned about history that early Monday morning in East Anglia. Circumstances placed some of the planes and some of the crews more in the limelight of fame than others. The fate of many planes would be to be blown to bits at the end of runways while taking off, to be reduced to rubble in a farmers field in Germany, to be entombed forever in the cold bottom waters of the North Sea, or to be incinerated into nothingness in a fiery ball over Berlin.

Other aircraft would survive, to end up a field near Kingman, Arizona, Altus, Oklahoma, or Walnut Ridge, Arkansas. From there they would be converted into aluminium siding to build the Levittowns, into electric skillets, toasters, waffle irons, patio chairs, and the innumerable other consumer products needed to fulfil the postwar dreams of America. Sentimentalists may feel that to be an ignominious ending for planes who had endured so much. However, it was for the very fulfilment of those postwar dreams that they had risked the midair collisions while corkscrewing upward around the Buncher and Splasher homing beacons to assemble their formations in the crowded clouded skies over East Anglia, had braved the box barrages of flak over St. Nazaire and Merseburg, and had fought off the swarms of Me109s and FW190s on the way to Schweinfurt and Berlin. They had done their job and they had done it well. They would no longer be needed as instruments of war and were ready for realization of the peace for which they had fought so valiantly.

Let us return once again to Bassingbourn and to *“Mary Ruth” Memories of Mobile*. Thirty six days have passed. The Lorient mission has been completed. All planes returned safely. Other missions have been flown and *Memphis Belle* and her crew have returned to the States.

It is another early morning in East Anglia. Today is Tuesday 22 June 1943, 0630 Double British Summer Time. Another mission is on, the Huls raid. *“Mary Ruth” Memories of Mobile* will

be flying in the No. 3 position (rear outer left) of the last three-plane element of the echeloned left, Low Squadron of the Low Group, 'Tail-end Charlie.' The predawn flurry of ground crew activities has ceased and the crews are standing quietly beside their planes. The air crews are aboard, the pre-flight check lists completed. An apprehensive sombre silence lies over Bassingbourn.

Two green flares form an arch over the field. From dispersal points scattered about the base there comes an erratic chorus of sputtering coughs as planes come to life. Soon the ragged rumblings coalesce into a penetrating ear-rendering roar as the multitude of engines are run-up and additional instruments checked. Slowly the olive drab, graceful, deadly, low-winged fortresses begin moving down the taxiways in two weaving, snaking, nose to tail columns, brakes squealing, toward the end of the runway. The columns pause. Two flares arc upwards from Flying Control on the second story balcony outside the control room--green-green. The first B-17, No. 453, *The Bearded Beauty - Mizpath*, belches a cloud of blue smoke and rumbles down the 6,000 foot Runway 25, slowly struggling to clear the trees at the end. At 30-second intervals another follows, another, another, and yet another. No. 797, *Old Ironsides*, leaves on her journey to the bottom of the North Sea. No. 132, *Royal Flush!*, lifts off on her final flight. No. 998 (no name) tucks in her wheels one last time. No. 789, *Golden Bear*, heads for her long hibernation.



No. 132, Royal Flush, over the target. Bombay doors are open and flak bursts around her. (Joe Harlick)

There is a hectic scramble around "*Mary Ruth*" *Memories of Mobile*. The No. 3 engine supercharger is not working. Sergeant Pierce clambers aboard and works rapidly. The pressure comes up seconds before an abort is declared. Brakes released, "*Mary Ruth*" jerks away from her hardstand, rolls along the taxiway, pivots, and lumbers quickly down runway No. 25. For the last time her wheels lift away from what later generations will refer to as the 'hallowed grounds' of East Anglia. "*Mary Ruth*" rises hurriedly and disappears into the distance as she heads for her nirvana and the obscurity of history. We watch her vanish with the confidence that those same later generations will say of "*Mary Ruth*" *Memories of Mobile* and of the others who will not return today, and all the days to come, 'We remember...we still remember.'

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This story is condensed from the book "*Mary Ruth*" *Memories of Mobile*. . . We Still Remember, available for downloading at no charge on web site: <http://hdl.handle.net/2142/184>