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A B-17 PILOT RECOUNTS

My Toughest Combat Mission

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The 99-year-old Stanton Mike Rickey took part in the Second World War as a bomber pilot. One mission from July of 1944 specifically has remained in his memory: This one almost cost him his life
by Ludwig Hauber

As Stanton Mike Rickey recalls earlier times, he relaxes comfortably in his armchair. In the Second World War, the 99-year-old sat at the yoke of one of the famous “Flying Fortresses” of the U.S. Air Force. He had brought the machine back from a mission 33 times, despite the weather, German fighter defense and the flak. However, on his 34th mission, a large-scale action against the airfield of Memmingerberg near Memmingen in Southern Germany, everything went wrong from the start.

On July 15, 1944, the 483rd Bomber Group of the 15th U.S. Air Force, which was stationed in Italy, received an order to attack with the number 626. The target: the airfield of Memmingerberg. The U.S. air surveillance had discovered that about 75 aircraft of the Bf 110, Me 410 and Fw 190 types were at that place. According to secret service reports, the “America Bomber,” Messerschmitt’s Me 264, was also to be built in Memmingen before long.

Group IV of the Fighter Wing 3 “Udet,” under Captain Moritz, had

Caption on color photo: The author (right) with the 99-year-old Stanton Mike Rickey (center) in Tucson, Arizona

Caption above group photo: The Rickey crew (clockwise from front left): Angelo R. Mazzacone, Stanton M. Rickey, Andrew R. Greene, Eugene S. Hoss, Raymond C. Ramsdell, Douglas J. Short, Frederic A. Hicks. Not pictured are John W. Galt, John H. Huntley and Alton Wertemberger

Caption on black-and-white at bottom left: Bombers of the 483rd Bomber Group during a combat mission over the Yugoslavian town of Niš. Stanton Mike Rickey and his crew had to pay dearly for a similar mission directed at the military airfield of Memmingen. Photo archives *Flugzeug Classic*

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arrived in Memmingen two days earlier, on July 13th, and was to fight the streams of U.S. bombers flying in from Italy. In addition, the German command increasingly put their money on new Storm Squadrons (*Sturmstaffeln*), equipped with the Fw 190 A-8/R2. These “Battering Rams” (*Sturmböcke*) were more heavily armored than other versions of the Fw 190 and had proved themselves in battle against four-engine bombers. On July 7th, Group IV of Fighter Wing 3 alone shot down 31 four-engine bombers near Oschersleben.

Code of the “Battering Ram” pilots

One of the Fw 190 pilots was Sergeant Willi Unger. Perhaps Rickey’s and Unger’s paths crossed in the air battle over the Allgäu. One thing is clear: The German fighter pilot was one of the men who, in their “Battering Rams,” threw themselves at the American bombers. Exactly as the other pilots of the Storm Squadrons, Unger had also promised with his signature not to return from the mission without an air victory.

Should no downing be successfully achieved with the aircraft armaments, then he had to ram the enemy machine. However, returning without results for no particular reason resulted in a court martial. The squadron’s emblem suggests the men’s conception of themselves: Group IV of Fighter Wing 3 bore a four-engine bomber in the crosshairs as an emblem, and on the pilots’ flight jackets, a pair of eyes stared out from the left side of the chest – a reference to flying so close to the bombers’ tail gunners that they could see the whites of the enemy’s eyes. A total of about 45 Fw 190s from different squadrons of Fighter Wing 3 must have been waiting at the military airfield of Memmingen for their deployment.

It all began so innocently...

It was with these battle-tested fighter pilots, whom First Lieutenant Stanton Rickey dealt with on his 34th combat mission. The senior’s gaze wanders into the past, back to July of 1944. Rickey now begins to relate the story of this flight, which many members of his crew were to pay for with their lives.

“At 4:30 in the briefing room, we learned the target of the next mission. The Memmingen airfield was supposed to be without anti-aircraft protection, so we assumed it would be a relaxed flight – provided the weather and the *Luftwaffe* cooperated. Since 3:30, there was already bustling activity on the fields of the 5th Bomber Wing around the Italian city of Foggia (see map, page 64), to which our 483rd Bomber Group also belonged. The last mission had taken us over Ploesti in Romania; now it was against Germany.

It had all begun so innocently: Our crew came together in Salt Lake City, Utah. After five weeks of intensive training in Rapid City, South Dakota, we joined the 483rd Bomber Group at MacDill Field in Tampa, Florida at the end of November in 1943. In March of the following year, we were deployed to Italy and moved into our first base in Sterparone near Foggia.

The weather on July 18, 1944, was perfect, and we were a well-attuned team. We, meaning my co-pilot, Second Lieutenant Eugene S. Hoss, navigator Second Lieutenant Frederic A. Hicks, bombardier John W. Galt, likewise a Second Lieutenant, as well as Sergeants Andrew

R. Greene, Jr., our radio operator, and Angelo R. Mazzacone (upper turret gunner), Raymond C. Ramsdell (lower ball turret gunner), John H. Huntley (tail gunner), Alton Wertenberger as left gunner and Douglas J. Short as right gunner. None of us was supposed to return from the mission.

After the briefing, we were handed the flight gear: flak vests and helmets, parachutes, oxygen masks, life jackets, food and survival kits. Then Jeeps took us to our planes, where we checked through our respective positions again, according to regulations. Meanwhile, the ground crew loaded the B-17s of the 815th, 816th, 817th and 840th Squadrons with twelve 500-pound high-explosive bombs each. The squadrons of the 2nd, 99th and 301st Bomber Groups received the same load, while the aircraft of the 97th and 463rd Bomb Groups were loaded with bundled 20-pound fragmentation bombs – 4,750 pieces in all. This mixture was intended to destroy the buildings and the machines on the Memmingerberg airfield as effectively and permanently as possible.

We started the engines at 6:35; our 28 bombers were to take off at 6:50, as soon as the green flare was visible. Then, every 30 seconds, a B-17 took off from the airfield. Heavily laden, each pilot sought out his place in the squadron, and the latter sought out its place within the Bomber Group in turn. Our Bomber Group was to occupy position five of the formation, which consisted of six Bomber Groups (see diagram on page 66). In the meantime, we had already received the radio codes: The bomber call sign was Greenherd 15 and [the counter call sign was] Shampoo. At 7:15, the 483rd and the 301st Bomber Groups formed up over San Severo. The remaining machines gathered over their bases at Ammendola and Foggia. Only beyond the coastline, over the island of Capaira, north of Foggia, were the B-17s to line up in the predetermined formation.

Difficulties over the Adriatic

While everything was going according to plan up to this point, problems began over the northern Adriatic. Bad weather, high clouds and poor visibility prevented us from

Caption on black-and-white photo: The target of the attack: the military airfield of Memmingen, on an aerial photo taken before the bombardment

Large blue text mid-page: “The approach was **difficult** – but nothing compared to the events on site.”

Vertical text in lower right margin: Photos, unless otherwise stated, from the collection of Ludwig Hauber

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being able to hold the formation. Our escort fighters, several Fighter Groups, had taken off about an hour after us. The 332nd Fighter Group, consisting exclusively of black Tuskegee Airmen, were explicitly to take over the escort of our 483rd Bomber Group. Their four squadrons put 66 P-51 Mustangs into the air that day.

German attempts to interfere

The Bomber Groups tried as best they could to stay on the predetermined course, but the bad weather front with heavy rain and extreme wind forces caused the formation to break up in order to avoid collisions in the air. While the 463rd and the 2nd Bomber Groups tried to stay on course, the 301st Bomber Group turned east to proceed along the Yugoslavian coast to the target. The 97th and our 483rd Bomber Group followed the Italian coast via Rimini to the next rendezvous north of Ancona. The 99th Bomber Group had turned around at the latitude of the island of Split due to bad weather. Meanwhile, several fighter groups had already started on their way back as well.

Besides the freak weather, the Germans also messed up our formation. Towards 9:25, radio reports came in, saying that our target could not be attacked today and that the bombers should switch to alternative targets in Italy and Austria. Major Seith, the pilot of the lead machine of the 840th Squadron of the 483rd Bomber Group, however, did not get a reply to his query with the code word that had been issued. He recognized the Germans' trick and did not fall for it. The 97th Bomber Group, however, took the radio reports as gospel truth and unloaded their deadly cargo not over Memmingen, but rather over a railroad bridge in Casarsa, Italy. Thus, our formation consisted of only four splintered bomber groups instead of six well-formed ones.

First enemy contact

After we had flown over Rimini, we had to be wary of enemy fighters. In the area of Venice, we noticed that we were half an hour behind schedule due to the course change and, because of this, had missed the other bomber groups at the next rendezvous point. Two machines from our Bomber Group had to turn back with technical problems – the Goodwin crew made it back to Sterparone, the Orton crew was able to make an emergency landing at Arcona. Our escort shrank as well; six planes encountered problems and flew back. In addition, the 2nd Bomber Group tried to avoid another bad weather front and thus lost contact with the formation.

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Caption for the color illustration at the top: The B-17 of the 817th Squadron of the 483rd Bomber Group, flown by Stanton Mike Rickey on July 18, 1944.

Information by Ludwig Hauber/drawing by Juanita Franzi

Caption for the black-and-white photo on the left: Nose art: The picture on Rickey's B-17 shows a corpulent woman with a pipe in her mouth, who carries two small children under her arms. In addition, the lettering "Baraz Twins"

Caption for the black-and-white photo on the right: The crew, however without Stanton Mike Rickey. First from the right is navigator Fred Hicks. The machine in the background is the “Baraz Twins I,” which the crew flew until May of 1944. After that, they received the “Baraz Twins II” (see profile above)

Caption for the color illustrations at the bottom: Emblems of the 817th Squadron and the 483rd Bomber Group

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Our fighter escort had its first contact with the enemy between Venice and the area north of Udine. At about 9:20, several of our Mustangs attacked about 25 German fighter planes that had taken off from the airfields at Villa Orba and Rivolto. Before our Mustangs engaged in combat, they threw off their auxiliary tanks and pushed the Germans back. But after the air battle, these Mustangs no longer had enough fuel and ammunition on board to fly towards Memmingen with us – they had to turn away. That left us with only 36 fighter planes as our escort. Due to the adverse weather conditions, the four remaining bomber groups – the 301st Bomber Group was flying along the Yugoslavian coast – with 112 B-17s had now been pulled more than 20 miles apart in northern Italy at the Bressanone waypoint. A tight formation was out of the question.”

German fighter pilots are ready

Meanwhile, there was already bustling activity on the German side – Rickey, however, did not know that at the time. Of course, such a large formation did not go unnoticed: the German airspace observers stationed in Italy had already sent a report to the control centers of the Reich’s Air Defense (*Reichsverteidigung*), which ordered a large number of fighter-interceptors into the air against the bombers flying in the Bozen and Brixen areas. The Fighter Wings 27, 302, 300, 51 and the 4th Group of Fighter Wing 3, stationed in Austria and Southern Germany, had already been alerted shortly after 9 o’clock; the pilots were on standby and were waiting for the order to take off. About 30 Bf 109s were already underway from Fels am Wagram and Götzen-

Caption for the black-and-white photo: Even the approach of the B-17s was fraught with difficulties. Many machines never arrived at the site of the operation. Photo archives *Flugzeug Classic*

Caption for map: The bombers fly north from their military airfield of Foggia. The mission is tough; both the weather as well as the Germans caused the Americans trouble

Place names on map:

Deutsches Reich = German Reich

Frankreich = France

Deutscher Fliegerhorst Memmingen = German Military Airfield of Memmingen

München = Munich

Schweiz = Switzerland

Österreich = Austria

Mailand = Milan

Venedig = Venice

Jugoslawien = Yugoslavia

Adria = Adriatic Sea

Korsika = Corsica

Rom = Rome

Insel Capraia = Island of Capraia

Mittelmeer = Mediterranean Sea

Alliierter Fliegerhorst Foggia = Allied Military Airfield of Foggia

Legend in top right corner of map:

Planned route of the 5th Wing (The 463rd and 2nd Bomb Groups flew this route)

Route deviation of the 97th and 483rd Bomb Groups

Route deviation of the 301st Bomb Group

Route deviation of the 99th Bomb Group

Rendezvous point of the allied fighters and bombers

Sphere of power of the Germans and their allies in July of 1944

Allied sphere of power in July of 1944

Neutral nations

National borders 1937

Vertical text in lower left margin: Information by Ludwig Hauber/artwork by Schlaich
Cartography and Graphics (KGS or *Kartographie und Grafik Schlaich*)

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dorf in Austria, heading in the direction of Lake Starnberg. Towards 9:30, the 2nd Squadron of Fighter Wing 300, under the command of Captain Peters, took off from Holzkirchen with just under 30 Fw 190 A-6s and A-8s. In Bad Wörishofen, the 1st Squadron of Fighter Wing 300, under Captain Stamp, took off in their Bf 109 G-6s. The fighter pilots had learned over the radio that the American bombers were in the Innsbruck area and were staying on a north-westerly course. Towards 10:25, the first swarms of fighter planes met. Near Füssen, German airspace observers reported the U.S. bomber formation still on a north-westerly course – that meant a scramble for the “Battering Rams” in Memmingerberg at 9:50. Under the leadership of Captain Moritz, Fighter Wing 3 put a total of 45 Fw 190s into the air. The air battle was imminent.

Now Stanton Rickey begins to talk about the attacks of the German fighters – he sits up straight, his eyes have taken on an alert expression. Despite all the years that have passed since this mission, he still shows the tension from back then. As he begins to talk, the events of that fateful day in July of 1944 come to life again.

B-17 bombers under fire

“We flew at position seven as the last aircraft in the third box of the 817th Squadron. Hicks, our navigator, had just given us a course correction when we spotted a large number of enemy fighters about five minutes from Kempten, where we were to initiate our

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Caption for color illustration at top: Focke-Wulf Fw 190 A-8/R2 of the 12th Squadron of Fighter Wing 3, which Willi Unger flew on July 18, 1944

Information by Ludwig Hauber/drawing by Herbert Ringlstetter of Aviaticus

Caption for black-and-white photo at middle right: He’s off: An Fw 190 rolls on the takeoff runway and is ready to take on the American bombers. Photo archives *Flugzeug Classic*

Caption for color illustration at middle left: The emblem of Group IV of the Fighter Wing 3 immediately shows what it’s all about: taking bombers out of the sky

Short article with tan background:

“At 10:45, as swarm leader (*Schwarmführer*) in the 12th Squadron, I had a sighting of the enemy. The attack on a group of about 20 Boeing Fortresses occurred from behind and below, whereby I came into shooting position with a Boeing flying in the middle. I opened fire from 400 meters and scored hits in the fuselage and wings, although an Mk 108 jammed. After the first burst of fire, the rear gunner shot no more. Individual parts came off. There was an intense flash in the wing-to-fuselage joint; the burst of fire drifted into both engines. The Fortress immediately broke formation and went down in flames in a left spiral with a light plume of smoke. I wasn’t able to observe the impact, since I had contact with the enemy fighter cover after that. I was shot down myself by a Mustang and was able to save myself by bailing out with a parachute. The following day, we visited my crash site near Memmingen.”

Caption for black-and-white photo at bottom right: Sergeant Willi Unger on the wing of his Fw 190. During the mission, he was shot down over the Allgäu. He later received the Knight's Cross.

Handwritten inscription on the black-and-white photo at bottom right: Willi Unger, Storm Group IV, Fighter Wing 3 "Udet"

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bomb run. There must have been about 75 aircraft. Out of a wide turn, wave after wave of five to six fighter planes approached from behind in a narrow spear formation.

Our machine shook from the incessant and massive recoil of all 13 on-board weapons. Our gunners fired almost non-stop. All of the formation's machine guns pounded, but the boys didn't know where to aim first. We had never experienced an attack of this magnitude. All the while, we could see 2cm rounds slamming into our wings and the fuselage. Small white clouds showed exactly where our B-17 was hit. Then everything happened very quickly. Fire! Flames erupted from the wing between the third and fourth engines. Hoss, my co-pilot, immediately activated the fire extinguisher.

But the Germans did not let up: a series of projectiles hit the cockpit with heavy blows. The plexiglass shattered; the shards hit Hoss in the face and injured him. Engine number two sputtered

Title at the top of the chart: 483rd Bomber Group – Formation during the Attack on Memmingen – July 18, 1944

Caption in lower right-hand corner of the chart: Of the 28 B-17 bombers put into action, 14 were lost. The 816th Squadron was completely wiped out by the Germans, the 840th had only two technical failures. MIA stands for Missing in Action and designates missing aircraft (here marked in yellow).

Information by Ludwig Hauber/drawing by Ronja Bock

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Caption for black-and-white photo at top: The burning wreck of a crashed B-17. The machine flown by Stanton Mike Rickey could have also looked the same, after the Germans had shot it down.

Photo archives *Flugzeug Classic*

Title at top of area with tan background: Our author and aviation archeologist Ludwig Haube was able to recover the following finds at the crash site of the B-17 “Baraz Twins II” near Memmingen:

Captions for the five color photos:

- 1) The emergency escape hatch of the B-17, which a local resident discovered while doing field work in 1945
- 2) With the help of this 50-caliber serial number, the author succeeded in identifying the wreck
- 3) An aluminum fragment from the wreck, which is fused with a 50-caliber shell
- 4) Wreckage of the downed B-17, including a compressor wheel, a piece of the wing, a Browning machine gun and piston from the Wright Cyclone engine.
- 5) 1. U.S. 50-caliber, 2. German 2-centimeter armor-piercing shell and 2-centimeter mine shell, 3. 3-centimeter mine shell

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– and died. With great effort, we tried to keep the rudder stable and the machine level. Projectiles were still hitting the fuselage; attacking fighter planes were rushing around us. But it was futile. The machine could not be saved – I activated the emergency release for the bombs and banged on the alarm bell. The boys had to get out! But the electrical systems had failed, and my instructions did not reach the crew.

Heavy hits: The B-17 crashes

The attempt to stabilize the aircraft with the autopilot failed, and the machine banked. We had no choice: we had to bail out while we were still able. I looked at the bomb bay. Could we get out through it? Our side gunners, Short and Wertemberger, lay dead at their stations. The rear gunner's stand had been completely blown away by 3-centimeter mine shell hits, so Huntley hadn't made it either. The lower ball tower was still spinning slowly – I didn't know that Ramsdell was dead, too.

We had to get out! Greene, our radio operator, had managed to escape from the radio hatch above him. Despite the enormous centrifugal forces, I finally managed to leave the plane as well – after Hoss, Galt and Hicks – through the narrow front escape hatch. It really was high time: we were barely 1,000 meters above the ground, which was rapidly approaching.

After a short time on the parachute, I landed in a spruce tree, which further slowed down the fall. At some distance, the air battle still roared; explosions flashed brightly in the sky. I freed myself from the oxygen connection and various radio cables, buried my jacket, life jacket and Colt in the moss and got an overview. My scarf, on which a map was printed, helped with this. Still about 60 miles to Lake Constance. I remembered my training, the advice of my trainers and comrades, and set off – away from the Germans.”

Escape of the pilot failed

Stanton Rickey stole civilian clothes from a clothesline. In this costume, with a rake as part of his disguise, he arrived at Lake Constance after days of marching off the beaten track. However, he was neither to reach neutral Switzerland nor his own lines: on the night of July 23rd, he was caught in Konstanz trying to saw open the padlock on a rowboat in an attempt to escape. The police handed him over to the *Wehrmacht*, who took him to Memmingen and from there by train to Oberursel to Stalag Luft 1 for Air Force officers who had been shot down. For Stanton Mike Rickey, the war was over.

A similar fate befell his surviving comrades. The Germans captured them in the Buchenberg area southwest of the crash site. The other members of the crew, Mazzacone, Ramsdell, Wertemberger, Short and Huntley, had not survived this mission.

In the near future, read how Rickey's squadron mate, Hommel, fared during the mission and how the battle over the Allgäu ended.

Caption for black-and-white photo at top right: After his capture, the Germans took Rickey to Stalag Luft 1 for captured Air Force officers. On the right: his record in the file of prisoners

Caption for color photo at top left: Stanton Mike Rickey, veteran of three wars – the Second World War, Korea und Vietnam –, in front of a B-17. During his missions, airmen's luck never completely deserted him

Caption for color photo at bottom: The former sergeant, Willi Unger, in front of the Buchenberg memorial plaque in honor of the fallen