Collision Course Tennenberg/Stern Aircraft in WWII – MARCH 17, 1945

Tragic Collision of the Tennenberg/Stern Aircraft in WWII

On the mission of March 17, 1945 over Germany, the B-17 bombers flown by pilots Tennenberg and Stern collided in mid-air when visibility was largely reduced by either clouds or contrails.  Until now (Year 2017), it was thought this tragedy was due to poor visibility.  However, with the help of Scot Lowry and the 490th Group aircraft position layout (see attachment), I have determined that the actual. collision cause was engine trouble on the bomber flown by Swett (possibly due to enemy fire over the target).  I was the navigator on that craft.  At the time we had no realization of our complicity in the collision however our bombardier, Manny Stobbe, did dimly, through the clouds, witness the fatal collision.

While our pilots, Swett and Randall, were busy trying to feather the dead engine and control the aircraft, a second engine on the same side began losing power.  This caused our entire element of three planes to fall behind the group.  The poor visibility no doubt prevented Tennenberg, on our right wing, from realizing he was closely approaching Stern, the leader of the last element in the high squadron.

The unusually close formation flying dictated by Col. Bostrom, in command of the entire 490th Group, undoubtedly contributed to the collision.   However this tight formation flying may have also caused German fighter pilots to deliberately avoid attacking our Group.  In any event, we were forced to leave the formation and find our own way back to Eye.

Over the target a few seconds after bomb release, an unexploding ack-ack shell hit our open bomb bay and then fell out the still open doors.

During this return to Eye, we were also concerned about low fuel level and, with only two engines, we had to slowly descend from high altitude and take a direct route home.  This meant largely disregarding known German anti-aircraft areas.  After flying some time on this course, it occurred to me that the Germans were undoubtedly tracking us.  I called our pilot, Swett, and suggested a sharp turn in direction.  He instantly responded.  Just as we completed that 90 degree turn, a large anti-aircraft shell exploded at the spot we would have been without that sharp turn.  What unbelievable good luck.

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Bob Kopp, Navigator on Dale Swett's crew.

