A Mission Gone Long

Low clouds were breaking up and snow retreating as the temperature warmed behind the trailing edge of the Alberta Clipper that had raced through the region the night before, then moved quickly to punish New England with another late winter storm. I could catch glimpses of the Hudson River in the distance, its surface the patina of aged copper, its banks swollen with runoff, angry where it was forced to bend around Jones Point just south of Bear Mountain.

Si Spiegel stood by the large window staring at the birds and squirrels jumping from one feeder to another, throwing husks left and right as they sought the elusive sunflower seeds he had added to the mixture. "Look," he exclaimed, "the white-throated sparrow!"

I walked over and stood beside him as he pointed at the visitor. The sparrow is a frequent winter migrant with an evocative evening call and clear whistle. This one hopped along the ground from morsel to morsel trailing the feathers of its right wing. "Can't fly: Broken right wing: Been here all winter. It's got to be careful, because healthy birds sometimes kill birds that can't fly." His modest frame and height, his slightly rounded shoulders and deep black eyes hid an erudite and serious man of much larger stature and celebrity. He knew that with plenty of food in the feeders, the other birds wouldn't bother the cripple. It was his own secret.

The Secretary of War regrets to inform you your son, Si Irving Spiegel, is reported missing in action. 3 February 1945.

Sixty-three years earlier, and three thousand miles east, the twenty- year old B-17 pilot was making more serious life and death decisions. "Ray, what's our status?" Ray Patulski, the navigator, had been plotting and re-plotting the plane's position every few minutes since number one engine began acting up over Amsterdam. Bill Hole, the co-pilot had been fussing with it since bombs-away at 1200 hours. It had been feathered and re-started three times and each time, the oil pressure swung wildly between 5 and 90 psi. Afraid of a fire, the engine had been feathered again. Number three had taken multiple flak hits over Berlin and was inoperable. Two and four were operable at full throttle. Spiegel knew Patulski would have been monitoring the situation closely.

"We'll have a problem holding altitude Si," said Hole. "Our indicated air speed is 103 and we're slowly falling behind the formation. If we continue, we'll be a sitting duck without any escorts. By the time we

reach Amsterdam, we'll be low enough they won't need to throw flak at us. They'll be able to hit us with stones."

The navigator had indeed been studying his charts. "The Russians are supposed to have made the Vistula at Warsaw. We have enough fuel and a bit of a tail wind. We need to lighten up a lot, but if we go home we'll be fighting a headwind the whole way."

"Tyler, what do you see back there?"

"Clear, lieutenant, nothing chasing us. I can't see anything coming from any engines either," said the tail gunner.

"I've checked," said Novarra, the waist gunner. "Number two looks OK."

"Number four is OK too, lieutenant," said Carpenter, the other waist gunner.

"Patulski, give me a heading to Warsaw. And make sure we avoid Poznan"

"Yes sir, set our heading at 091.5. We'll correct at Szamotuly or Oborniki and then circle Warsaw. There are two fields there." The crew of nine fell silent as Spiegel broke formation, added right rudder, and they felt the plane slew eastward.

The B-17G crossed the Oder at Kostryzn; at Oborniki, Patulski corrected the heading to 093.55 degrees, direct to Warsaw. They could see long columns of heavy equipment and troops below as the German army retreated towards the Oder. Not since the year 1210 had an enemy approached the Old Prussian frontier from the east. The Russians continued at a hurried pace until they outran their supply lines then stopped, giving the Germans an opportunity to set up a defense on the approach to Berlin. It was this disarray that the crew witnessed and by 1505 hours Warsaw was visible ahead. The crew strained to get a view of the city or the airfields. Nothing existed but masses of rubble on both sides of a very frozen river. Spiegel banked the plane and they circled the desolation several times, as they tried to make sense of the situation. Wisps of smoke rose from the piles of rubble. The cockpit crew was surprised that very few Poles were wandering about, none interested in the crippled bomber that flew overhead. With weather closing in on them, and altitude now an issue, Spiegel made the decision. Well, thought Spiegel, there's no way we can land here so we're going to follow the river northwest and see what we can find. "Carpenter, break radio silence and tell division HQ our situation."

The Vistula is the longest river in Poland. It rises in the Carpathians and flows 665 miles to the Baltic Sea at Gdansk (formerly Danzig). Its history is 2 million years old, with its present shape having been determined nearly 14,000 years ago after the final retreat of the Scandinavian ice sheet. A buffer in the eons-long struggle between east and west, the regions over which Spiegel now flew had been settled by Mennonites and Dutch emigrants in the mid-1500s where their skill as farmers and expert drainers of swamps made them tolerable to the king of Poland. The sedimentation along the banks, resulting from frequent flooding and cliff erosion, established ideal conditions for growing potatoes. And, from potatoes, the Poles made vodka.

As the war spread depravity, small civilian groups banded together to till the fields in the hopes they could raise enough food for survival and trade. Usually the fields were plowed east west, generally perpendicular to the riverbank, to facilitate drainage and irrigation. An access road usually would enter from the end opposite the riverbank while both ends would be protected by stands of lime, oak, elm and ash. The lowland climate gave rise to spruces and firs that lived 400 years, and are the only local trees that reach 50 meters in height.

Against the murky background of frozen farmland and long shadows, the waist gunner yelled out, "Novarra here, I see a single-engine Russian spotter about a half-mile at 3 o'clock; gonna pass under us in 15 seconds. Must be less than 500 feet off the deck." Spiegel immediately hit the landing gear switch and dropped the wheels. The spotter banked right as John Caffrey, the engineer, fired a red flare. The Russian acknowledged the signal by rocking his wings, but the bomber's speed was too much and the Russian fell behind. Spiegel raised the gear and put the plane into a tight bank to let the spotter catch up. Minutes passed, but eventually the spotter and the bomber were in general alignment headed down the Vistula. The Russian rocked his wings again and dropped onto a small airfield bordered on one end by a dirt road. A grass runway ran down the diagonal of the field, occasionally marked left and right by hay bales. Another identical single engine spotter was parked at one end of the field near a few small trucks. The Russian opened the cockpit door and waved at the B-17 circling above him.

An emergency landing is always a dicey event. In this case, Spiegel knew only that the spotter had been able to clear the trees and brake to a stop. The field was frozen, but even if he put down on the diagonal the rollout was going to be a problem. He knew he needed much more runway than the field provided, and even the approach over the trees left him no leeway to land at the end of the runway. Spiegel aborted any thought of landing at that location, as he banked the plane away from the field and continued to follow the river.

The terrain over which they flew was heavily forested, even at the river's edge. The afternoon light was obscured by clouds when Spiegel spotted a clearing a few miles east of the river. He adjusted course and when the plane was abreast of the field he began circling. It was a larger field than the Russians had converted with a makeshift runway, perhaps a half-mile on the diagonal, but much smaller than Spiegel would have wanted- if he had other options. At a ground speed of 100 mph, the plane would cover 3,000 feet in less than a half minute. The brakes would have to work, and field would have to supply friction and drag on the fuselage. Shallow ruts remained of what would have been furrows from last year's plantings- probably potatoes and other root vegetables. He figured that chances of finding a large bolder or soil-covered ledge during the landing were pretty remote. At each end of the field was a stand of trees, taller on one end than the other and behind the trees at the east end was a number of thatched-roof cottages with smoke curling up from mud chimneys. There would be no running water or electricity in that cluster of dwellings.

A belly landing was impractical due to the Sperry ball turret on the underside of the plane. The turret was removable, but the needed tools had been ditched with other non-essentials as the crew attempted to lighten the plane over Poland. Spiegel continued to circle and considered the odds.

At this moment, circling an open field 500 miles west of his father's birth city, and 650 miles north of his mother's birth city, it was early Saturday morning in New York City and Spiegel's father completed his short commute from West 11th Street, unlocked the front door of his laundry in Greenwich Village and began another long workday. Afternoon editions of the local newspapers would headline the heaviest attack yet on Berlin by the US 8th Air Force. Over 1000 bombers and 900 P-51 Mustang and P-47 Thunderbolt fighters had participated in a mission that leveled large areas of the city and killed more than 25,000 civilians. The 490th Bomber Group's target had been Luftwaffe headquarters. And, on a peninsula that separated the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea, Stalin and Churchill sipped cognac waiting for Roosevelt to join them in final preparations for the Yalta Conference that would establish the German zones of occupation, discuss the subject of reparations and establish the future western border of Poland. Half way around the world, 30,000 U.S. Marines made final preparations to invade a small island named Iwo Jima.

The telegram from the War Department would not arrive at the house in Greenwich Village for another 24 hours.

The Soviet Army was on the march. After securing Warsaw, the 1st White Russian Army under Marshal Georgy Konstantnovic Zhukov commanding the troops of the First Belorussian Front, pushed forward cutting off the Fortress city of Poznań, taking 66,000 Germans as prisoners then continued its 50-mile per day advance west. In early February, it held three bridgeheads on the western bank of the Vistula.

Spiegel walked himself through the options, always remembering he was responsible for the lives of his eight crewmen. Finally, he decided he could not trust luck to find another field and there was only one practical option. He decided to land- and he decided it would have to be a wheels-up landing. Even when retracted, the wheels extended slightly below the number two and three engine cowlings. They would rotate when the plane touched down and, hopefully, be responsive to the braking action of the cockpit pedals. He ordered the entire crew, except his co-pilot, to assume the crash position behind the radio room bulkhead. Spotting clothes flapping on a clothesline behind the cottages, he set up a long and lazy downwind approach and knew he would have to approach over the end of the field with the taller trees. He did a short crosswind just shy of the eastern bank of the river, and turned on final. Spiegel told Hole to adjust flaps, while Spiegel adjusted the operating engine throttles for maximum lift and minimum speed. Spiegel held wings level, and flared the plane into a slight nose up attitude as he approached the diagonal of the field and the tree line from the southeast. When the plane neared the trees he cut the master power and battery switches. The plane shook as the ball turret and rear wheel hit the top of the tallest trees. The plane sank and hit the field hard. Frozen dirt and pebbles spewed in all directions as the plane bounced in and out of the shallow ruts. “Hold the diagonal, ” he yelled to no one-- and everyone.

His hands hurt as he gripped the controls tightly. His 5”7” frame was stretched full length as he stood on the pedals, hoping the brakes were being applied to both wheels. He and Hole tried to hold the diagonal, but the field was rutted from a late fall plowing and the plane skidded. The tail wheel would not obey; midway across the field, with perhaps 200 yards to the tree line, the ball turret was acting both as a rudder and a keel, then it cracked and split into shards. The plane slid and bounced, its propeller blades spinning freely since power was cut. Chunks of frozen dirt and pebbles were blasted from the furrows.

He watched the far stand of trees grow larger. With less than 35 yards from impact, he reacted, giving hard left rudder and releasing the right pedal in an attempt to unlock the right wheel brake and ground loop the plane, which reacted violently, spinning counterclockwise, almost out of control. The right wing bounced upward, just missing a large oak. The force of impact had been absorbed, but the momentum of the fuselage

caused it to whip and bend counterclockwise. Stones and clumps of dirt flew through gashes in the aluminum, bouncing all over the inside. Then the "Giddy", a B-17G formerly of the 490th Bombardment Group (heavy), of the 93rd Combat Bombardment Wing, part of the 3rd Air Division of the US Army 8th Air Force came to rest- and was quiet. He looked over at his co-pilot. Bill was glad they all were alive.

"Crew check '" yelled Spiegel.

One by one, each of the crew announced they were unhurt. Patulski, Sandusky, the toggelier and Caffrey, the top turret gunner came forward to the nose area. Spiegel and Hole stared out the Plexiglas cockpit windows at the substantial trees in front of the plane. Spiegel looked over at Hole, "Thanks Si. Great landing." The balance of the crew made their way to the waist.

Spiegel unbuckled his safety harness, stood up and put his hand on Hole's shoulder. "Check your sidearm Bill, and let's check the surroundings." They moved to exit the plane through the front hatch, while the crew remained inside by the waist hatch, waiting for their all-clear signal.

Only the pilot and co-pilot carried side arms; Spiegel checked his now to make sure it was loaded, on safety and unsnapped the leather strap. In the distance, behind the line of trees abutting the access road, he could see two or three front doors crack open. They crawled out the access hatch and walked clear of the fuselage, each with his right hand near the grip of his pistol. The smell of fuel was powerful.

After a few minutes, one of the cottage doors opened wide, and a man emerged. Spiegel and Hole peered at the man in the darkness of the doorway. The man's hands were empty and hung at his sides. A handmade cigarette dangled from a corner of his mouth and smoke swirled around a woolen cap. His trousers were stuffed into the tops of leather boots caked with mud. His forehead frowned deeply above heavy black eye brows as he squinted at the wreck in his potato field. Finally, he began walking toward the plane, other doors opened, and one or two more men emerged and began to walk towards the bomber. Others watched from windows, but eventually a dozen or more joined the initial group. As they came onto the field, Spiegel, still with his hand near the revolver grip, could hear them speaking. He could make out only two words: Ben Zeen. Before the first dozen men reached the plane, all were repeating the words either as a question, or a statement of fact.

“Я – американец,” said Spiegel. All pilots had been trained to speak four words in Russian- ‘I am an American’. The rest of the crew exited the plane and watched the reaction of the farmers and their families.

At once the farmers seemed to come to a common conclusion, turned about face and ran back to their cottages at full speed. Within a few minutes, all the men and women in the small hamlet were running back toward the plane with cups, pots, pans, bottles and every other conceivable container they could find. Leading them all was the man who had first stepped forward, a fresh cigarette glowing from his lips.

Spiegel stepped from behind the plane with his hand still near his holstered pistol. “Bill, cover me: Halt!” he said, his hand raised in the manner of a New York City traffic cop. “Halt!” he said… much louder this time. Then to his crew, “Stand back; no threats.”

Everyone stopped. He hoped they were not hostile, and walked forward, and wagged his finger in a no-no manner while he imitated removing and extinguishing the butt of a cigarette. They understood. Several men immediately dowsed their smokes, while the others laughed. “OK’” said Spiegel, “benzene, it is,” and he turned and walked back to the plane and signaled the crew the situation appeared safe.

Carpenter had set the charge on the IFF as the crew exited the plane. The small charge, set in accordance with Army Regulation 390-5, demolished the Information Friend-or-Foe (IFF) radio detection device and Spiegel told Hole to take Novarra and Caffrey, both of whom had exited the plane carrying fire extinguishers, and inspect the engines for any latent fires. Then he sent Stockton, the ball gunner, whose turret had been sheared off in the crash, and Tyler back into the plane to retrieve any remaining relevant mission materials and other personal gear. They all could smell lubricant and fuel.

What little gas was left in the bomber’s fuel tanks was gone in less than an hour. So were most of the townsfolk. The crew stood around watching them retreat to their thatched roofed cottages with buckets of fuel.

A mission of 1000 bombers is a big deal. By 1945, the Combat Box Formation, developed by General Curtis LeMay, had become the 8th Army Air Force’s standard formation. It provided a devastating ground bombing pattern, while maximum defensive firepower from guns mounted in the planes, and improved slightly the defense against enemy fighter aircraft. Still, it was always one-sided battle without escorts: whenever German fighters attacked an unescorted formation, B-17’s were going to be lost. The gunners in each bomber had only a few

seconds to spot fighters slicing through the formation, take aim and get off a burst from their .50 caliber machine guns.

The formation was built of individual elements, each consisting of three aircraft flying at the same altitude in a "►" pattern. If formed according to the flight manual, the aircraft left and right of the lead plane in the "►" pattern, would be no more than 50 feet behind the tail of the lead plane and no more than 50 feet left or right of an imaginary line from the lead plane's wing tips. In reality, these distances varied according to the skill of the pilots and might have been as much as 100 feet. A squadron was four such elements, and sometimes an element would include a trailing plane, called "Tail End Charlie" flying slightly off center from the lead plane of the element in order to minimize prop wash. Tail End Charlie was not an enviable position to fly. Except for the lead planes with their precious Norden bombsites, it was the least protected plane, usually with the newest crew, and its mission was to fill in if a plane in front of it was lost or had to turn back. The larger the mission, the more creative the flight planners became with the box. A bomb group consisted of four squadrons with three of the squadrons at any time flying a mission in this close formation; one higher than the lead and one lower than the lead; all pilots trying to maintain the 50 foot separation.

The 8th Air Force was based in southeastern England and the 490th Bombardment Group was headquartered out of Mendlesham, a town less than 15 miles north of Ipswich. It was known for flying tight formations, owing to the many B-24 crews who now flew B-17's after the B-24's were moved to the Asian theater. Early on a cool 3 February 1945 morning, Spiegel's squadron had taken off from an airfield just northwest of Eye, a small farming community in Suffolk about four miles south of Diss. It took several hours for the formation to establish the proper pattern as planes took off, circled, and found their place in each squadron, then squadrons were vectored to bomb groups, and finally bomb groups were assembled into a vertical wedge combat box. In the vertical wedge, 36-plane bomb groups fly tight formations, with the leader of the lead group changing altitude as weather, cloud cover and defensive tactics required, and the high and low leaders in the trailing squadrons flying respectively 100 ft above and 250 below the group leader. Behind this lead group, would be another high group consisting of 36 planes, its lead plane 1000 feet above the leader of the lead group, and a low group, also of 36 planes, its leader at 1,000 feet lower than the leader. Twenty-eight vertical wedge combat boxes required 1008 aircraft. And so it continued until all 1008 pilots each positioned a plane weighing 36 tons, fully fueled and loaded with 6-7 tons of bombs and machine gun ordinance into its proper position in the formation. From lead plane to last plane, the entire wedge would have stretched 300 miles as it headed across the English Channel and over Holland.

Such mission formations never vectored directly to the target, but would veer continuously by 20 to 30 degrees of compass as they traveled toward the European coast and the leader of the lead group often would vary altitude along the inbound course. All other pilots adjusted their altitude to maintain the requirements of the Combat Box. This maneuvering was intended to keep the Germans off guard and make it difficult to prepare anti-aircraft defense systems, and muster timely fighter interception. Not until it was well inside Germany, did the lead planes in this mission turn and fix their bearing on Berlin. The rest of the formation followed.

As night fell, the crew gathered kindling and a few stout branches and made a campfire. Rations were opened. Several of the locals stayed near the plane and the crew. Conversation was attempted but there was no common language except smiling. Eventually, one of the farmers turned to the crew, "Następują ja," he said, "kom." And he waved at them to follow him as he set off in the direction of the cottages.

The crew all turned to Spiegel, and waited. "Hell," he said. "It's been a long day. Dowse the fire, and let's get warm."

Seated on the steps of the nearest cottage were two men dressed in thick wool shirts and pants, perhaps faded fatigues, each holding a long rifle. To Spiegel they looked like tall, lanky Kentucky Mountain Men. One of them passed his rifle to another, smiled and walked forward toward the crew. Reaching Spiegel first, the man put out his right hand, and as Spiegel shook it, the man said simply, "Partyzani." Then, "Amerykanie, tak?"

These were members of the Polish underground, now surfacing after the Germans had been driven westward. They spoke no English, and none of the crew spoke Polish, or German. They made it clear that Spiegel and Hole were to follow them while the rest of the crew was to remain behind. So while the remaining seven crew looked on, Spiegel and Hole walked away, down a dusty and cold dirt road, accompanied by two lanky men with long rifles.

This story is based on true events, many recalled by Mr.Siegel over coffee and fresh biscotti baked by his lovely wife, Jo Ann. Historical research and interpretations by the author have filled in some of the blanks. In time, the rest of the story will be written.

Boston, MA
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