

One Turning and One Burning

The odds said Bill Lawley couldn't keep the crippled B-17—with its eight wounded—in the air for another five hours.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

FEBRUARY 20, 1944, was the first day of Big Week, those six days when USAAF bombers and fighters broke the back of the Luftwaffe and gained control of the air over Europe. All the pieces had at last fallen in place. Weather on the Continent was clear and forecast to remain good; for the first time, the Eighth Air Force could muster more than 1,000 heavy bombers; auxiliary tanks had extended the range of escort fighters. Only the English weather refused to cooperate that Sunday morning. At US Strategic Air Force headquarters, Lt. Gen. "Tooney" Spaatz considered the risks of launching nearly 2,000 bombers and fighters into the soup that lay thousands of feet thick over East Anglia, and made his decision: "Let 'em go."

Now, several hours later, the 364th Squadron, 305th Bomb Group was on its bomb run at 28,000 feet, the target a Messerschmitt assembly plant at Leipzig, deep in the heart of Germany. Already it had been a long day—the nerve-racking climb up through overcast skies teeming with aircraft, heavy flak en route, attacks by enemy fighters, and now the ultimate frustration for 1st Lt. William R. Lawley and his crew. The bombs in the bay of their B-17 would not release.

As they came off target, Bill Lawley worked hard to keep his bomb-laden B-17 in formation. Glancing ahead, he saw enemy fighters boring in head-on, their guns blazing. Then, suddenly, the cockpit exploded into a screaming, icy maelstrom. Lawley's head was slammed back against the seat, and,

through a crimson haze, he saw the copilot slumped over the controls. Sensing that the bomber was in an almost vertical dive, he automatically chopped the throttles, forced the copilot's body off the control column, and with his left hand fought for control of the stricken plane.

For what seemed an eternity, the Fortress plunged earthward, subjected to stresses it was never designed to withstand. At 12,000 feet, Lawley, using every trick he knew, regained enough control to assess the situation. A 20-mm shell had knocked out the right windshield and killed the copilot. One engine was burning furiously, the aircraft controls were badly damaged, and Lawley was bleeding profusely from deep cuts on his face, neck, and hands. Flight instruments, covered with blood, were useless; there was virtually no forward visibility through what remained of the bloodstained windshield.

Lawley reached for the bailout bell, hoping to get his crew out before fire reached a fuel tank and the bomber exploded. As the bell rang, a crewman brought word that eight of the crew were wounded, two so seriously that they couldn't use



Bill Lawley—despite his injuries—refused to give up on his plane and crew.

their chutes. Lawley decided there was only one thing to do: try to put out the fire, then nurse the shattered bomber with its wounded over several hundred miles of enemy-held territory back to England. If the machine held out, maybe he could, too.

The flight engineer elected to parachute to safety—and to a POW camp. Lawley, with no copilot or engineer to help, finally extinguished the engine fire and headed on three engines for France, where the crew might find help from the underground if they had to crash-land. Flying in the clouds as much as possible, he managed, with the help of bombardier Lt. Harry Mason, to evade enemy fighters and to put out a second engine fire. They couldn't get the copilot's body out of the seat, so Mason tied it to the seat back with a parka. He then stood between the seats and helped Lawley with the controls when Lawley's strength ran out.

Over France, Lawley, who had refused to leave the controls to receive first aid, collapsed from loss of blood and exposure. Revived by Mason, he was able at last to salvo his bombs as they approached the Channel. With the bombs gone, the chance of making those last fifty miles over the gray, icy waters of the Channel improved. But near the English coast, a second engine quit. Then one of the two remaining good engines caught fire and continued to burn until Lawley found Redhill, a small fighter strip south of London, and brought the Fortress in for a crash landing nearly five hours after it was hit over Leipzig. All of the wounded, whom Bill Lawley had refused to abandon, survived the long ordeal.

On August 4, 1944, Lieutenant Lawley was awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroic performance on that first day of Big Week. He remained on active duty until his retirement in 1972, and now lives in Montgomery, Ala. ■