

# A Point of Honor

The battle-scarred B-17 circled its base in the UK with wounded aboard and no pilot to land it.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE  
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

**B**y November 1943, the invasion of Europe was only eight months away, and Allied air forces were still far from winning control of the air over the Continent. Air superiority would be essential to the success of the planned Normandy landings. But the strength of the Luftwaffe fighter force was, if anything, increasing.

Lt. Gen. Carl "Tooney" Spaatz, commander of US Strategic Air Forces in Europe, knew that a sustained, all-out attack on Nazi Germany's aircraft industry must be launched—and quickly. At last, after an agonizingly slow buildup, he had the bombers to do the job and enough long-range fighters to escort them to their targets.

A strategic bombing campaign, which was code-named Argument, was worked out in meticulous detail by the operations staffs of Spaatz's headquarters, the Eighth Air Force, VIII Fighter Command, and Ninth Air Force, which provided additional fighters. Spaatz also needed a week of weather good enough for visual bombing if those small targets were to be hit. That was a long time in coming.

Finally, after several postponements due to bad weather, Argument got under way on February 20, 1944—the start of the Big Week that was to break the back of the Luftwaffe. Before dawn on that day, more than 1,000 heavy bombers escorted by some 900 US and RAF fighters climbed through a heavy overcast and icing to attack aircraft factories in eastern Germany and Poland. It was the largest Eighth Air Force bombing raid up to that time.

The 351st Bombardment Group,

based at Polebrook in the UK, was assigned a target in the heavily defended Leipzig area, about 100 miles southwest of Berlin. This was going to be a long, tough mission, especially for 2d Lt. Walter E. Truemper, a young navigator, and engineer Sgt. Archibald Mathies, members of a 351st crew and both on their second mission.

In a running battle near the target, the 351st was attacked by a squadron of Luftwaffe fighters. The B-17 crewed by Truemper and Mathies took direct hits in the cockpit that killed the copilot and left the pilot bleeding and unconscious. As the B-17 fell, out of control, crew members dragged the copilot's body out of the right seat. Lieutenant Truemper, with no experience as a pilot, took over the controls and pulled the bomber out of its dive. Although the cockpit was badly smashed and some of the instruments shot out, he managed, with Sergeant Mathies's help, to fly back to his base at Polebrook, contact the control tower, and describe the condition of the plane and crew.

Truemper reported that he and Sergeant Mathies would try to land the plane after other crew members had bailed out. The group commander, Col. Eugene Romig, and his Operations Officer, Col. Robert W. Burns, checked the condition of the plane and judged that it could

not be landed by an untrained pilot. Truemper was told to put the unconscious pilot in a chute and drop him out of the plane. He replied that the pilot couldn't be moved and that he and Mathies would not abandon the wounded man. Under these circumstances, they were reluctantly cleared to attempt a landing.

Colonel Burns, now a retired major general, recalls what happened as he and Colonel Romig flew alongside the damaged bomber, its cockpit windows blackened and its windshield shattered. Two men with no pilot experience had only a slim chance of landing the crippled plane. Nevertheless, the navigator and engineer were determined to save the life of their pilot, and with luck perhaps they could.

Truemper was instructed to follow Burns and Romig, who would lead them to a landing on the runway. Because of inexperience, battle damage, or both, Truemper wasn't able to slow the B-17 enough to stay with the lead plane or to get his bomber on the ground. Climbing back to traffic altitude, they again attempted a landing, without success.

The stricken B-17's two-man crew decided they could not land on the runway, but might get down safely with gear retracted in an open field near the base. About forty-five minutes after arriving at Polebrook, they came in over the field, cut the engines, touched down, and slid straight ahead on the plane's belly. It looked as though they had won their gamble. Then the plane hit an obstruction and disintegrated. There were no survivors.

Lt. Walter Truemper and Sgt. Archibald Mathies could have abandoned the critically wounded pilot and lived, but as courageous and honorable men, they saw no alternative to their desperate and almost successful attempt to save his life. Both men were awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously for their gallantry on that bleak February day in 1944. ■



Sgt. Archibald Mathies (left) and Lt. Walter Truemper died trying to bring their critically wounded pilot back to their base in Britain.