

A Tale of Two Texans

The Mathis brothers, two extraordinary bombardiers, left a legacy of heroism to the men of the Eighth Air Force.

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THE winter of 1943 was a grim one for Eighth Air Force bomber crews. The weather was unspeakable. Combat losses were higher than anticipated, the flow of replacements excruciatingly slow. Statistically, a crew had one chance in five of completing its twenty-five-mission tour, and the odds weren't likely to improve right away.

Toward the end of January, the Eighth had begun to hit targets inside Germany itself, far beyond the range of escort fighters in early 1943. By that time, the Luftwaffe had concentrated more than 300 fighters in the west and was rapidly building to a force of 600 planes.

Gloomy though the picture might seem, it wasn't enough to dampen the irrepressible good humor of Lt. Jack Mathis, a bombardier from San Angelo, Tex., assigned to the 303d Bombardment Group. Besides, it was mid-March; winter was almost over. And his bombardier brother, Mark, who had just landed in the UK for duty with another group, was on the way to visit Jack at Molesworth, where the 303d was stationed. It would be a great reunion for the brothers—veteran Jack who had been flying combat missions for nearly five months and new-boy Mark, about to begin what Jack considered the greatest of all adventures.

On March 18, 1943, two days after Mark arrived at Molesworth, the 303d took part in the unescorted 100-plane mission against German submarine yards at Vegesack on the Weser River, a few miles northwest of Bremen. Jack, in *The Duchess*, was lead bombardier of the 359th



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Squadron. Their route to target was over the North Sea to the island of Helgoland, thence south to Vegesack.

All went well until the turn at Helgoland, when hell broke loose as fifty to sixty enemy fighters bored in on the formation, continuing their attacks until the B-17s began their bomb run. Then the threat changed from fighters to intense, accurate anti-aircraft fire.

A heavy flak shell burst just ahead of *The Duchess*, tearing up the nose of the bomber. Shell fragments shattered Jack Mathis's right arm above the elbow, tore a gaping hole in his side and abdomen, blew off his oxygen mask, and hurled him to the rear of the bombardier's compartment. With the lead bombardier out of action only seconds from the target, the chance of a successful attack was slight, and Jack Mathis knew it.

Fighting shock, pain, and the sure

knowledge that he was dying, the mortally wounded bombardier dragged himself back to his bomb-sight, clinging to a slender thread of consciousness until the run was completed and his bombs released. His last word before he died was, "Bombs . . ." The squadron, dropping on Jack's release, put its bombs squarely on target for a perfect strike.

Lt. Jack Mathis was the first airman in the European theater to earn the Medal of Honor for his heroism on that bitter March day in 1943.

When *The Duchess*, bearing Jack's body, landed at Molesworth, it was met on the ramp by Mark Mathis. The quiet, serious Mark had been close to his ebullient brother. There was one thing he could do to avenge Jack's death. He could replace his lost brother on *The Duchess* crew.

Mark asked the 359th Squadron commander, then Lt. Col. William R. Calhoun, to arrange his transfer to the 303d Group. Colonel Calhoun worked the transfer, but not to the crew of *The Duchess*, which was scheduled to return to the States.

A few weeks after Mark joined the 303d, his B-17 was shot down by enemy fighters over the North Sea. Some members of the crew were seen to bail out, but Mark stayed with the doomed bomber. According to one report, his gun in the nose of the Fortress was still firing at enemy fighters just before the B-17 crashed into the icy waters. Colonel Calhoun remembers the writing of that second letter to the parents of the Mathis brothers as the saddest moment of his war.

The heroism of the Mathis brothers became legendary in Eighth Air Force—an inspiration to the thousands of airmen who followed them in the skies of wartime Germany. Now, more than forty years later, those two intrepid Texans are still remembered when the Bombardiers Alumni Association meets each year to renew old friendships and to honor its wartime heroes. ■