

Remembering the Thirteenth Mission: The Day the Milk Soured



by Billie Holladay Skelley

The 67th Bomb Squadron of the 44th Bomb Group was equipped with B-24Js, similar to the one shown above, at the time of this mission. (Photo from the AAHS photo archives)

During WWII, flight crews of U.S. bombers stationed in England knew that all of their missions had the potential to be both dangerous and deadly. Air combat losses were all too common to assume otherwise. Occasionally, however, a crew received an assignment that, for all intents and purposes, appeared to be a milk run — a routine, easy mission — with little or no danger anticipated.

On January 21, 1944, the crew of the *Liberty Belle* thought they had drawn just such a milk run. Their objective was to target military installations along the French coast, south of Calais. It was assumed that any potential enemy opposition encountered would be light. So “run of the mill” was the designated mission that the *Liberty Belle*’s pilot, 1st Lt. Keith Cookus, and copilot, 1st Lt. Howard Kelly “Tiny” Holladay, had three extra crewmen onboard to make a total contingent of 13 men. The extra crew included Command Pilot Maj. William Anderson who was making his 25th and final mission, Group Bombardier Capt. Robert L. Ager, and Observer 1st Lt. Henry A. Wieser. The *Liberty Belle* was the lead aircraft in a sub-formation of 12 B-24s from the 67th Bomb Squadron of the 44th Bomb Group.

The rules of engagement at the time for bombing targets in France required visual confirmation of the target. Unfortunately, due to heavy cloud cover and after five runs on the target,

Major Anderson ordered an abort to the mission with the bomb load still intact. As the *Liberty Belle* attempted to head home, however, a navigation error put the group in close vicinity of Calais and over a cluster of German mobile anti-aircraft guns. Suddenly the guns began to fire, and within seconds, the *Liberty Belle* took seven direct and devastating hits.

The #1 and #2 engines of the plane were destroyed by these hits. The attack left the #1 engine hanging in shreds. The #3 engine, which was also hit, ignited in a ball of flames and began to emit a long plume of black smoke. Another hit bombarded the base of the nose turret. Still another tore through the right wing. One especially destructive shell exploded in the bomb bay tearing out the doors and the catwalk. Part of the landing gear was also blown away. During the attack, many indirect hits



1st Lt. Howard Kelly Holladay would go on to complete 29 missions as a B-24 pilot. He spent 17 months in the European theatre and four and a half years in the Army Air Forces. He would become a captain and receive the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with three Oak Leaf Clusters. After the war, he became a pilot for Eastern Airlines. His efforts, like those of the rest of the crew of the Liberty Belle and the many others who fought, survived, and died during WWII, are well worth remembering.



67th Bomb Squadron B-24J-55-CO Liberator, 42-99970, M-Bar, Liberty Belle where she finally came to rest close to Canterbury, England. (Photo from the AAHS archives)

inflicted injury to the skin of the aircraft causing additional damage to the wings, fuselage and empennage. Smothered in the smell of smoke and gas, the pilots quickly discovered that they had lost hydraulics and all communications.

Several crewmen were wounded by the enemy fire, and others were badly burned by blazing hydraulic fluid. The radio operator, S/Sgt. Richard Trechel, was blown out of the plane, and with a large portion of the fuselage gone and flames erupting, two other crew members, Captain Ager and 1st Lt. Wieser, elected to bail out (all three men would become POWs). With communications down, the pilots were unable to advise other members of the crew to jump.

At the moment of the attack, Major Anderson was standing between pilot Cookus and copilot Holladay. Anderson was hit by one of the first shells and was seriously wounded in his back and legs. Neither Cookus nor Holladay was harmed.

With options now limited, the *Liberty Belle* quickly began to head for home on its remaining engines. Cookus and Holladay tried to keep the wobbling, heavy bomber flying as their injured bombardier, 1st Lt. Woodrow Cole, tried heroically to rid the aircraft of its bomb load. Holding precariously to anything he could find in the open bomb bay, Cole managed to manually release some of the bombs, but he could not get them all out.

Already having difficulty maintaining altitude, conditions worsened for the crew near the English coast when the #3 engine exploded. Accepting that the one remaining engine was not sufficient to keep the *Liberty Belle* airborne and sighting land near Canterbury (Wingham, Kent), the pilots cut the remaining operating engine and prepared to make a crash landing.

Cookus asked Holladay how Major Anderson was doing. Holladay responded that "The landing won't hurt him. He's dead."^[3]

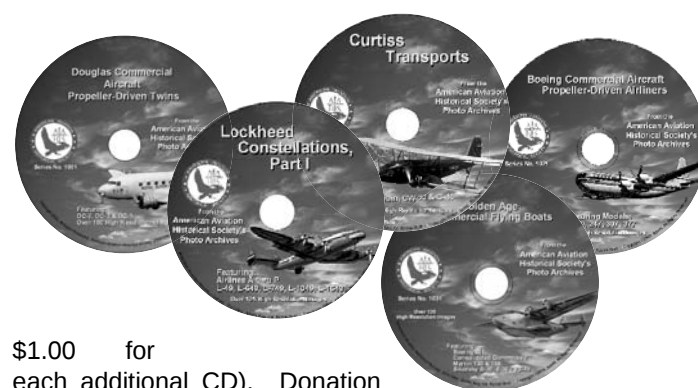
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With the #3 engine still burning, Cookus and Holladay attempted to land the *Liberty Belle*. At 50 feet, they successfully veered and narrowly missed a farmhouse. Plowing into a field, they shot up and down over the ground landing the plane on her belly in a ditch. Amid the blazing wreckage, the pilots' compartment was twisted approximately 45 degrees off center to the right, and the #3 and #4 props were torn off on impact. Realizing that fire from the #3 engine could spread and that the bombs still onboard could explode, the pilots feared the *Liberty Belle* might go up in a ball of fire at any minute.

Cookus and crew members able to exit the plane began to fight the fire in the #3 engine. Some suffered burns from flaming oil as they exited. Holladay stayed onboard trying to free the trapped crewmen on the flight deck, even though he knew the *Liberty Belle* could explode at any moment. He tore at anything within reach in an effort to free the men, but could not get to them. Despite the danger, none of the trapped men complained — even though they knew the high octane gas could ignite a fireball that would engulf them.

A passing civilian car took three of the injured crewmen who had exited the plane to the hospital. A nearby farmer brought a shovel, and the remaining crew used it and their bare hands to build up an earthen wall between the fiery engine and the trapped men. A British fire engine eventually arrived and extinguished the fire. Using axes and other tools, the crew managed to cut a hole in the plane to finally free the trapped men. After three hours of effort and struggle, the trapped crew members were extricated. Two of the men, Major Anderson

and bombardier Cole, did not survive.

Thirteen men went out on the *Liberty Belle*, but only eight returned.

"We had 13 aboard," Holladay remarked. "It was my 13th mission."^[6] He added that if it had been Friday the 13th, he would have quit and gone home!

The thirteenth mission proved to be a far cry from a milk run. That day, the milk definitely turned sour. Yet, as all thoughts of anything routine vanished and as tragedy seemed poised to triumph, heroism also flourished.

References:

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2. Holladay, Howard Kelly, 1st Lt. "Copilot Flight Report." Plane #970. January 21, 1944.
3. Lundy, Will. "44th Bomb Group Roll of Honor and Casualties." www.44thbombgroup.com. Updated July 2005.
4. Mackay, Ron & Adams, Steve. *The 44th Bomb Group in World War II*, Schiffer Military History, Atglen, Penn., 2003, ISBN 0-7643-1885-3, pp.97-100.
5. *The Somerset Journal*, Somerset, Ky. December 1943 – May 1945.
6. "3 Trapped in Blazing Lib Saved by Rest of Crew after Crash." U.S. Liberator Base (Newspaper Archive). January 23, 1944.

Consolidated B-24J-55-CO Liberator, 42-99970, 67th Bomb Sqdn., M-Bar, LIBERTY BELLE, MACR #8714

Liberty Belle Crew – January 21, 1944

Name	Position	Home Town	ASN	Status
1st Lt. Keith COOKUS	Pilot	Eugene, Ore.	0-675040	Survived crash-landing
1st Lt. Howard K. HOLLADAY	Copilot	Somerset, Ky.	0-681418	Survived crash-landing
1st Lt. Franklin A. CAMPBELL	Navigator		0-678607	Wounded, injured, survived crash-landing
1st Lt. Woodrow W. COLE	Bombardier	Correopolis, Penn.	0-741099	KIA, buried Cambridge (D-1-35)
Maj. William N. ANDERSON (506th Sq.)	Command Pilot	Taylorville, Ill.	0-411678	KIA
1st Lt. Henry A. WIESER	Observer (not with the 67th)	Hamilton, Tex.	0-669253	POW
Capt. Robert L. AGER (68th Sqdn.)	Group Bombardier	Port Blakely, Wash.	0-727956	POW
S/Sgt. Andrew A. KOWALSKI	Engineer	Reading, Penn.	3316890?	Survived crash-landing
S/Sgt. Richard J. TRECHEL	Radio Operator	Schenectady, N.Y.	6688765	POW
S/Sgt. Eugene K. SEIFRIED	Nose Turret	Philadelphia, Penn.	33107243	Survived crash-landing
Sgt. Thomas FONG	Ball Turret	Brooklyn, N.Y.	12124529	Survived crash-landing
S/Sgt. Walter E. BOYD	LW Gunner	Little Rock, Ark.	38179723	Survived crash-landing
S/Sgt. Herman BECKER	Tail Turret	New Jersey	32079625	Wounded, trapped, survived crash-landing

