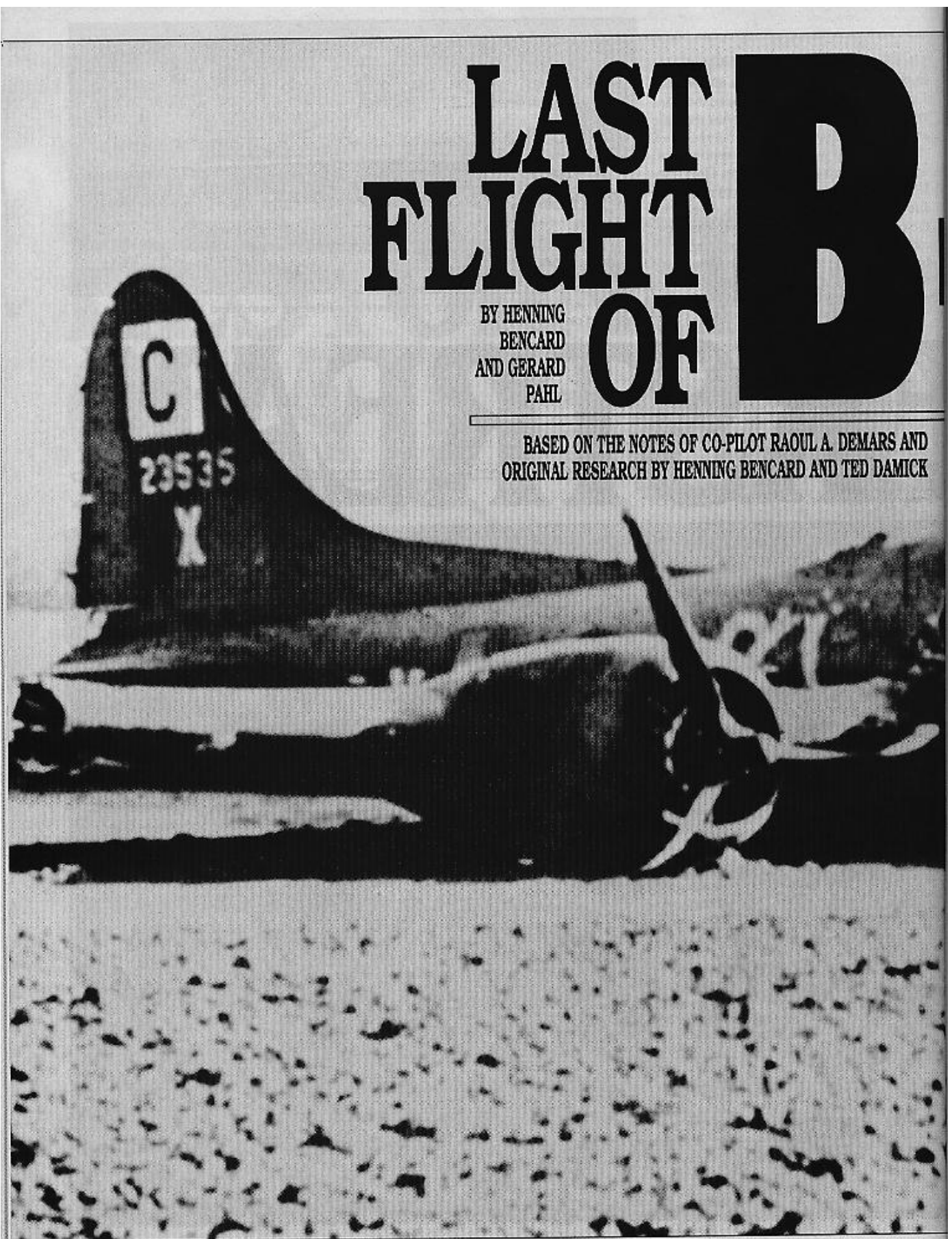


LAST FLIGHT OF **B**

BY HENNING
BENCARD
AND GERARD
PAHL

BASED ON THE NOTES OF CO-PILOT RAOUL A. DEMARS AND
ORIGINAL RESEARCH BY HENNING BENCARD AND TED DAMICK



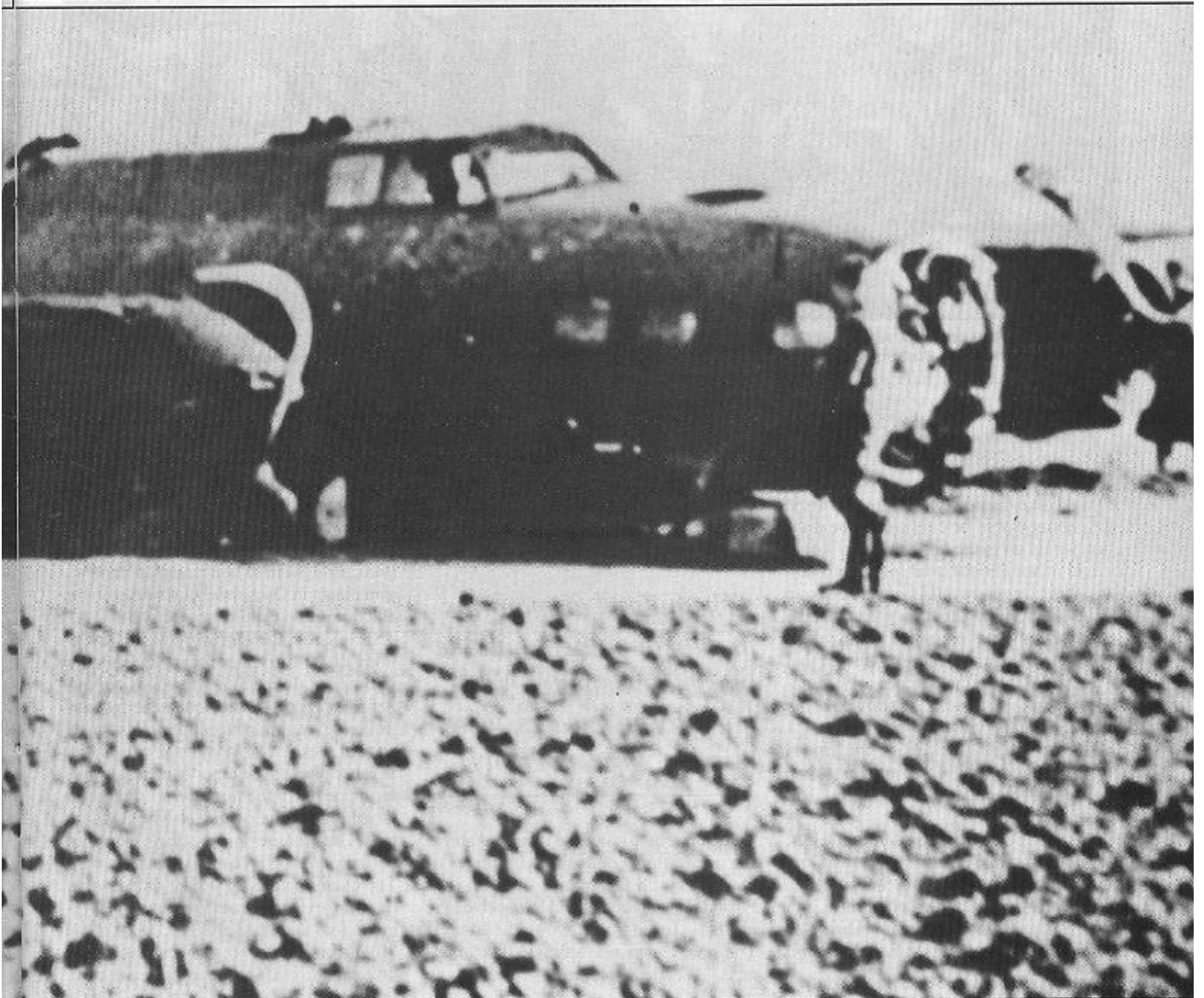
17

23535

Watch it Stan, there's a 109 coming under the belly, one o'clock low...get'em, get'em. Tony! 190 from the other side, 11 o'clock high. Come on Segalla, get the SOB." The staccato of .50-caliber machine guns reverberates and the smell of cordite permeates the fuselage of the Fortress as German bandits pepper the plane with cannon and machine gun fire. Eighth Air Force B-17 23535 had just dropped its load of 500 lb high explosive and 100 lb incendiary bombs on the synthetic oil plant at Politz, Poland. Then the German fighters swept in, trying to cut a bomber or two out of the formation as the four-engine heavies came off target. It is April 11, 1944.

Recalling the heroic last mission of a Flying Fortress during a World War Two raid. Today, relics from this flight are preserved at the Kalamazoo Aviation History Museum

With eight feet missing from the starboard wing tip (caused by clipping a telephone pole), the Fortress cut a new furrow into a Danish farm field. (R. deMars)





The crew of 23535 (top row, left to right): SSgt. Stan Segalla, Sgt. Russ Lauer, SSgt. Stan Mrozek, SSgt. Al Esler, Sgt. Everett Morgan, and Sgt. John Hamlin. Bottom row: 2nd Lt. Raoul deMars, 2nd Lt. Ken Bethe, 2nd Lt. Hy Juskowitz (now Howard Justin), and 2nd Lt. Bob Smith.

Some strategists back at Allied Bomber Command had the bright idea that if three divisions (643 bombers) of tightly-knit B-17s and B-24s were to fly two routes to a target area deep within enemy territory, the enemy would be confused. One division would go to the north and two would travel on an almost total land approach and their targets would be well beyond "Big B" (Berlin). The theory was that the enemy would have no idea what would become the ultimate target. At least that was the theory — the bomber crew members knew otherwise. As they saw the briefing curtain drawn at 0500 hours back in Snetterton Heath, Suffolk, the groans were obvious. The primaries were Poznan, Kreising and other targets 160 miles east of Berlin!

Protesting pilots complained, "Hell, we'll never make it back!" "Oh my God, how damn far is that?" This was almost a suicide mission. For the men of the 339th Bomb Squadron, 96th Group, Third Air Division, it was going to be a long and terrible day.

At least for the 339th, the route was predominantly over the North and Baltic Seas — where anti-aircraft fire would be minimal. *But* the path bridged despairingly close to northern France and Belgium, well within enemy interceptor reach. The forma-

"The injured airman was in a lot of pain, but all the morphine ampules either had broken needles, were missing, or were empty"

tion would then continue overland above the particularly dense *flak* batteries of Denmark and Germany, then on into Poland. The mission would last twelve long hours — for many, it would be longer. There was *some* reasoning in this "madness." Weather predictions for the route

called for concentrated cloud cover much of the way, clearing over target. It was thought that with the split route, the Germans would reason the Third Division bombers were just a diversion for the "real" attack: The First and Second Divisions were taking more direct southerly penetrations, straight in to bomb aircraft production plants in Oschersleben and Bernburg and Sorau and Cottbus respectively.

Logically, the *Luftwaffe* would obligingly direct its fighter forces to this more immediate threat. Just the opposite happened as reports indicate the enemy controller delayed in concentrating his forces against these two Divisions. Perhaps this was because, as the report stated, a "similar mission (to the north was flown) two days before." Everything else went wrong too. The weather predictions were not correct and clouds covered the target area. The planes had to fly slower than normal over the extended route to conserve precious fuel and at 18,000-19,000 ft these "flying crosses" were easy targets for the 202 anti-aircraft batteries in the region.

Even some ground rockets were fired! Though there were two P-47 and one P-38 fighter groups assigned escort, two groups were to cover the return flight and only one Thunderbolt group (353rd) would go in with the bombers — and they left 30-40 miles inland. The bombers missed the rendezvous coming out but met up with two groups of fighters closer to home. To add insult to injury, the 339th's bombs fell east of the target!

One of the B-17s penetrating "Fortress Europe" on this fateful day was B-17 23535. Navigator Hyman Juskowitz (now

Me 410s and 15 Ju 88s struck from the six o'clock, firing rockets — the enemy had put up a well-coordinated defense and three of the 17s were shot down.

Another B-17 (Joe Ziegler's plane), flying 23535's left wing, disintegrated in a blinding flash — probably from a rocket explosion right in the bomb bay. All the men lost were buddies. Pathfinder aircraft could not make out the primary target of Poznen, even with radar. Ironically, here the cloud cover was ten-tenths and smoke generators were active too.

Division leader Col. Castel turned the

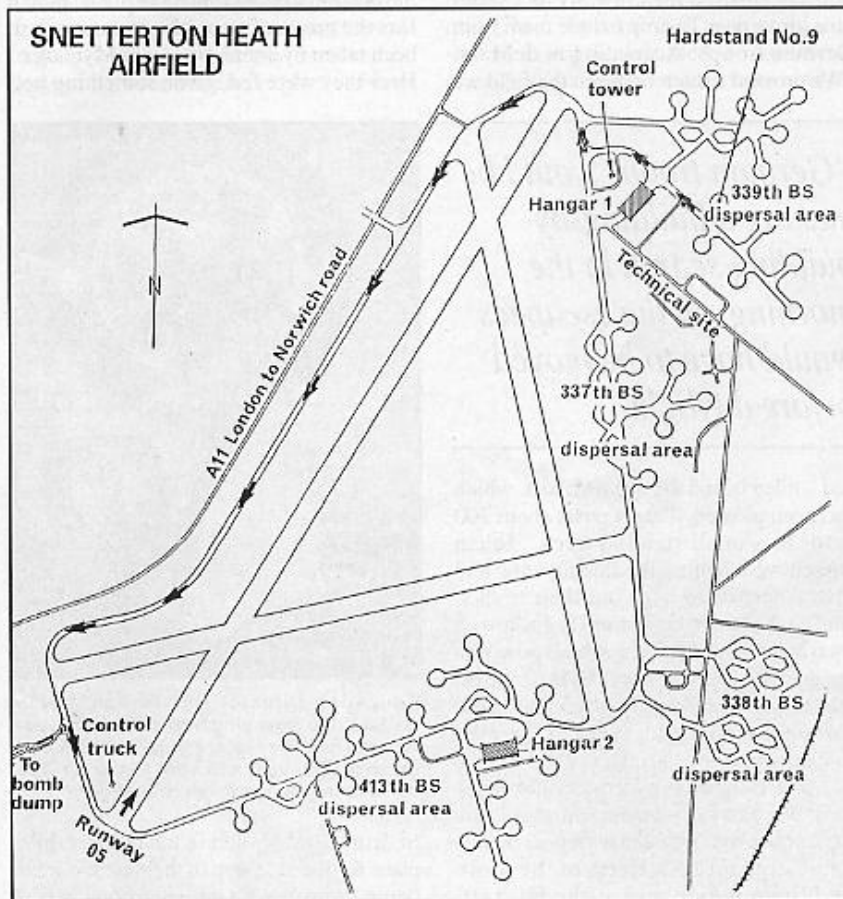
damage and the bomb bay doors were jammed partially open. But, more importantly, number three engine stopped functioning and in an unfeathered position — drag would slow the plane down.

It was at this point that the Messerschmitts and Focke Wulfs pounced! Pilot Bethe and co-pilot Raoul deMars had thought they might avoid detection by flying at tree-top level, but before they could even start to let down from 28,000 ft, the bomber got jumped! They were just over Rostock when the fighters cut the cripple out of the pack — 23535 became a potential victim. The murderous fighter attacks knocked out the number two engine and number four was smoking badly from a burning oil line. Number one was the only good engine left. Even worse, number two was only partially feathered and number three was windmilling terribly. The drag was trying to pull the plane out of the sky.

In all this commotion, a 20mm cannon shell shattered the cockpit, blasting shards of shrapnel into the skull of deMars. Searing metal penetrated beneath his right eye and into the roof of his mouth. Bethe was trying to fly the crippled bomber by himself and had the feeling he would not be able to return the bomber to the 339th ground crew.

Bethe knew the crew's only hope was to reach neutral Sweden, but he did not know if they could make it that far. Their last navigational instrument still working, the magnetic compass, had been knocked out during the cockpit explosion. Again, the fighters assailed the stricken bomber! Luckily, after this run, all of the fighters broke off — either low on fuel or ammo or both — all except the five shot down (and later confirmed) by the bomber's crew. Bethe turned the damaged bomber north/northeast, flying over Vemmetofte Strand, Denmark.

DeMars was removed to the radio room where Johnnie Hamlin dressed his wounds. The injured airman was in a lot of pain, but all the morphine ampules either had broken needles, were missing, or were empty — having leaked their contents (actually this probably saved deMars' life in a way, as the plane was not going to make it to Sweden). The drag was so great that the lumbering Fort kept wanting to turn right. Engineer Tony Segalla climbed down from his top turret and filled the left seat — pilot Bethe was flying the right seat because of the plane's previous position in the group. Segalla used all his strength to press both feet on the left rudder pedal. The pilot had taken what he thought was a good heading but,



Howard Justin) said that upon boarding the bomber, a ground crewman extolled him to take care of the Fort as it had just gone through a thorough repair regime. The bomber crew was comparatively new (this was their third mission) and, as a result, they were flying in a composite group. As 23535 and the other American bombers approached their targets, two Gruppen of fighters formed up over the Musitzsee (Lake Murtitz), about 55 miles north/northwest of Berlin. Speeding to the attack, 15 Bf 110s dove right through the B-17 formations — some of the German planes seemed to try to ram the Forts. Also, 20

bombers towards their secondary targets: Stettin, Politz, and Rostock. They were about 40 miles inland from the Baltic (though 23535's Wing initially went for Stettin, its "secondary for overcast," it turned on to Politz, the "secondary for visual," when clouds cleared). With "bombs away," the lightened plane heaved upward and the pilot, 2nd Lt. Ken Bethe, started for home — again at a reduced speed. But, before the bomb bay doors shut, a violent jolt shook the teetering aircraft. A flak burst, just below the belly of the plane, shook the entire foundation of the Fortress. There was minor structural

because of the damage, it was hard to hold course and they were rapidly losing altitude. Dane Kaji Larsen remembers the low-flying plane frightened his horses as he farmed near Dyrland.

In an attempt to keep the craft airborne, the crew hastily threw everything they could out of the B-17, leaving a trail of parts strewn across the Store Heddinge peninsula. Little Oluf Nielsen was playing outside his home at Skottehusenge when he saw ammunition "raining" from the aircraft. Everything that was not bolted down and some things that were, went overboard — ammo, guns, instruments — everything! Even the parachutes went as most of them had been damaged beyond use...every crew member elected to "ride it down all the way."

When the faltering plane approached the coastline and Hy Juskowitz compared what he saw to his maps, he must have realized that something was wrong with the geography or else he would have told Bethe to put the plane down immediately. Instead, they continued north almost to Stroby, littering gear along the way (some of these items were recovered and now are on display at the Kalamazoo Aviation History Museum. Even an active .50-caliber machine gun was retrieved and offered to the museum, but declined). At about Aulebjerg, Bethe probably could have seen Sweden off the starboard wing as the spring day was beautiful and clear. The plane turned east but, near Soholm/Gjorslev, number four engine died and the pilot knew he could not make it to freedom.

A little south of Klippinge, Bethe decided to turn back on his course. The doomed plane was only a few hundred feet off the ground and Bethe had seen a likely landing spot about 2-1/2 miles back. Farmer Kare Jensen was ideally located near Jaestestue and witnessed the whole thing. He remembers the machine coming from the south, flying east, returning, and then landing.

Coming in at about 100 knots, a shudder went through the plane and the crew thought this was it — the B-17 was going to break up and roll into a ball of fire. But the right wing had only clipped a telephone pole. The bomber swung around, barely missed a farm house, and dug into the earth. The belabored pilot could have easily dropped a wing at such a slow speed, cartwheeling the plane to disaster. But Bethe did a great job. There was a road and ditch on the left and high voltage wires on the right. The damaged fuselage sucked in a ton of dirt and effectively broke the slide of the plane. DeMars, Hamlin, and Al Esler were lifted about

three feet by the influx of soil. The crew scrambled out of the plane because of the threat of fire and, if deMars had been drugged, he might not have made it. Farmer Jens Herluf Jensen saw the approach and, though he missed the crash, hurried to the site and organized guards to keep the curious away. It was about 1400 hrs and the downed plane was about 40 miles south of Copenhagen.

The Allied bomber had plowed a 410 ft furrow in a 1540 ft alfalfa field owned by Knud Larsen. Another farmer, Kare Jensen, and his work-hand, Edward, quickly spirited the crew off to a small pine grove near Tastrup to hide them from German troops. According to deMars, "We crossed a ditch between the field we

"German troops would be making a building-by-building search in the morning, so the escapees would have to be moved before daylight"

had landed in and the one next to it, which had been plowed. Then we ran about 300 yards to a small stand of trees." Johan Nissen went behind the fleeing crew and used a harrow to wipe out their tracks. During the crash, navigator Hy Juskowitz smashed one of his eyes, which now was completely swollen shut. DeMars, suffering from his head injury, thinks he heard older non-combatant types of German soldiers searching the edges of the woods. But according to the records, this is not the case. Perhaps deMars mistook the local police for German soldiers as by this time Sergeant J.M. Hertz of the Store Heddinge police was at the aircraft. Indeed, Police Chief E.R. Gelius took some great risks. He waited for quite some time before informing the Germans of the crash and then sent them in the wrong direction, to Tommestrup, when they did come!

According to tail gunner, Everett Morgan, although there were local informers in Tastrup, they were unable to contact the Germans as the plane took out the phone lines! The occupation troops did not even find the aircraft until 2300 hours! (at this time there were over 200,000 German occupation troops in Denmark because of a suspected Allied invasion)

The men were freezing since it was

getting quite cold. Stan Morozak and Hy Juskowitz laid close to the injured deMars to share with him their body heat. The crew members removed and buried all their insignia except their dog tags while Johan and Asger Jensen tried to concoct a scheme to save them from capture. The two Danes decided to ask for help from Asger's father, Hans, of Hojerup who met them in a cemetery about six miles from the crash site so as not to be overheard by Germans or informers.

Hans was active in transporting Jews from Stevns to Sweden. An hour before the Nazis had even found the plane, much less the grove of trees, the crewmen had been taken by Johan Nissen to Myrekaer. Here they were fed, given something hot



Education Director Gerard Pahl holds deMars' life vest which started the investigation into the history of B-17 23535 and its crew. The vest was sent to the Air Zoo by Henning Bencard. (Herb Ellinger)

to drink, and hidden in a hay loft while plans for the next step in their escape were being formulated. German troops would be making a building-by-building search in the morning, so the escapees would have to be moved before daylight. Though it had been over 20 hours since the crew had had any sleep, they still could not catch some shut-eye as they were quite nervous, especially Hy Juskowitz who was Jewish — it was well-known how the Nazis treated Jews. The crewmen still had their side arms and Hy vowed the Nazis would not capture him alive.

Fish exporter P.H. Brammer was on his way from Rodvig with his tank truck. Along with him was ship's skipper Aage Leonhardtsen. Both men were experienced in rescuing Jews and they were

able to bluff their way through a German roadblock to get to Myrekaer at about 2330 hours. The bomber crew was secreted away in the tanker. A tense moment in the trip came at another German road block — but the guards were bribed with a side of bacon! The truck made its way through the night to “Seaman’s Home” in Fakse Ladeplads, where the crew rested. DeMars’ wounds were attended to by Dr. Erik Thomsen who was a member of the resistance.

The next day, resistance commission agent Borge Nielsen of Store Heddinge brought a freight truck to the hidden crewmen to transport them to Copenhagen. Nielsen was deeply involved in smuggling weapons and explosives into

Denmark and Jews out. He hid the Americans behind bales of straw. DeMars remembers that the truck seemed to stop often and the crew was in a panic. They thought that each time the truck stopped, it was because of a German patrol — but it must have only been because of stop signs as the truck always started up again, right away. Finally, the truck stopped fully and one-by-one the Americans were led through an alley to a freight elevator and the apartment of Robert Jensen (cover name “Tom”). This apartment was in Vlaby. The crew remained hidden for three or four days and had to remain very quiet, moving around in their stocking feet so as not to alert the Germans next door. Somehow the Jensens were able to

provide the “mob” with food and drink — even a small American flag on a stand and American cigarettes.

(This whole organization was very well coordinated and a real thorn in the side of the occupation troops. Robert Jensen would eventually be awarded the Silver Star for his efforts, but it would be a posthumous presentation as he was killed shortly after this by the Gestapo.)

At this point there is some confusion in the story as the records show the above portion of the escape to be correct, but that is not the way deMars remembered it. He thinks events happened in reverse... according to his story, *this* is the point at which the fish truck was used.

(continued on page 64)



It appears there may have been some nose art on 23535 but, since it was a borrowed bomber, none of the crew can remember if this was so. (H. Bencard)

(continued from page 19)

Nazi patrols had a habit of arbitrarily stopping any truck for inspection — the crew was quite nervous over the possibility of being discovered. “We were sent out to the truck one at a time and each of us was put in what must have been tanks for carrying fish. They were about 2-1/2 ft wide and 3-1/2 ft deep and 3-1/2 ft long. They were made of fairly heavy gauge steel and each one had a cover.” DeMars continues that it was by this conveyance that his crew reached a fishing village on the coast of Denmark and that they were taken to an inn (probably Seaman’s Home) where a doctor attended his wounds. Tail gunner Morgan remembers the truck as being a “one-ton milk truck.” Whichever conveyance or chronology is correct is not as important as the outcome of this courageous and daring act of both the Danish Underground and the American crew.

The men were spirited through Kobenhavn to the harbor just before dawn. Dressed in coveralls brought in from Sweden, the escapees boarded a fishing boat which was to then rendezvous with a boat from Sweden by crossing the Oresund. As the men hid behind a short sea wall, they breathlessly peeked over the stone retainer only to see a German soldier but a few feet away! The patrolman took a few steps then reversed course

Howard Justin, left, and Raoul deMars during a 1985 reunion. (R. deMars)

The downed Fort was chopped apart and loaded on seven flat cars and sent by rail to Germany where it was probably melted down. (R deMars)

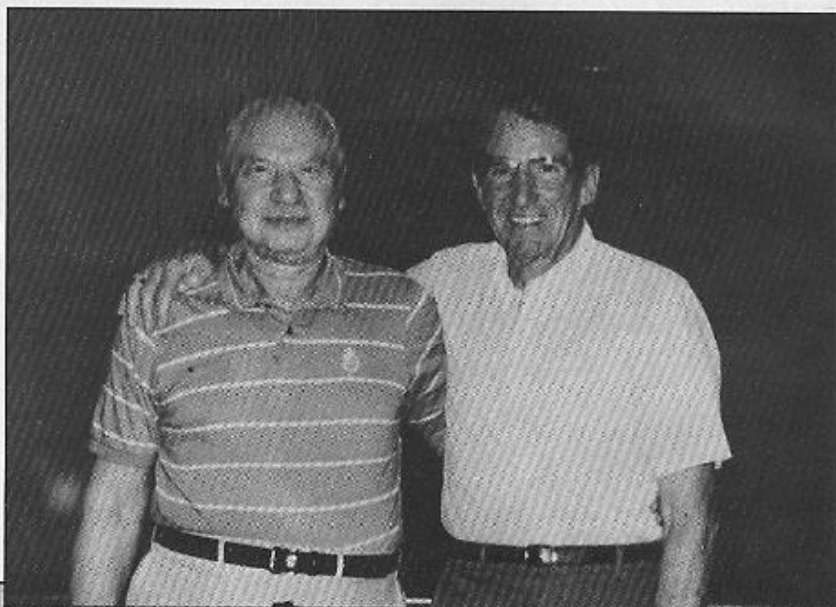
and came back, right at the men — they thought for sure it was all over. Fortunately, the soldier passed them and con-

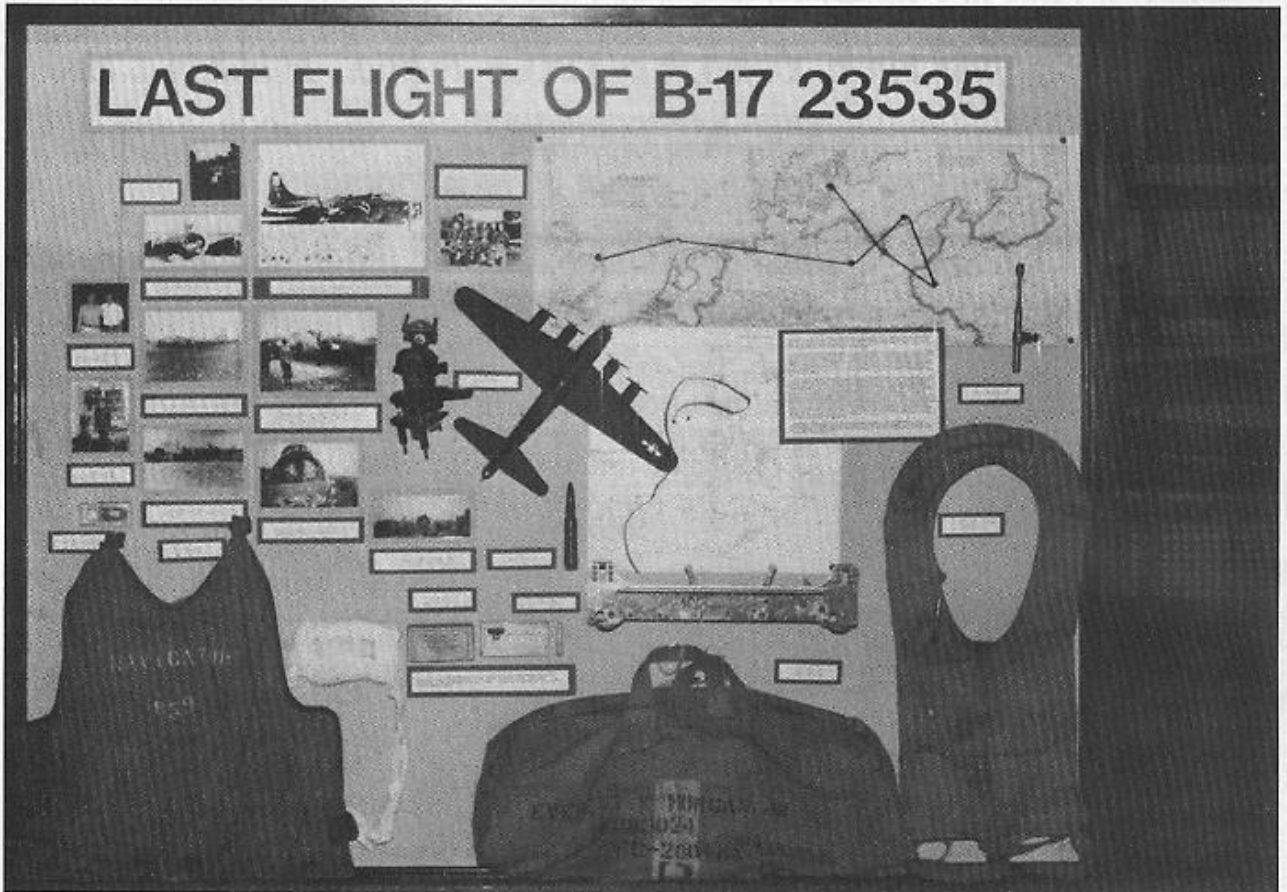
“The theory was that the enemy would have no idea what would become the ultimate target”

tinued out of sight. Hastily, two of the crew jumped the quaywall and ran for the boat. Five times the escapees did this as the German patrol walked past their hid-

ing place. Five times each man’s heart seemed like it was going to jump out of his chest. But at least, had they been caught, they would only have been taken as prisoners of war — the Danes would have been shot!

Bernhard Nielsen (cover name “Sundby”) and his boat the *Rylen* were prepared to take the crew to Swedish waters. He had become friends with the Germans and they did not suspect his activities. He even made it a habit of lighting the guard’s cigarette before boarding his boat! German patrol boats aggressively searched the Oresund waters between Denmark and Sweden in an attempt to prevent the escape of Allied air crews and





Some of the artifacts on display at Kalamazoo include deMars' Mae West, a flak vest, flight bag, astro-compass, and bomb shackle. (G. Pahl)

Jews from the territory they occupied. They stopped Swedish boats in Danish waters and shot at any Danish boats in Swedish waters. But their patrols were so rigid in their timetables that they could easily be avoided.

Yet something went wrong — the Germans discovered the fishing boat! Bethe's bomber crew was ready to go over the side and make use of the hand rail that had been added to the exterior of the boat, just beneath the waterline, but it turned out to be a false alarm. The Germans knew this boat and skipper well and they were just checking up on them and did not even bother to come aboard! Had it been daylight, the patrol probably would not have stopped them at all.

Morgan said the ten man crew was stuffed into a "fishing boat which had three gas tanks removed to make room for them." The weight of the crew and the storm-tossed sea proved almost more hazardous than the Germans. At daylight, Morgan peered through an opening in the

hold only to "find himself face-to-face with a fish! The boat was about two inches from capsizing when they were picked up by a (Swedish boat)... which transported them to Malmo (Sweden)."

"The bomber swung around, barely missed a farm house, and dug into the earth"

Though the crew could have and should have been interned in this neutral country, the American Consulate arranged for Swedish visas. DeMars was taken to a hospital where shrapnel was removed from his eye. His eyelid and the upper palate of his mouth were also repaired and stitches were needed for his cheek. This was done under local anesthetic and deMars thought it was a bit scary.

Fortunately, Johnnie Hamlin's first aid with sulfa powder and bandaging had prevented infection and saved deMars' eye! Swedish authorities invented a story that the Americans had wandered around the Danish woods for days, stole a boat and made their way to Sweden. This was published for the benefit of the Germans to protect the Danish Underground.

While deMars healed, the rest of the crew was taken to Stockholm. When reunited, they left for Great Britain in the belly of a B-24. There were so many people (82) crowded into the plane that some had to move to the front of the plane just to keep the nose wheel down for take-off. Landing in Scotland, the crew fell into the hands of G-2 and was taken to London. Rather than being turned loose on the city, they were restricted to the premises "until further notice!" But after several days of interrogation, the crew was taken off restriction, during which time an unbelievable meeting occurred — they ran into Joe Ziegler and his entire crew! They were so

certain it had been his bomber which blew up in mid-air that they just could not believe it! On the other hand, Ziegler thought Bethe's crew had "bought the farm." It was quite a celebration!

Because of their rescue via the underground, the crew was placed in category "R" and ultimately flew a war-weary B-17 home — one of the few crews to have escaped in its entirety after being downed behind enemy lines. This is also a story that sheds some light on the combined acts of heroism performed by "common" people in uncommon circumstances: The men and women of the resistance.

Over 1200 bombers and fighters took part in this mission. There were 52 B-17, 12 B-24, and 16 fighter losses this day. The Third Bomber Division lost the greatest number of aircraft: 33. As briefed, the Third's fighter escort left for home at the appropriate departure point — they encountered no enemy aircraft, lost no planes, scored no victories. For the entire mission, there were 13 men killed, 47 wounded, and 654 missing personnel.

Currently there is a display of some of the artifacts recovered from B-17 23535 at the Kalamazoo Aviation History Museum. These came to the museum through the tireless efforts of Henning Bencard of Rodvig, Denmark. Mr. Bencard is an aviation enthusiast who visited the Kalamazoo "Air Zoo" while on a trip to the United States some three years ago. He was so impressed with the museum that, immediately upon his return to his home country, he began the collection of information and memorabilia about the last flight of 23535 which he sent to KAHM Education Director Gerard Pahl. Both this story and the display at the museum are the result of his efforts. You can visit the Kalamazoo "Air Zoo" by either car or plane. By car, take I-94 to the Portage Rd. exit (#78). Take Portage Road south approximately one mile. At Milham Road turn left (east) and the museum is at the end of the road. By plane, simply fly to the Kalamazoo/Battle Creek International Airport and taxi up on the museum's flight deck. (Museum Hours: Winter (Oct-Apr): Mon-Sat 10 am to 5 pm, Sun 1 pm to 5 pm. Summer (May-Sept): Mon, Tues, Thurs, Fri, and Sat 10 am to 6 pm; Wed 10 am to 8 pm; and Sun 1 pm to 6 pm. Closed for major holidays). For more information write: The Kalamazoo Aviation History Museum, 3101 East Milham Road, Kalamazoo, MI 49002-1700, or call (616) 382-6555. **WI**