

Shortly after the drop it seemed that all hell broke loose. It seemed like all hell broke loose (phrase repeated). Enemy fighters were everywhere and our planes were going down right and left. We were shot up badly. Our tail gunner was killed (not true) on the 1st sweep. No one else was shot.

Our far right engine was hit and the pilot was unable to feather it. The prop flew off and into the inner engine knocking the prop off it, (leaving us with only 2 engines) Soon we picked up 2 P-38s as escort but they had difficulty staying with us because of our loss of air speed and gradual loss of altitude. They finally had to “waggle” goodbye.

We limped back and got across the Rhine where we were shot up with Flak—shortly thereafter Capt Haptman (sic) gave the order to abandon the plane. At the time we were north and west of Cologne (actually Coblenz or Koblenz). I was injured when I hit the ground (fracture of my right femur). I understand one waist gunner (Tarbert) went down with the plane. Capt Hauptman’s dog tags were given to Lt Snidow later with an explanation that he died due to action of angry civilians. This I learned (hearsay) later.

Duane Giesler, the son of Harold Giesler, later published additional details about the Mairzy Doats, the crew, and the Kassel Mission.

During the initial fighter attack near Bad Hersfeld, the ship took a direct hit to the tail section, severely wounding tail gunner S/Sgt. Waldron and completely blowing off one of the rudders....With the plane barely flyable, Lt. Hautman made a turn to the southwest and left the rest of the group....After staying airborne for approximately forty minutes, having traveled 115 miles from the initial fighter attack, they encountered railway flack near Wetzler, Germany....At 11:55 A.M. the Mairzy Doats, mortally wounded and now abandoned, went into a steep bank to the right. She crashed seven miles west of Koblenz...

ore information, please visit <http://www.kasselmission.org>.

The Kassel Mission

Wednesday, September 27, 1944 began with the usual routine for the aircrews at Tibenham Air Field, but it would end marking the largest percentage loss of aircraft of a United States Army Air Force group on any mission in World War II.

But, for the Hautman crew on that morning, it would be their 18th mission on the way to the 35-mission requirement before they could be rotated home for leave. As an indicator of the shortage of aircrews, only 25 missions were required prior to April 1, 1944, 30 missions required from April 1 to June 6, 1944, and 35 missions completed was the goal after June 6, 1944. Of course, the latter day is more well-known as D-Day.

While many articles have been written over the years that describe the mission, the following account of the Kassel mission was written in October 1944 by Mairzy Doats' co-pilot Carroll Snidow while he was a prisoner of war. He wrote it in a notebook provided by the Red Cross. It represents a first-hand account of the actions that affected the Hautman crew.

They woke us up very early on the morning of September 27, 1944. The briefing was to be held at three thirty, which was about an hour earlier than usual. "Jonesy" and myself, walking to the mess hall in the darkness of night, figured it must be "Big B". It was a cool morning and you could tell fall was fast approaching. We had a very good breakfast—although we had powdered eggs. They tasted very good. All the crews in my barracks were scheduled for the mission. Johnny Friese, my bombardier, was not on the mission that day. The "Runt", navigator on "The Commander's" crew, was not sure whether he was scheduled or not, so he went with us to briefing. We ate our breakfast slowly as we had plenty of time. We arrived

at briefing on time (4:30 am) The “Runt” found he was not scheduled so back to bed he went. Before going back, he came to me and told me “to give them hell, Snidow”, an expression both of us gave to the other if he wasn’t flying that day...it was a joke between the two of us.

Briefing was as interesting as usual. “Jonesy” and myself were greatly relieved to find our target was to be Kassell (sic), Germany instead of “Big B” (Berlin). We were in good spirits because we were to be back at the base by 12:30 which is very early to return from a mission. We had a normal take-off and climb to assembly altitude. We were flying number two ship in the “slot” of the lead squadron, assembling at a low altitude crossing the Channel and part of France. Flying was hard because we were flying directly into the sun. There were about four aborts with a 10/10 cloud cover at 8,000 feet. We dropped our bombs OK that day but our whole group missed the target. (N.B. see further below for an explanation.) We did not get any flak when we should be getting plenty of it. After dropping our bombs, we thought we had made a “milk run”. Everything was coming off according to plan. Then, all of a sudden, all Hell broke loose. I was listening to the VHF radio channel so I didn’t get the warning. I looked out of my co-pilot window and saw what I first thought was small flak. It was heavy and close...than (sic) I found the truth. Looking at the ship ahead of us, I saw their waist guns firing. FIGHTERS!!! I don’t know how many there were, but it was “beaucoup”. I saw the ship in front of us go down with its rudder on fire. I imagine it blew up. Just then a FW 190 came along side of us and seemed to be flying in formation with our lead ship...I believe if I’d had a gun I could have blown him to bits. The shells were busting around us everywhere. I saw a FW 190 about twenty feet above the ship on our right wing...it dropped about twenty or thirty small fire bombs right on top of the poor B-24. I saw a waist gunner bail out of the ship before it went down in flames. About that time something hit my window and put

a hole in it...a piece scratched my knuckle in two places. The enemy fighters knocked out our tail gun and turret on their first pass. Waldron, our tail gunner, was injured in the leg. My oxygen system was also damaged. Just before the fighters left, our number four engine propeller "ran away". We started to "feather" it but it (was) too late as our oil pressure was gone. Land, our top turret man, was really firing that gun...a FW 190 was coming in on top of us, evidently to drop fire bombs on us but Land blew him out of the sky...he did a good job that day. Then I looked at our number four engine. The whole prop. and engine was coming out of the wing. What a sight. The propeller, whirling in its full velocity, made a 90 degree turn and come (sic) toward me. I thought that I had "bought the farm" then. The prop. (No. 4) came over into the number three prop. and engine and knocked it out of the wing. Prop. and pieces of props were going everywhere. Luckily (sic), none hit the ship. There we were, in the middle of Germany in a B-24 with two holes in the right wing where the engines had been, no tail turret, radio almost out and one of our tail rudders mostly shot off. The bandits (enemy fighters) had left us. We saw four fighters way out in the distance at twelve o'clock. We didn't know whether they were friendly or enemy...they turned into us so I thought again that we had "bought the farm". It was an anxious few minutes until they came close enough to find they were P-51s. A few minutes later two P-38s came and flew on our wing. We were out of formation now. Only three out of thirty-six made up the formation and we saw them gradually leave us, homeward bound. We started losing altitude so we threw everything out that we could including our flak suits, guns, auxiliary (sic) power units, etc. At that time we were flying at 27,000 feet altitude. We got in contact with the P-38s on our wing to give as a radio fix to our nearest friendly airport. They gave us a heading to a field in France and told us it was about 30 miles away or about fifteen minutes away. We kep (sic) losing altitude at

a rate of 300 feet per minute. It was going to be close...but we thought we had a chance. Evidently the P-38s gave us the wrong information. We kept losing altitude for about forty minutes...until we were down to approximately 7,000 feet, coming out from over the cloud overcast. We were flying at 120 mph which is almost stalling speed for a B-24. Our P-38s were still with us. We still figured we had a good chance of getting home. Then more big trouble. They opened up on us with flak. We were so low and going so slow that we were a perfect target. None of us had flak suits for protection as we had thrown them overboard to lighten the load. The flak was so close that it was rocking the ship and the concussion had blown out our waist gun windows...there wasn't anything to do but leave the ship. We gave the order to bail out. Land went first from the flight deck followed by Giesler, Jones, myself, and then Hautman. Before jumping, I went back to my seat to get my handkerchief (sic) and hat. I don't know why I did but all I can say is I did. I couldn't reach them so I went without them. I did get my shoes which were tied together under my seat. I remember my jump. I can honestly say I wasn't afraid because I trusted my chute. I just took a step out of the bomb bay and then I started floating. You have complete presence of mind when you are sailing through space. Just as soon as I left the ship, I started falling head over heels. I tried to fall straight but I couldn't until I remembered something S-2 had told us once...STIFFEN UP...that I did and sure enough, it worked. My next thought was to pull the rip cord. I started to pull it but I again remembered the S-2 (Intelligence Officer)...delay your jump. I did this for a couple seconds and then I pulled her. She really opened up nicely without scarcely a jerk. When I opened my chute, I dropped my shoes but caught them with my feet. While floating down, I was trying to get my shoes but when I reached down for them they slipped away. I then looked around me. I saw our ship, now without anyone on board in a steep bank to the right and

very low. It hit the ground and I am glad I wasn't in it. It looked as if the B-24 was spread out on all of Germany. Black smoke came up from the few remains of the airplane. I then looked below me...I saw that I was going to land in an open field near some woods and right beside a railroad. There were approximately twenty people working in the field so I knew that I wouldn't have a chance of escaping (sic). I then looked above me and I could see Hautman's chute. About that time, I hit the ground. I was finally on the ground without a scratch. Ed Hautman hollered at me before he hit the woods over a hill. I haven't seen him since. I got out of my chute and awaited my captors. They soon came upon me and thus the war was over for me. I was surprised to have one of the women in the group to speak to me in good English. She wanted to know if I was hurt, if I was American or British and then she told me she had a husband in West Virginia and that he liked it over there. I assume he was a prisoner in America. She told me everything would be OK with me and I would be treated fine. They took me to a nearby road and there we waited for about an hour. In the meantime they bought (sic) Land and Giesler up. They had also been captured. They took us in an automobile to a nearby town. We waited about three hours where they searched us. They then (sic) brought in another crew that had been captured. We then had a short ride in a charcoal burning truck to a railroad station. It took us the entire night, after changing trains many times, to get to Oberselle (Oberursel) near Frankfurt (sic). That was the morning of September 28th. At Oberselle (Oberursel) they interrogated me and left me in solitary confinement until October 3rd at which time I was sent to my permanent camp, Stalag Luft I, Barth, Germany on the Baltic Sea.