

THE RETURN OF "BOWLEGS"

The mission of the 357th Fighter Group on the 25th day of September, 1944, was the usual Penetration, Target and Withdrawal Support, this time to Leipzig. It was a five hour run, with 47 Mustangs led by the then Lieutenant, Charles Yeager.

An unusually large number of aborts reduced the number to 36 P-51s, but it turned out to be a "milk run" for the fighters as there were no encounters with enemy aircraft. All except one of the Mustangs was back at Leiston before 1500 hours.

For John S. Templin of the 362nd Squadron, it was to be his final mission. Templin was flying veteran P-51B, serial number 43-6698, it's name was BOWLEGS, and it had formerly been TEXAS RANGER, with Herschel "Rocky" Hill as it's original pilot. Hill had completed his tour and returned to the ZI. He is a current member, and was one of the happy crowd at Dayton in '87.

Also in the crowd at Dayton was 362nd pilot Chuck Weaver. Forty-three years ago he reported:

"I was flying Lt. Templin's wing in Dollar Blue Flight at 30,000 feet. Just before reaching the target, Lt Templin called that his engine was cutting out, his oil pressure was completely down and that he would have to head home. I answered that I would provide escort. We flew for about 15 minutes westward, when heavy white smoke began to come out of his engine. Then Lt. Templin split-essed and bailed out. His chute opened around 11,000 ft and I saw him settle into a heavily wooded area."

Luftwaffe reports tells us the aircraft crashed in the city forrest of Melsungen, starting a fire which was put out with difficulty by the towns people. Melsungen is a small town about 13 miles due south of the city of Kassel. The last available Luftwaffe report, dated 3 October, says simply, "Pilot escaped".

As I write these words, relics of this P-51 lie on my desk, and include 2 smashed cal. 50 machine gun rounds, a name plate from the gun sight, a shattered piece of armor glass from the windshield, and a few unidentified bits and pieces.

These came to me from Herr Konrad Rudolph, a good friend living in the area, who was a boy of 8 or 9 when the skies above his school were a vast battle ground. His passion now, is researching and excavating the many aircraft wrecks in his area, some of which are 357th P-51s.

After excavating the crash site of BOWLEGS, he researched German records in an attempt to discover whether Templin had indeed escaped or had been captured later on. Templin's name could not be found in the available records, but I remained doubtful that he would have escaped from that deep in Germany.

THE RETURN OF "BOWLEGS" (cont)

Conversation with assn. member Jim Sloan at the Dayton re-union solved the mystery, as he and Templin had been together in Stalag 13. (This writer had been aware of that fact before, but had forgotten!) The two had, in fact, escaped together, in the last weeks of the war.

Templin is on our Lost Sheep List, but I hope he turns up, I would like very much to talk to him about those long ago events.

When Templin took off on that September day in 1944, this writer was a part of the 362nd Squadron flight line maintenance crews. Now, 43 years later, almost to the day, BOWLEGS has come home.

It is unlikely that she will ever be mission ready again, but will instead, remain treasured relics of one of the few 357th Grp P-51s to return from Missing status.

Merle Olmsted

