

## 4 AUGUST 1944

The first three days in August 1944, the US Army Eighth Air Force conducted tactical operations in support of the Allied Ground Forces fighting in France. These missions included dropping supplies to the French resistance movement, and bombing German airfields, marshalling yards and supply depots in the vicinity of Paris and Northern France.<sup>159</sup> On 4 August 1944, favorable weather forecasts allowed a "dispatch in the late morning of a large-scale effort, utilizing forces from all three bomb divisions to [attack] targets in northern central Germany."<sup>160</sup> The objective of this mission, designated as Operations Number 514, was to attack 10 separate targets inside the country, employing 1,246 heavy bombers, supported by 15 Fighter Groups. Two smaller elements would serve as diversions by attacking coastal batteries and V-1 launch sites in Pas de Calais and northwestern France.

The scope of the Eighth Air Force's primary mission and the diverse locations of the designated targets in Germany, required that the supporting combat wings be grouped into four separate force structures. The 398th Bomb Group was allocated to Force II, which consisted of eleven combat wings of 36 aircraft each.<sup>161</sup> Six combat wings of this subordinate command, including the 398th, were designated to attack the German Experimental Establishment at Peenemünde, the secret test and launch site for the German rocket propulsion program. The other five wings would strike the Aircraft Component Plant, supply depot and airfield at Anklam, located 35 kilometers southwest of the experimental facility.

"On the morning of our third mission we went through the usual procedures," Corporal Don Dorfmeier recalled. "We were briefed, told where we were going . . . it was a long ride—Peenemünde. This was a

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<sup>159</sup> Carter & Mueller, *The AAF in WWII: Combat Chronology, 1941–1945*, 412

<sup>160</sup> HQ Eighth AF, Tactical Mission Report-514, 4 Aug 1944, 1

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 2

maximum effort [as] we were going to knock out their V-2 rocket site and . . . research facility." The "maximum effort" designation required the group commander, Colonel Frank P. Hunter, Jr. and his executive officer to fly as copilots in two of the group's 36 aircraft. Moreover, the 398th was selected as the "lead group of the 1st 'B' Combat Wing." Lieutenant Carter's crew, which included Don, was assigned to an aircraft known only by its tail number, 7098-Y, and would assemble with the "high group" of the formation. Lieutenant Wallace Blackwell and other members of Don's original crew would also participate in the Peenemünde mission and fly with the middle group.

Following the main briefing, Don and the other enlisted men and gunners in the group went to the flight line locker rooms to dress for frigid weather and gather their parachutes and flak vests. Once dressed, the gunners moved to the armament shop to secure the machine guns that had been removed from the aircraft and then proceeded to the squadron's revetment area. On arrival, the airman mounted the heavy 82-pound guns in their respective positions and conducted dry-fire function checks, then initiated the first phase of their preflight inspections. The four officers of Don's crew, including a new navigator, Lieutenant William W. Hembrough, arrived around 0915 hours after receiving more specific briefings. After all initial preparations were concluded, the crews waited for the firing of the green flare from the airfield's Operation's Center. This signal was the official acknowledgement that the mission would proceed and for the pilots to start their engines. Slowly, the roar of one hundred and forty-four, 1,200 horsepower, radial motors blanketed the airfield and engulfed the surrounding community. Minutes later, the collective roar of the group's engines increased in intensity as the long lines of fully loaded aircraft moved toward their launch point. Under ideal conditions, these bomb-laden aircraft would take off on 30-second intervals, but overcast weather this particular morning would cause some delay.

Once airborne, the group's lead aircraft flew east toward their assembly area some seven miles away. The aircraft then circled back to Nuthampstead to fly a continual racetrack pattern, some five miles in diameter, while climbing 300–400 feet per minute. Other aircraft followed in the same pattern until all 36 Fortresses had reached assembly altitude. "This procedure," according to Lieutenant Bob Kraft, lead navigator for the 602nd Bomb Squadron, "took the better

part of 30 minutes."<sup>162</sup> Once assembled in the correct formation, the 398th proceeded to link up with the other two bomb groups of the 1st Combat Wing.\* This collective force of 108 bombers climbed to an altitude of 12,000 to 14,000 feet en route to their designated assembly area before joining with other wings participating in the day's mission. The assembly of such a large formation, consisting of 1,246 heavy bombers and their fighter escorts, would have "extended 100 miles in length and 75 miles in width," according to operations officer Lieutenant Willis Frazier.<sup>163</sup> A force of this magnitude would also take almost an hour to pass over the English coast.<sup>164</sup> The sound of such a massive force departing Britain was deafening. Yet on the other side of the English Channel, the roar of the oncoming formation, announcing itself some 30 minutes before actually being sighted, was terrifying.

At 1120 hours, the 398th Bomb Group passed over the coastal town of Louth, flying on a converging course across the North Sea to join with Force III and IV. These elements joined to form a single formation of 927 heavy bombers at ". . . a point, approximately 100 miles west of Jutland." The three groups then continued to fly directly eastward to the North Frisian Islands, soaring on two parallel routes, Force I preceding the other formation by 45 minutes. Individual groups then broke formation, as required, to make the desired approaches to their respective targets.

The selection of this particular penetration into Europe was revised to limit the number of German aircraft that could be brought into the radius of action, as well as avoid extensive flak defenses while approaching specific targets.\*\* Further, staff planners had hoped to confuse the Germans as to the actual purpose and intended targets selected for attack. German fighters from two separate groups, representing 100 single-engine aircraft, were put in the air to "make a determined effort"<sup>165</sup> to oppose the two separate AAF formations. Still,

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\* See Appendix D, Order of Battle

\*\* By late 1943, the German Luftwaffe had deployed over "55,000 anti-aircraft guns to combat the [Allied] air offensive."<sup>166</sup>

<sup>162</sup> Kraft, Bob, "The Art of Bunching Up," *Flak News* 20.3 ( Jul 2005) : 5

<sup>163</sup> Frazier, Willis, "Operations Officer," *Flak News* 21.3 ( Jul 2006) : 4

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 4

<sup>165</sup> HQ Eighth AF Tac Mission Report-514, Wireless Intel Service, 4 Aug 1944

<sup>166</sup> Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, 129

enemy controllers appeared confused, according to later reports, as to which element should be attacked first.<sup>167</sup>

Ultimately, the Luftwaffe fighters were directed to intercept Force I as it entered Northwest Germany around 1400 hours. "In the main, the German fighters were attacked by American escorts, and no more than 40 enemy fighters succeeded in attacking the bomb groups, where they shot down one B-17."<sup>168</sup> Later in the afternoon, another force of 10 German single engine fighters also engaged five bomb groups that were directed toward Anklam. A larger group of German twin engine fighters based at the airfield, and thought to be available for local defense, had been recently transferred to the Russian front. Last, 40 German fighters from the initial group assembled earlier attempted to intercept the withdrawal of the 1st Bombardment Division in the Schleswig-Holstein area.

After Force I turned to attack oil refineries at Bremen and Hamburg, the second larger formation continued to fly eastward. Fifteen minutes later, Forces III and IV turned south into northern Germany while Force II proceeded for another 140 kilometers as the only element flying into the Baltic Sea. The formation then made two course corrections to reach their designated IP (Initial Point), some 80 kilometers northeast of Usedom Island at 1441 hours (briefed). At that time, the eleven combat wings designated to attack the two farthest targets executed a 90-degree turn to the southeast. The six wings assigned to strike the Experimental Establishment turned to a 257-degree heading toward Peenemünde. The other five wings made a less severe turn and proceeded on toward Anklam.

Completing their adjustment, the 221 Fortresses of the six combat wings heading toward Peenemünde aligned their formation for their final approach. At this point, the airmen had been in the air for five hours and were fatigued by the physical stresses of the flight and subfreezing temperatures. They had also been in enemy territory for almost 90 minutes, which required a heightened sense of personal alertness. All crew members in the formation now felt a sinking feeling in their stomachs. Their bomb run had begun—along with their individual encounter with fate.

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<sup>167</sup> HQ Eighth AF Tac Mission Report-514, 4 Aug 1944, 12–13

<sup>168</sup> HQ Eighth AF Tac Mission Report-514, Enemy Reaction, 4 Aug 1944, 1–2

The bomb run represented the time required for the aircraft of each group or wing to traverse the distance from the designated IP to their target. The run for Don's squadron started at 1458 hours and lasted a full seven minutes. During this time, the pilots and bombardiers were not allowed to maneuver their aircraft to avoid enemy flak or attacking aircraft. Any deviation in flight, however slight, would cause the bomb strikes to miss their intended targets by tens, if not hundreds, of meters. For most veterans, this phase of any mission, running the gauntlet of defensive fire, caused them their greatest fear in combat. "You couldn't do a darn thing about it," according to one airman, "[except] plow through it."<sup>169</sup>



Bomb run

398th Bomb Group

German flak batteries began to open fire as the six combat wings of Don's group started to close on their targets within the Peenemünde Experimental Establishment. The first of these batteries to engage the forward elements of the combat wings were the anti-aircraft guns mounted on flak ships positioned near the Baltic coast to defend Usedom Island from a northern approach. Eventually all of the Luftwaffe batteries defending the Experimental Works would engage the slow-moving formation, while excited German gun crews calculated the correct course, distance, and altitude of the oncoming Fortresses.

The flak batteries, according to former battery crew member, Otto Suchsland, were initially alerted by "a sophisticated nationwide tracking

<sup>169</sup> Kaplan & Smith, *One Last Look*, 21

system . . . [that] allowed early identification of probable targets." Once a battery was alerted, an individual crew member would "optically zero the range finder . . . on the selected target," identifying elevation, traverses, and distance. This data was entered into a computer that transmitted information to the guns, which then fired barrage salvos calculated to intersect with the bomb formation's direction of flight. However, the one variable that could not be determined on the ground, and which could deflect the course of a projectile, was wind direction and velocity at altitude.<sup>170</sup>

The minutes slowly passed for Lieutenant Charles J. Mellis, Jr., a copilot flying his 20th mission with the 603rd Bomb Squadron. He later recalled, "I had to do most of the flying during the bomb run, especially when things got hot." At the point the group started getting hit, Mellis continued, "We really caught all the flak, too—our element was hardest hit of the whole wing. We only got 5 [hits] but the element leader got plastered. I shudder when I think of it. It happened 30 seconds after bombs away—had it happened before that, I'd not be here."<sup>171</sup>

Mellis's aircraft was buffeted by exploding flak as the high squadron of the 398th Bomb Group started dropping their ordinance. One of the bombs in Don's aircraft hung on a shackle preventing its release. "Events of this nature," according to Lieutenant Leonard Streitfeld, a bombardier assigned to the 602nd Bomb Squadron, "would happen periodically." Corrective action required that the bomb be freed manually. Describing this incident years later, Don said, ". . . the bombs got hung up. So I had to enter the bomb bay on the catwalk, [with] doors open at 22,000 feet and [force a release] . . . with a screwdriver. It wasn't a hard thing to do; just somebody had to do it."

Shortly after the bombs in Don's aircraft were released and he returned to his assigned duty position, the wing's "element leader" took a direct "hit in the main [fuel] tank and exploded. I got a glimpse," Mellis noted, "of the burning hulk, before it fell—it was horrible. The explosion rocked [our] ship and burning parts of the [other aircraft] hit near our right wing. I thought we were hit and had a wing fire. Even as I glanced out, I was wondering what to do next, [when] I saw their burning framework. It was awful. Only two other crew members saw

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<sup>170</sup> Otto Suchsland, *Course Twelve*, unpublished article

<sup>171</sup> Charles J. Mellis, Jr., "Combat Diaries," [www.398th.org](http://www.398th.org)

it and I am glad for their sake—especially the bombardier whose best buddy went down with the [aircraft]."

Former crew members John Bell and Adrian Bacon, flying in the middle formation of the 398th Bomb Group, also saw the explosion of the aircraft identified by Mellis. Moments earlier, the two airmen had mistakenly identified the same aircraft as the one flown by Carter and the crew to which Don had recently been assigned. In the next instant, the plane exploded and ceased to exist; displaced by a bright flash, followed by a spray of fluid and falling debris. Incredulous, John strained to spot any deploying parachutes that would indicate some men survived the explosion. Seeing none, his vision started to blur with tears. In shock, John turned to Adrian, to seek some sort of confirmation or to acknowledge what they had just witnessed, only to find him slumped over his gun, equally distraught.

The explosion that caught the attention of the two airmen, and thought to be Don's aircraft, was actually that of another plane flying in close proximity and almost directly in front of Carter's Fortress. This aircraft, number 7186-L, flown by Lieutenant John S. MacArthur, 603rd Bomb Squadron, had received a direct hit from a flak round and exploded mid-air, instantly killing the entire crew. The two airmen, thinking that Don had just been killed, struggled with their sense of shock and disbelief as they tried to contain their emotions and comprehend their loss of a beloved friend. Moreover, the incident forced both men to recognize, if only fleetingly, their own vulnerability.

In all probability, MacArthur and Carter's aircraft were hit from the same flak salvo as the two Fortresses were flying within 100 yards of each other. Although Carter's aircraft avoided a direct hit, it had been struck by multiple shards of shrapnel. Ball turret gunner, Bob Carr, recalled that the crew's radio operator, Sergeant Robert Doll, described the fragments striking the aircraft as sounding like "a bunch of rocks being thrown on a tin roof." Miraculously, no one in the crew was killed or wounded, although the plane's left wing had caught fire. Lieutenant Carter recognized the danger almost immediately and executed the standard procedure for such emergencies by breaking formation and sharply banking his aircraft to "dive out" the fire. Descending as rapidly as possible, Carter dropped several thousand feet in altitude within a matter of minutes. Later witness statements, from men flying in the



group's formation, provided further insight regarding the fate of the two aircraft.

Lieutenant Richard T. Ostern, Jr. reported, "The high group had just made their rendezvous after the bomb run with the wing, when aircraft 7098 left the high [group] . . . dived for about 3,000 feet and . . . crossed under our formation. Navigator Lt. Marcus J. Woods recalled that his tail gunner announced the explosion of MacArthur's aircraft, then said, "there goes another ship into a dive . . . after losing about 2,000 feet, [Carter] leveled off, and started for Sweden, then started a wide circling descent." Lieutenant Van B. Campbell saw Carter's ship [take] "a sharp dive, then leave the formation and level off" near 10,000 feet AGL (above ground level). At the time he was on a heading for Sweden, but ran into some flak (a second encounter). He used evasive action and when the flak ceased he still appeared in control of his plane and headed for England."<sup>172</sup>

Carter's maneuver to extinguish the fire in their left wing was initially successful, yet there was still concern among officers of the crew regarding the mechanical worthiness of their aircraft. Bob Carr recalled Lieutenants Carter and Hembrough engaging in conversation for approximately two minutes as they considered the merits of attempting to fly across the Baltic Sea to Sweden, some 120 kilometers north of their present location. Sweden's declared neutrality at the onset of hostilities in Europe and her close proximity to Germany represented a safe haven for damaged German and British aircraft during the first years of the war.<sup>173</sup> In spring 1944, American Fortresses and Liberators started [arriving] in large numbers as the Combined Bomber Offensive began targeting the aircraft industry and fuel deposits in Northern Germany and the "USAAF started issuing maps of southern Sweden to guide damaged aircraft to safety."<sup>\*</sup>

Carter momentarily considered the merits of flying to Sweden, yet

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\* "A total of 327 aircraft from belligerent countries found their way to Sweden during the war,"<sup>174</sup> of which 140 belong to the USAAF. Another 166 damaged US aircraft found safety in Switzerland.<sup>175</sup>

<sup>172</sup> WD, HQ AAF, Missing Air Crew Report - 7707, 8 Aug 1944

<sup>173</sup> Henningson, Par, "Americans . . . in Sweden," *Flak News* 14.3 (Jul 1999) : 5

<sup>174</sup> Henningson, Par, "Americans . . . in Sweden," *Flak News* 14.3 (Jul 1999) : 5

<sup>175</sup> Wells, *Courage and the Air War*, 108.



acquiesced to the more experienced assessment and recommendation of his navigator, William Hembrough. The veteran navigator, flying his 27th combat mission, had advised against making such an attempt, and Carter's decision to accept the recommendation was prudent. Only 38 percent of all B-17 aircrew that ditched or bailed out over the North Sea while returning to England were rescued, and a crew going into the more northern and colder Baltic waters would have certainly perished.<sup>176</sup> Carter then adjusted his heading for England in hope of returning to home station when his ship was hit a second time by flak, reigniting the fire in the previously affected wing. Carter called on other crew members for a damage assessment, although the waist gunner's position provided the clearest view of both wings and all four engines. Don responded to the inquiry, asserting, "The wing is starting to buckle!" Without hesitation, Carter replied, "All right—abandon ship!"

The order confirmed every crew member's worst fear—they would not make it back to England. Concern regarding this possibility first surfaced when Carter broke formation and plunged their aircraft into a sharp dive to extinguish the fire in the left wing. At that moment, every crew member's body was flooded with a surge of adrenaline, triggered by an involuntarily "fight or flight" response to perceived threats of danger. Once alerted, the crew's heightened anxiety remained elevated throughout the running conversation between Carter and the navigator, as the two officers deliberated the option of flying to Sweden. However, earlier distress and worry over what might happen were surpassed by Carter's last command, and a collective apprehension started to mount. Faced with the necessity of abandoning their aircraft, each man sought to recall the procedures for just such an eventuality and to control their fear of executing a parachute jump from a disabled aircraft. For such contingencies, the Air Force had established a written Standard Operating Procedure (SOP), yet not provided any practical training.

The procedure for exiting a B-17 while in flight was based on the position and location of each crew member in the aircraft. The bombardier and navigator were designated to exit from the front entrance door; the ball turret and waist gunners would exit from the main entrance door; the tail gunner would exit through a small emergency door located in the far tail section of the fuselage. The other four crew members—the

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<sup>176</sup> Kaplan & Smith, *One Last Look*, 116

radio operator, engineer, pilot and copilot—would exit through the bomb bay. The pilot was designated as last man to exit in order to maintain control of the plane, if necessary, so that crew members would not be pinned inside by centrifugal force if an unstable aircraft fell or spun out of control.

After Carter activated the alarm bell, each crew member started attending to personal and crew-related tasks in preparation for making their exits. Don's first reaction resulted in a tense moment, which he later characterized as "humorous," when he tried to jettison his flak vest. The vest had been redesigned in response to a 1942 analysis of wounds sustained by airmen while in combat, indicating that "70 percent were caused by missiles of relative low velocity."<sup>177</sup> The resulting canvas flak vest consisted of overlapping, two inch squares of thinly, laminated manganese steel plates that prevented most 20mm aircraft and anti-aircraft shell fragments from piercing the body. The armored vests, produced later in the war, weighed approximately twenty pounds, featured a single strap that, when pulled, detached the vest if bailout was necessary. Elaborating further, Don said, "I always wore a flak vest, which I could release by pulling a little cord, and the vest would fall from my shoulders. Well, [as I tugged on] the damn cord release, it wouldn't fall off. So I had to pull the vest off over the top of my head and I almost took my ears off doing it. But, I got out of it."

Don's next concern should have been to assist in extracting Bob Carr from his precarious position in the ball turret. He had sworn to do so one night drinking beer with Bob, vowing that he would "never leave the aircraft with him in the 'ball'." However, preoccupied with his own survival, Don completely forgot about his fellow crew member. Fortunately, he had given Bob his parachute shortly after he entered the ball turret at the start of their mission. This provided Carr with an alternate escape option. His first preference would have been to climb back into the fuselage of the aircraft, then exit from the designated door. But, under the circumstances, Bob was forced to exit the ball directly from a small escape door in the turret assembly.

Carr was fortunate to have had his parachute. Don's primary focus after jettisoning his flak vest was to move toward the main exit door.

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<sup>177</sup> Freeman, *The Mighty Eighth*, 28

"Once in position," he recalled, "I reached down for the emergency handle on the door and that damn thing didn't work either. So I kicked the door out and sat down, my feet dangling in the slipstream [before] I realized if I'm going to evade [capture] I'd better get my shoes." The special boots worn by the airmen while flying were designed primarily for keeping their feet warm at high altitudes and were not adequate for moving over open terrain. "So I crawled back up into the radio cabin where I had my shoes. At this time I guess the plane was on automatic pilot, and I imagine she's [flying] about 160 [mph] indicated. I get my shoes, and that crazy radio operator, [Sergeant] Robert Doll, who was kind of a character—in fact I think we were all characters aboard that plane—came in and pushed the little red button that made the radio go 'poof,' then turned around and smiled at me." Doll's smile was an acknowledgement of his responsibility to destroy the radio by activating a thermite compound that burned metal components at extremely high temperatures. "Meanwhile," Don continued, "the plane was burning . . . as I moved back to the exit. I then sat in the door with my shoes in my hand, said a prayer, and tumbled out."

Don wasn't the only crew member who experienced difficulty and delay in exiting the burning aircraft. Tail gunner Corporal Sanford Lewis experienced problems opening the emergency door located in the tail of the fuselage. Bob Carr also experienced similar problems when he opted to exit the small escape door that was part of the ball turret assembly. A side pocket of his flight suit caught on a piece of metal, which prevented any further forward movement and may have saved him from a fatal jump. Carr's parachute was only attached to the left D-ring of the harness and most likely would have not fully deployed when activated. Once back inside the turret, Carr noticed this oversight and took the time to attach his parachute to the other side of his harness prior to making a successful exit.

The hindrances cited by Don and Bob Carr, attempting to exit their stricken aircraft, delayed their escapes by several critical seconds. This lag caused them to be separated from other crew members by a significant distance once on the ground. Other factors that affected the crew's dispersion pattern were the amount of time each airman remained under an open canopy, in addition to the force and direction of the prevailing winds.

Don and his crew wore one of three types of parachutes: a back, chest, or conventional seat type model. Most aircrew gunners wore the 1944 A-4 Chest Type parachute, a 24-foot, flat, circular, silk-nylon canopy that was attached to two D-rings located on the front side of the parachute harness. The harness itself was uncomfortable, and deployment caused frequent injury to the face or head of the jumper when slapped by the two-inch nylon risers of the parachute. More problematic was the fact that the parachute canopy could not be maneuvered during descent.<sup>178</sup>

Airmen who jumped with the attached chest parachute would free fall for an additional 168 to 240 feet after deploying their canopy. During this period, the jumper would reach the speed of terminal velocity, falling 32 feet per second. Once the airman's canopy, suspension lines, and raisers were fully extended, the canopy would start to fill with air slowing the jumper's rate of descent. After the parachute was fully deployed, the airman would experience a truly jarring, and at times, violent "opening shock."<sup>179</sup> This jolt was more severe at higher altitudes where the air was less dense, which increased descent velocity.

Don successfully exited his burning Fortress and fell to earth. While falling, he vividly, "remembered the training manuals advising an individual to conduct a long count from 'one to ten' before pulling the ripcord handle to activate the parachute. Well, instead of making a long count," Don continued, "I [quickly] counted 'one' . . . 'ten' . . . then pulled the ripcord, and bang! I damn near tore myself in half when my parachute deployed. [The opening shock was so forceful] my shoes snapped out of my hands and went tumbling below. If they'd hit somebody on the head they would have been knocked cold."

Don's parachute probably deployed around 9,500 feet above ground level, although he would have descended to a lower altitude before he regained his composure and orientation. At the time he discovered he had "unrestricted visibility" for approximately thirty miles,<sup>180</sup> which was, no doubt, exhilarating. However, it was also frightening, given his close proximity to the Baltic coast, and concern that his descent might take him out into the water. He also noticed that his aircraft continued

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<sup>178</sup> Poynter, *The Parachute Manual, Vol I*, 165

<sup>179</sup> Poynter, *The Parachute Manual, Vol II*, 310

<sup>180</sup> HQ Eighth AF Tactical Mission Report-514, Weather, 4 Aug 1944, 1

to fly on what appeared to be a set course, "while still burning, before diving to earth." Moments later, he spotted eight other deployed parachutes scattered beneath him, which meant that the entire crew had safely exited the aircraft. Don also noticed "two P-51 Mustangs circling in the general vicinity to provide protective suppressing fire if necessary, as the crew descended and stayed with us until we [landed]."

Under canopy and descending to earth, Don recalled "It was very quiet in the air, and all I could think about was my mother's worrying . . . fearing I've been killed, and this bothered me." Don also started to consider how he would execute his evasion plan, and thinking, "What I am going to do when it hit the ground as I want to get out of there if I can. We had been taught evasion [procedures] by our Intelligence Service, and we were well-prepared." Months earlier, in February 1944, the War Department's Military Intelligence Service-X (MIS-X) branch had published an extensive manual on "Evasion, Escape, and Survival" to assist US Army Air Force personnel in evading capture.<sup>181</sup> The manual presented a wealth of information collected after two years of assisting airmen to successfully return to Allied control. Airmen shot down in northern Germany were specifically advised to head for one of four large ports on the Baltic—Danzig, Gdynig, Stettin, and Lübeck—and stow away on Swedish ships bound for their port of origin. The manual provided information on color schemes to identify Swedish vessels and advice on how to gain access. The MIS-X Manual also provided extensive information pertaining to several underground evasion networks established in Europe to move downed airmen back to England.\* "We all had escape kits and the rest of it," Don said, "which included a small compass, maps, and local currency," in addition to a black and white photograph, taken while dressed in civilian clothing, to authentic false identification papers.

"After what felt like an eternity," Don continued, "[I] was fortunate to land on solid ground, yet I hit pretty hard. I think these 'chutes' were [made] for an average-size man of 160 pounds. I weighed 200 lbs. then, and probably came down pretty fast . . . although it seemed like it took

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\* A total of 4,658 Allied airmen successfully evaded capture after being shot down during the war. The majority of these airmen, 2,692, belonged to the US Army Air Force.<sup>182</sup>

<sup>181</sup> WD, MIS-X Manual on Evasion, Escape, and Survival (Feb 1944)

<sup>182</sup> Doyle, *A Prisoners Duty*, 286

an hour." Some of his perception was accurate. The rate of descent for a 150-pound man under a 24-foot diameter canopy was slightly less than 19 feet per second. The rate of descent for a heavier man of Don's weight would have exceeded 24 feet per second, which suggests he spent approximately six and one-half minutes in the air prior to landing, and did, in fact, "hit pretty hard."\*

Before Don could recover from his parachute landing fall, "a kid around 15-years-old showed up, [in uniform] with a gun, and speaking German, ordered me to put up my hands. I was plenty scared as this kid was also scared to death. Here [I am], a guy [who has] dropped out of the heavens [after] bombing his [country], and German newspapers had been reporting that American airmen were 'terror fliers' and 'luft gangsters.' Yet, this kid didn't know that [wasn't true]. And the look in his eye didn't make me feel very much at ease."

Any airman shot down over Germany had good reason to be anxious upon capture. A substantial number of women and children had been killed during the Allied bombing campaign. Most of these deaths were directly attributable to the policy of the British government to bomb German cities at night, with the specific intent to inflict mass casualties. Early in the war, the RAF lacked the technological capability to conduct precision bombing. Moreover, they could not afford the loss of aircraft or personnel resulting from a daylight campaign. Almost by default the government adopted a policy of conducting mass area bombings, in which the civilian population of Germany was intentionally targeted. Conversely, the US Army Air Force possessed the capability to conduct a more precise bombing campaign against primarily military targets, although these bombings also resulted in civilian casualties. The US policy to intentionally inflict mass casualties on the German population would not change for another six months, until the 3 February 1945 raid on Berlin.

In response to the increasing frequency and intensity of the Allied

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\* Calculations for the rates of descent were made in consultation with Dan Poynter, author of *The Parachute Manual*. Later, post war protocol examinations of former POWs found the "prevalence of back injuries was highest for aircrew members who parachuted from or landed with their disabled aircraft."<sup>183</sup>

<sup>183</sup> Williams, *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*, 137

bombing campaign, German Reich Minister, Dr. Joseph Goebbels, and other state functionaries had urged harsh and severe treatment of captured airmen. In late November 1943, Goebbels was able to exploit this theme more fully, following the capture of Lieutenant Kenneth Williams and two crew members of the 351st Bomb Group. All three airmen were wearing their leather flight jackets at capture with their aircraft's name, "Murder, Inc.," lettered across the back. A photograph of Williams appeared in a number of newspapers across Germany, along with an article that claimed "all [bomb] crews were composed of gangsters paid \$50,000 per mission."<sup>184</sup> Goebbels further denounced the captives as murderers in his attempt "to incite the general public to take revenge against the American gangsters."<sup>185</sup>

The possibility of capture was a reality for all airmen participating in the air war over Europe. Still, few Americans could "foresee the hostile reception that often awaited them on the ground."<sup>186</sup> Anecdotal accounts alone, from American and British POWs who were later liberated, suggest that German civilians killed many Allied airmen shortly after they were apprehended. Moreover, author David Foy also noted that while considerate treatment was extended to some injured flyers upon capture, this was the "exception rather than the rule" and that most aircrew were mistreated by both German civilians and members of the armed forces. For these men, their first hours and days following capture were the most threatening and "the most dangerous period of their entire captivity."<sup>187</sup> Some members of Don's crew experienced this hostility once apprehended, although most, except for Staff Sergeant Richard Kukulian, were captured without incident.

Later that afternoon, as Don and the other members of his crew were moving to a central collection point in northern Germany, the returning aircraft of 398th Bomb Group crossed over the English coast, inbound for Nuthampstead. The group had successfully dropped 178 of a total 911, 1,000-lbs. high explosive bombs, in addition to other ordnance, on their target.<sup>188</sup> Assessment photographs taken later that afternoon indicated that "the electrolytic hydrogen peroxide plant,"

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<sup>184</sup> Foy, *For You the War is Over*, 22

<sup>185</sup> Toliver, *The Interrogator*, 156

<sup>186</sup> Carlson, *We Were Each Other's Prisoners*, xviii

<sup>187</sup> Foy, *For You the War is Over*, 45

<sup>188</sup> HQ Eighth AF Tactical Mission Report-514, 4 August 1944, 8



long with other structures at the target site, was damaged.<sup>189</sup> The group lost two Fortresses over Peenemünde, while a number of other aircraft assigned to the 398th sustained significant battle damage. A total of sixty-nine of the 221 participating aircraft had been hit by flak. A later postwar chronology of USAAF missions during WWII would simply note, on "4 Aug 1944, the Eighth Air Force launched 2,072 aircraft on their 714th day of sustained operations, losing 14 heavy bombers, 15 fighters, and 153 aircrew." Another 325 aircraft reported varying degrees of battle damage, of which four were beyond repair and noted as Category E (salvage).<sup>190</sup>

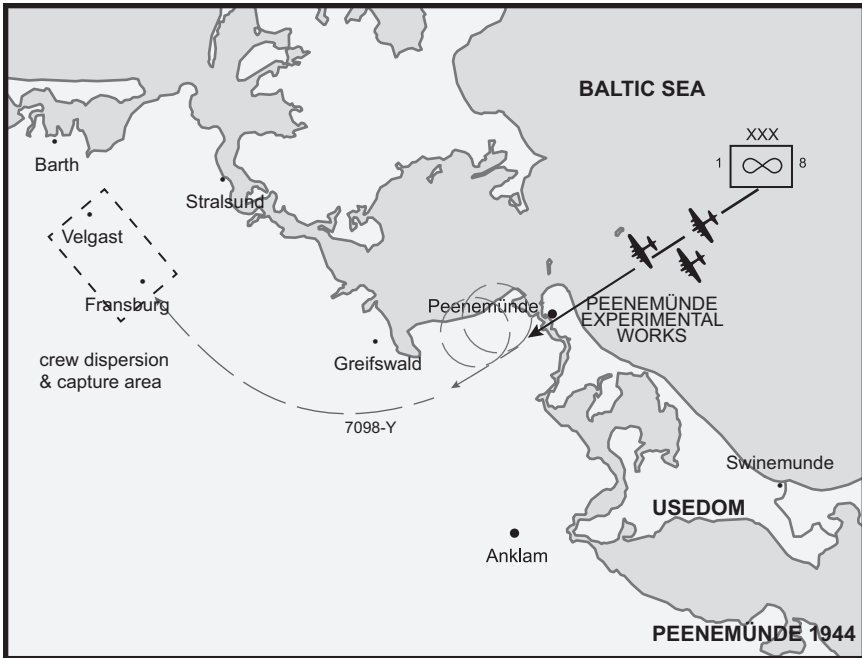
That evening, after the crews at Nuthampstead had been debriefed, John Bell inventoried Don's possessions, still under the mistaken impression his friend had been killed on the day's mission. Over the next week he would also return letters to Don's girlfriend, and transport other personal items to the appropriate base facility for shipment back to the United States. Years later, in a conversation with the author, John would cite this experience "as one of his most painful memories of the war." Other airmen released from the 4 August afternoon debriefings went out drinking, yet the majority of these men simply ate at the combat mess and went to bed. The following morning the Eighth Air Force would launch another 1,062 plane raid into Germany, flown by many of the same aircrew that had participated in the previous day's operation, all hoping to complete another mission and return safely home.



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<sup>189</sup> HQ Eighth AF Tactical Mission Report-514, Summary, 4 August 1944, 15

<sup>190</sup> Carter & Mueller, *AFF in WWII: Combat Chronology, 1941-1945*, 414



Mission 514 to Peenemünde

Author's collection

The US Army Eighth Air Force sent 221 B-17s of the First Bombardment Division to strike the electrolytic hydrogen peroxide plant at Peenemünde on 4 August 1944. The high group had just finished their bomb run when Carter's aircraft, 7098-Y, left the formation.