

(466th BOMB GROUP) Attlebridge Notes

THE MID-AIR COLLISION GROUP

by John H. Woolnough

Roger A. Freeman illustrated the high incidence of mid-air collisions in the 8th AF in his book, *The Mighty Eighth* (page 128) by telling of the three mid-air collisions that the 466th suffered on the first, second and fourth missions (22, 23 and 27 March 1944). Ten out of the 59 men aboard the six aircraft survived.

The first accident was reported as follows: "The Terry aircraft was apparently hit by flak just prior to bomb release over Berlin. Then the ship hit the Brand aircraft. Both were observed falling out of control... into an overcast at 16,000 ft." The sketchy records available for the second mission show only that the Garrett and Griffin crews of the 785th were MIA. Bill Modene (Pesonen navigator, 784th) wrote a note in his mission diary which helps a little: "466th lost 2 planes - collided - that makes 4."

The details on the Pinto and Mogford crash (4th mission) are also sparsely reported in the available mission records. The Telephone Report Work Sheet shows only that these two crashed. The Missing Air Crew Report file provides this information: "Delhagen (tail turret on the Mogford crew) was killed 27 March 1944 over East Dereham, Norfolk, England when the plane of which he was a crew member collided with another while on an operational mission. There were no survivors of the crash." These crews were assigned to the 784th.

I remember how the story of that sad incident went around the base. One of the aircraft must have had trouble on take-off on that foggy, cloudy day. A farmer near the base was reported to have said that he saw this plane circling at a low altitude near the end of the take-off leg. Ten aircraft took off after that troubled aircraft. All missed him except the last one off.

Those three mid-air accidents provided a shaky start for the group as they constituted the only losses up to that time. Fortunately, the trend did not continue. The Group had only one more mid-air accident. It was during the last 20 days of September of 1944 when the group was taken off of combat for the purpose of flying gas-runs to France to supply fuel to Patton's charging tanks.

The Medical History of the 466th reports the 4th mid-air in this manner: "A mid-air collision between two ships of the 787th Bomb Squadron on 16 September 1944, caused the death of seventeen officers and men, out of a total of twenty-one. Among the dead were included four first pilots, and the Squadron Commander of the 787th Bomb Squadron."

Stuart M. Peace, a veteran of 22 missions at that time, was on that mission. Stu gave me the following account of that tragic day: "I remember it fairly well. It happened on the afternoon of Sept. 18, 1944 (Medical History pegs this on the 16th). The group was stood down that

Lt. Stuart M. Peace, formation observer on the 16 Sept. 44 practice mission was one of four that chuted from the two stricken aircraft.



day and the Commander Col. Luther J. Fairbanks) decided to send the crews up to get some practice in close formation - especially for the new arrivals who didn't know what close meant. My co-pilot, Fred Deck, and I were assigned to observe from the waist windows in the squadron (787) lead plane with the Williams crew and Major Cockey (787th CO since 2 Sep. 44, formerly 784th Ops O) up front as Command Pilot. We were briefed to observe and give a critique of the formation following the mission.



Major John O. Cockey, Jr., Officer of the 787th Bomb Squadron, pictured here while he was the Operations Officer for the 784th BS, was the Command Pilot for the 787th flight that was marred by the fourth mid-air collision for the group. He and sixteen others were lost in the crash.

Things were going along normally and the Squadron had just made a simulated bomb run on Kings Lynn heading south and had turned east toward the rally point. About ten or eleven aircraft were in our squadron formation. We encountered turbulence from the squadron ahead and the left wing plane in the lead element dropped low to get into smooth air. We were in a left turn and the left wing plane began to come back up rapidly under the lead plane (which I was in) and made contact, not too severely, but enough to cause both to lose control and go down spinning. This happened at about 22 thousand feet.

I was wearing a chute harness for a chest pack which was stowed beneath the left waist window. Just after impact I was thrown to the left side near the waist window and almost over the floor hatch which I had managed to open an instant before we collided. The out-of-control condition pinned me to the left fuselage as I struggled to reach my chest pack by walking my fingers to the web strap on the chute. I finally took hold of the chute and dragged it to my lap, but could not lift it to attach it to the hooks on my harness. Neither could I shift my weight to get out that opened floor hatch. Suddenly and miraculously, the whole tail section departed the fuselage immediately adjacent to where I was pinned. I was able to turn and squirm out the big opening, still hanging on to the chest pack. Free of the aircraft, it was an easy matter

to hook the chute to the harness and pull the rip-cord.

When the chute opened, I must have been still at about 20 thousand feet as it took something like 10 minutes to reach the ground. I observed two other chutes descending below me and a lot of debris in the air around. The two planes were spinning below and finally hit the ground in two big orange balls of fire, seconds apart. It turned out that three people got out of the other plane. I was the only one to escape the plane I was in. On the other plane, the pilot, Capt. Bell, the engineer, M/Sgt. Courser, and the radio operator, Bauman (I think) survived. There were 11 persons on my plane and nine on the other.

When I finally reached the ground, it was in a plowed field next to a U.S. P-51 fighter base called Bodney. There I met the other survivors, phoned Attlebridge to report what happened, and waited to be transported back by truck to the home base. Doc Hoff confined us to the dispensary until the next day. None of the survivors sustained any injury that I recall. We were sent to the Norfolk Broads rest home (run by 466 medics) for a few days.

That experience went into my book as the most "hairy" of any I had including all 35 missions in combat, though many were "hairy" - you know.

Well I am sure that most of those who were in air combat will agree that Lt. Peace had a most "hairy" experience, one that I am glad that I avoided. After completing his missions he stayed on with the group until the end and retired from the USAF in 1963 as a Lt. Col. He now is doing things for the FAA Center in Oklahoma City.

All told, we had 66 killed in the four mid-air collisions. This amounts to a whopping 23% of all the deaths recorded for the 466th (288).

Join the Second Air Division Association

We have engaged in a concentrated effort to contact former members of the 466th Bomb Group. We have written letters, published newsletters, placed notices in service news media, made telephone calls, written Alumni Associations and done many other things to bring the group back together again. At the last reunion, we agreed that it would be best to identify directly with the 2nd AD Assn. (to avoid duplication and to insure longevity). Consequently we will discontinue separate newsletters in the future (ours will be a regular part of the 2nd AD Assn. Newsletter).

This will mean that those that are not on the 2nd AD Roster will not be receiving regular news of interest to 466ers, unless they join the Assn. For this reason, we urge all to join the parent group. For the low price of \$3.00 a year we can keep plugged in to the news source. How about it? Urge your 466 friend to apply for membership in the Second Air Division Association.