



‘WEE WILLIE’

ROGER SOUPART SETS THE RECORD STRAIGHT ON A HARROWING IMAGE OF A DOOMED B-17

Above
The propaganda image taken to celebrate 'Wee Willie's' 100th mission.

Right
Horrific images as 'Wee Willie' disintegrates during the raid of April 8, 1945.

One of the most dramatic photos of the air war over Europe depicts a USAAF Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress caught in a fireball. A wing folds away from the fuselage and the stricken bomber falls to earth like a leaf in autumn. Entombed within is its crew.

This image has been used hundreds, if not thousands, of times in books and magazines. Some captions declare that the B-17 fell to the guns of a Luftwaffe fighter, or that it was hit by bombs dropped from a friendly formation flying above it.

Then there is the location to consider. Dozens of German cities have been alleged. Berlin and Hamburg crop up, but Schweinfurt is the most popular.

Most of what has been written about this spine-chilling photo is wrong. The *real* story of this Fortress is different.

LUCKY SHIP

Like most Fortresses of its time, B-17G-15-BO 42-3133 was painted in dull olive drab and grey livery. It was built at Boeing's Plant 2 at Seattle, Washington State, and tested in the autumn of 1943. On October 22 it was delivered to the USAAF at Cheyenne, Wyoming, and made ready for deployment in Europe.

It was issued to the 91st Bomb Group at USAAF Station 121 at Bassingbourn, Cambridgeshire, on December 20. The 91st was part of the 1st Air Division, itself an element of the 'Mighty Eighth' Air Force. Like most bomb groups, the 91st was composed of four squadrons, in this case the 322nd, the 323rd, the 324th and the 401st. Allocated to the 322nd Bomb Squadron, 42-3133 received the code letters 'LG-W' on its fuselage, and a white triangle with a black letter 'A' on the top of its right wing and both sides of its fin.

When the B-17 was assigned to its first crew, they gave it the name *Wee Willie*. A young boy in nappies, wearing a flight cap, and sitting on a falling bomb was painted on the nose.

The bomber became a 'lucky ship'. Unlike other bombers that were shot down or written off within the first 15 or so flights in that mid-war period, *Wee Willie* seemed to have a charmed life. It survived well over 100 operations.

At that time crews were stood down after completing 25 missions. During its operational life, *Wee Willie* had been 'home' to many aircrew.

After the 'centenary' mission, a propaganda photo was taken, showing the crew under the nose of *Wee Willie* in faded olive drab, sporting numerous battle scars and looking 'tired'. In spite of its looks, 42-3133 flew on, soon exceeding 125 missions.



THE CREW OF B-17 **WEE WILLIE**, APRIL 8, 1945

Rank and name	Position	From
1st Lt Robert E Fuller	Commander	California
2nd Lt Woodrow A Lien	Co-pilot	Montana
Tech Sgt Francis J McCarthy	Navigator	Tennessee
Staff Sgt Richard D Proudfit	Bomb aimer	Mississippi
Staff Sgt Wylie McNatt Jr	Engineer/Top gunner	Texas
Staff Sgt William H Cassidy	Ball turret gunner	New York
Staff Sgt Ralph J Leffelman	Radio op/Top gunner	Washington
Staff Sgt James D Houtchens	Waist gunner	Nebraska
Sgt Le Moyne Miller	Tail gunner	Pennsylvania



Possibly taken in the USA, an informal photograph of B-17 aircrew. The men who took part in the last mission of 'Wee Willie' are part of this group. Other than 1st Lt Robert E Fuller, who survived the crash, the other crew members are buried in the American war cemetery at Margraten in the Netherlands.

2nd Lt
Woodrow A Lien

Sgt
Le Moyne Miller

Tech Sgt
Francis J McCarthy

1st Lt
Robert E Fuller

Staff Sgt
Wylie McNatt Jr

Staff Sgt
James D Houtchens

Staff Sgt
William H Cassidy

Staff Sgt
Ralph J Leffelman

Staff Sgt
Richard D Proudfit



"The fuselage was on fire and when it had dropped approximately 5,000ft the left wing fell off. I saw no crew member leave the aircraft or parachutes open"

EYE WITNESS

On April 8, 1945, the bomber climbed out of Basingbourn on its 129th combat mission; its commander was 1st Lt Robert E Fuller. The 322nd was part of an attack against the locomotive repair facilities at the railroad marshalling yards in Stendal, near Berlin. The squadron was to bomb through clouds using H2S ground search radar to identify the target area.

Anti-aircraft gunfire was moderate, causing major damage to four B-17s and minor damage to 13 others. Two bombers from the 91st were lost, including *Wee Willie*.

The Missing Air Crew Report (MACR 13881), included a statement from a witness, a crew member in a nearby B-17: *"We were flying over the target at 20,500ft altitude when I observed B-17G 42-31333 to receive a direct flak hit approximately between the bomb bay and No.2 engine.*

"The aircraft immediately started into a vertical dive. The fuselage was on fire and when it had dropped approximately 5,000ft the left wing fell off. It continued down and when the fuselage was about 3,000ft from the ground it exploded and then exploded again when it hit the ground. I saw no crew member leave the aircraft or parachutes open."

Miraculously Lt Fuller managed to bale out of the stricken bomber. He was captured and spent the remainder of the European war - a few weeks - in a prison camp. The eight other crew members were killed - see the panel on page 97.

Wee Willie was the oldest B-17G still in service with the 91st Bomb Group, and the penultimate B-17 lost to enemy action by the Basingbourn-based group before the end of hostilities. The famous images of the last moments of *Wee Willie* made the bomber well known, even if the circumstances have for so long been somewhat inaccurate. ●

Right
"Wee Willie" with its first crew, 1944.

Far right
A detail of the "Wee Willie" nose art. The B-17 is in its early days, with just four bomb tallies.

ALL IMAGES AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

