

Steadfast Striker

America's Boeing B-17 heavy bomber

ILLUSTRATION BY JIM LAURIER

The B-17 Flying Fortress is best known as the primary workhorse of the U.S. Army Air Forces' daylight strategic bombing campaign in Europe. In all, the B-17 equipped 32 overseas combat groups and dropped 640,036 tons of bombs in Europe, more than any other American aircraft. Although the B-17 also operated in the Pacific Theater, General Henry "Hap" Arnold preferred the B-24 Liberator's longer range, and B-17 groups there converted to other types by mid-1943. Nevertheless, pilots largely preferred the B-17 for its stability and ability to keep flying even with extensive battle damage. During the war, Boeing and other companies manufactured 12,731 Flying Fortresses in eight variants. The final model, the B-17G, began production in July 1943 and featured numerous improvements over previous variants. The B-17G cost an average of \$238,300; 8,680 were built by war's end. The B-17G depicted here, *A Bit O' Lace*, completed 83 consecutive missions—a testament to the ground crew's dogged efforts to keep the bomber fit for duty. —*Paraag Shukla*

The Competition



British Avro Lancaster

Range: 2,530 mi. • Top speed: 282 mph • Ceiling: 21,400 ft • Armament:

8 machine guns • Typical bomb load: 14,000 lbs • Production: 7,377 • The "Lanc" was Britain's main heavy bomber and the primary instrument of the Royal Air Force's nighttime bombing campaign.



German He-177 Greif

Range: 2,000 mi. • Top speed: 350 mph • Ceiling: 26,000 ft

• Armament: 5 machine guns, 2 cannons • Typical bomb load: 15,800 lbs • Production: 1,169 • The Luftwaffe's only long-range heavy bomber had a tendency to catch fire, sparking the nickname "Flaming Coffin."



Italian P-108B Bombardiere

Range: 2,187 mi. • Top speed: 267 mph • Ceiling: 27,100 ft • Armament: 7

machine guns • Typical bomb load: 7,700 lbs • Production: 24 • The P-108B was a costly design, and Mussolini's son, Bruno, died in one of its many learning-curve accidents.



Throwing Shade

Painted panels on the engine cowlings and in front of the cockpit helped reduce glare.

Stage Front

The nose art depicts cartoonist Milton Caniff's beloved Miss Lace, a central character of his comic strip *Male Call*. The bomb icons above it mark the B-17's many missions.

Supercharged Power

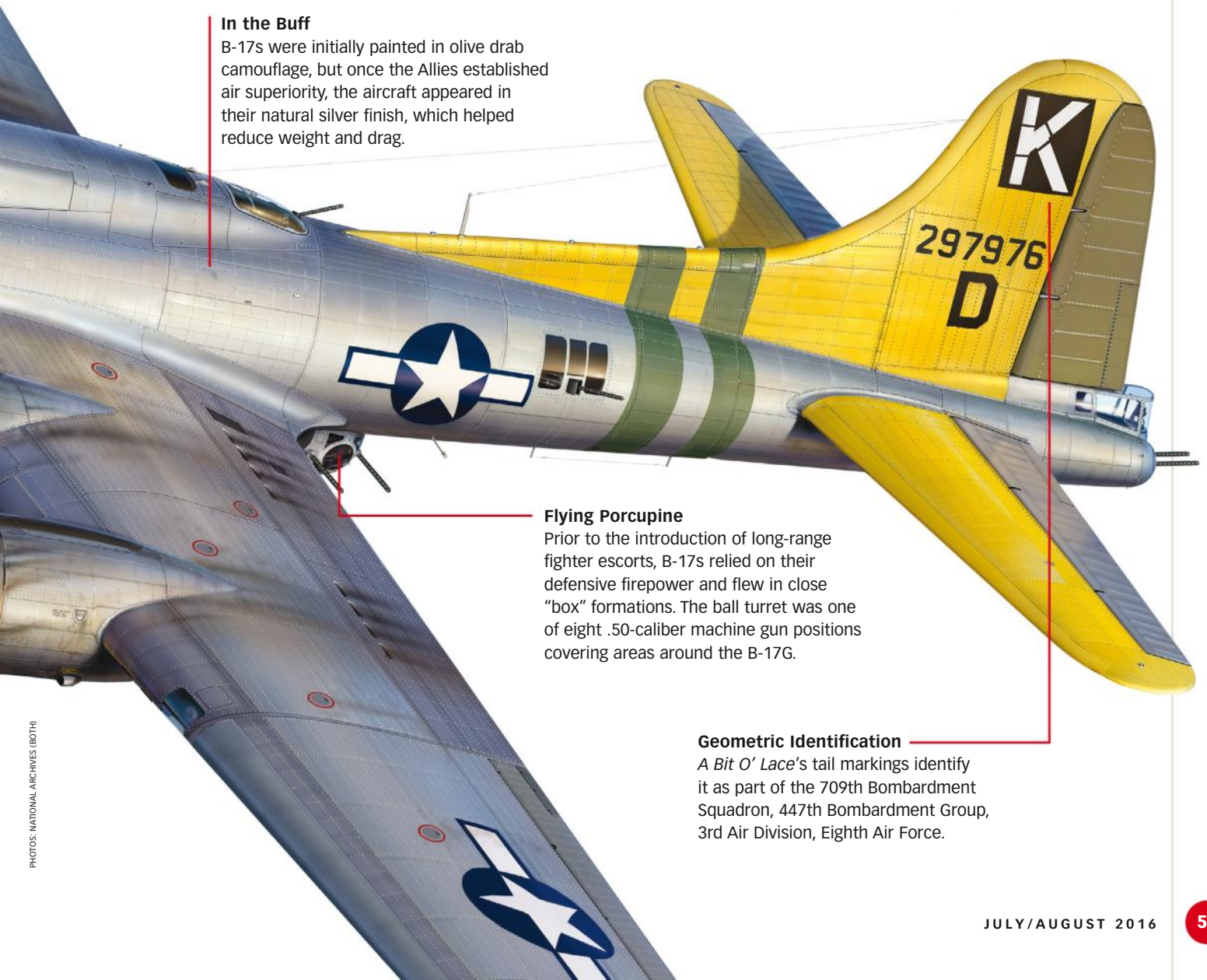
Four Wright R-1820-97 radial engines, each producing 1,200 hp, propelled the B-17G to a top speed of 287 mph. With a service ceiling of 35,600 ft, the B-17 had a range of 2,000 mi with a 6,000 lb bomb load.



B-17s' propeller and exhaust contrails (above) were often visible in frigid altitudes over 20,000 feet. After flak mangled their B-17G over Germany, the pilots managed to fly their crippled bird (right) back to base in England.

In the Buff

B-17s were initially painted in olive drab camouflage, but once the Allies established air superiority, the aircraft appeared in their natural silver finish, which helped reduce weight and drag.



Flying Porcupine

Prior to the introduction of long-range fighter escorts, B-17s relied on their defensive firepower and flew in close "box" formations. The ball turret was one of eight .50-caliber machine gun positions covering areas around the B-17G.

Geometric Identification

A Bit O' Lace's tail markings identify it as part of the 709th Bombardment Squadron, 447th Bombardment Group, 3rd Air Division, Eighth Air Force.