

**THE STORY BEHIND THE HORRIFIC PHOTO OF THE B-17 "WEE WILLIE" WITH ONE WING
BLOWN OFF PLUMMETING TO ITS DOOM**

SOME HAVE CALLED THE PICTURE THE MOST DEVASTATING OF WW2

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Taken on Apr. 8, 1945, the horrific, main image of this post is one of the iconic pictures of the American daylight bombing campaign over Germany.

But which Fortress was it, where had it been and who was on board?

As told by Dan Sharp in his book ***Spitfires over Berlin***, this horrific picture is part of a photo sequence taken by the automatic bomb strike camera of a B-17. The photo sequence shows ***the final 18 seconds of B-17G*** 42-31333 'Wee Willie' (which was the 302nd Boeing B-17G to roll of the production line at Boeing Plant 2, King County Washington) over Stendal, Saxony-Anhalt, Germany, after it was hit by ***an 88mm flak burst***.

In the first, ***(above)*** Willie's port wing has already sheared off and is spinning over its tail, gouting in flames.



The second photograph, ***(directly above)*** ***that as we have mentioned above is frequently used to show the horrors faced by American air crews during the daylight bombing campaign over Germany, shows the aircraft during the final seconds of its death dive. All nine crew members are still inside.***

In the last photograph, (below) 'Wee Willie' has exploded. Fragments of debris, wings, tail and fuselage fall burning to the ground.



'Wee Willie' was part of a 73-bomber raid on the locomotive repair shops at Stendal and was flown by Lt Robert E Fuller for this sortie.

The mission was a great success, the 322nd's official report noting: "The high squadron was furnished by the 322nd, led by Lt Johnson. Strike photographs for the high squadron's bombs show an excellent concentration of hits covering the aiming point.

"Almost the entire concentration lies within a 1000ft circle over the MPI. Meagre to moderate tracking AA fire on the bomb run which was extremely accurate resulted in minor damage to 13 aircraft and major damage to four in the group. The high and lead squadrons each lost one aircraft in the target area from flak damage."

The aircraft lost from the lead squadron, the 401st, was B-17G-50-B0 42-102504 Times A-Wastin', flown by Lt Peter Pastras. Its demise was witnessed by Lt Mike Fodroci, a navigator aboard another B-17. He saw the four-gun batteries on the ground tracking bursts of flak through the lead formation, getting closer and closer to Times A-Wastin' until the fourth one went directly into the aircraft's still-open bomb bay.

In his report he states: "The pilot must have been killed instantly; for the ship pulled up and veered to the right, climbing directly over our ship. Captain Shelby put our ship into a dive so steep that I was thrown up against the astro hatch of the ceiling in the nose — seems I hung there for a brief second or two.

"I also observed that a bad fire was burning on the aircraft's forward bomb bay area and that the co-pilot was trying to climb out of the small window with his backpack on. Somehow, we saw three chutes emerge from #504 as she spun toward the earth."

Times A-Wastin's co-pilot, Bob Morris, was killed when the B-17 exploded in mid-air, along with all but two of its crew, engineer Lyle Jones and radio operator Bob A Smith, who were taken prisoner on the ground.

The aircraft lost from the high squadron was 42-31333 'Wee Willie'.

In the Missing Air Crew Report S/Sgt George Little, a gunner aboard a 401st B-17, states: "I observed 42-31333 receive a direct flak hit approximately between the bomb bay and the number two engine. The aircraft immediately started a vertical dive. The aircraft fuselage was on fire and when it had dropped approximately 5000ft the left wing fell off.

"It continued down and when the fuselage was about 3000ft from the ground it exploded, and then exploded again when it hit the ground. I saw no crew members leave the aircraft or parachutes."

There was another witness to 'Wee Willie's' end that was able to offer an even more accurate account of what happened. About a third of the B-17s flying on any given mission were equipped with bomb strike cameras. These were fitted under the floor in the radio room and the lens cone was exposed to the elements.

The cameras were automatically operated from 'bombs away' until they ran out of film or automatically stopped after a predetermined number of exposures. They took an exposure every six seconds, with the mechanism then winding the film on, ready for the next shot.

In this way, the success or failure of a mission could sometimes be determined by examining the photographs.

The automatic camera on another B-17, flying beside or below 'Wee Willie', captured the aircraft's violent final 18 seconds in [the above] three photographs.

Shortly before the last of the three, Willie was torn apart by an explosion that ripped right through the fuselage and blew Lt Robert E Fuller clear out of the cockpit. Somehow, he managed to get his parachute open and survived the descent. The remainder of his crew were all killed.

Although he is recorded as having been taken prisoner, Fuller's final fate remains unknown and in some sources he is listed simply as 'killed in action' alongside his crew. Wee Willie' had completed 127 missions and was destroyed on its 128th.

Wee Willie was the oldest B-17G still in service with the 91st Bomb Group, and the next to last B-17 lost to enemy action by the group before cessation of hostilities. The War in Europe came to an end with the unconditional surrender of Germany just 30 days later, 7 May 1945



The B-17 "Wee Willie" and the crew that didn't make it back



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