

Carpetbaggers – Two Flights of Lady Grace



We are not talking about the Carpetbaggers known through the epithet used in the South after the Civil War to describe Northerners who went to the South during Reconstruction, taking advantage of speculative and commercial opportunities. We are talking about the super secret, heroic airmen who flew clandestine missions before the term CIA was known. The Office of Strategic Services, OSS, was a federal agency responsible for covert operations working closely with the British Special Operations Executive, SOE, even before the war officially started in 1941. The two organizations worked as a team of undercover specialists whose mission was to foster a spirit of resistance against the Nazi onslaught. The Americans became known as Carpetbaggers.

I was very fortunate one day last summer when I took a flight on the Experimental Aircraft Association's (EAA) new B-17, Aluminum Overcast. In the crowd were a number of WWII veterans. One gentleman, Ed Canner, happened to be talking about flying a B-24 over Europe one night – that's right, an American pilot flying a bomber over Europe at night. That caught my attention, and when I mentioned I knew some German Luftwaffe night fighter pilots he may have experienced, we struck up a very interesting conversation. Mr. Canner found or should I say a German night fighter found him once over the skies of occupied Europe.

Canner was a pilot of a U.S. secret, a B-24 known as Lady Grace, part of the 492nd Bomb Group. He was the pilot of one of 25 B-24s in the 406th squadron based at the Cheddington Air Base, about 30 miles north of London. Each of the B-24s was painted black to assist their stealth in secret night missions. Canner's duty was to drop leaflets into Germany and other areas of occupied Europe. The leaflets were critical in maintaining hope for the people of occupied countries.

Canner arrived in England during December 1944 with 490 hours of flight time, 250 in B-24s. New fliers practiced and learned the ropes quickly. Instrument flying, learning new navigational aids of G-box or today's LORAN, and special night vision classes made up the required courses. Night vision would prove to be one key to living longer in this secret field of night flying against the enemy. The night vision classes started with a virtually pitch black classroom where the airmen were asked to describe what they saw on a screen in the front of the room, wherever the front of the room was. After a few weeks of training and under the same light conditions, the airmen were able to see the screen and a formation of aircraft and determine how many of what type were flying.

A typical mission format lasted six to nine hours, started at dusk and concluded, hopefully, with a return to base early the next morning. The evening of March 12, 1945, the eighth mission for Mr. Canner, weather was good including over the target, Cologne, Germany, about 270 nautical miles due east. Flying at 20,000 feet, the flat black aircraft was fairly difficult to see. After a rough take-off, the B-24 Canner piloted, climbed to 22,000 feet and headed out towards Holland. The electrically heated suits kept the men warm even in the negative 45 degree outside temperatures. Soon, the small yellow light over the instrument panel, illuminated, indicated German ground radar was following their flight. It wasn't unusual to be tracked by ground radar.

After some time, Lady Grace's navigator, Dutch Coehoorn, located the target using the G-Box navigation aid and alerted the bombardier, Mike Markovitch, to operate the bombs-away switch. With the mission completed, the aircraft and its four big engines turned towards home at 250 mph. Suddenly, a new indicator illuminated, this time a red light above the instrument panel in the Boozier, as it was called, indicating a radar equipped, enemy night fighter had locked on to the B-24. In a split second, a pilot remembers. German night fighters close at 350 mph and their guns are radar controlled – "We're in trouble."

Canner immediately put the nose of the aircraft into a steep dive, a dive for life. The B-24 responded well, diving at over 350 mph on an airframe designed for a maximum

speed of 300 mph. The B-24 was diving on Dusseldorf which was under attack by British Bombers. The anti-aircraft was intense and at 18,000 feet Lady Grace banked hard, so hard that the instruments spilled, indicating the bank exceeded 70 degrees. The immediate objective was accomplished; the red indicator light was no longer illuminated to the relief of all on board.

As they turned back on course and leveled off at 20,000 feet, Lady Grace wasn't quite the same. Although the bomber had not taken any enemy fire, staying on course was not going to be easy. The aircraft was wallowing all over the sky. The pilot asked permission for emergency landing privileges at the nearest Allied base, Paris, France. Initially approved but unfortunately denied within a few minutes since the airbase was under attack, Lady Grace would have to stay airborne and find another destination. They turned for home and wallowed towards their destination, 200 miles to the west.

Approaching the French coast, allied anti-aircraft fire illuminated the sky when off course, the crew flew into restricted air space. Quickly thinking, the pilot called ground control in time to get the shelling stopped, in time to survive and continue on. Exhausted, Canner turned the controls over to the co-pilot and fell asleep hoping to awake as they approached Cheddington Air base. Just ten minutes into a well deserved rest, Canner was awakened by jabs and yells from the co-pilot. Turning his intercom back on he abruptly learned another night fighter was off to their rear. There was no radar indication but the tail, ball turret, top turret and waist gunner all reported seeing the twin-engine fighter lumbering about their tail. But they couldn't tell – friend or foe.

Immediately, Canner gave the instruction to shoot it down if it moved into firing position while he prepared to fire a flare. A flare was the agreed upon signal between allied aircraft that they were friendly. Even though the allied P-61 fighter had night radar and could tell the aircraft was a B-24 and by this early morning light, see the aircraft had American markings, the Germans had captured and rebuilt several B-24s. The fighter pilot needed to be sure and as soon as the flare was fired, he flew off to continue his hunt.

Lady Grace finally landed safely at Cheddington. The crew inspected the aircraft and found that the two-foot-long wing tips had taken a beating in the 2,000 foot, 350 mph dive to avoid the German night fighter. Nearly every rivet had popped out on each wing tip under the G forces. March 12th was an eventful night but March 14th would prove to be another difficult secret mission – next month we uncover what Lady Grace experienced with 3000 gallons of 100 octane on board.

Special thanks to Ed Canner and his memoirs for sharing a WWII evening with us. By John Cilio. You can contact John at questions@vintageflyer.com



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