

# The Life And Death Of 'Super Al'

BY CHARLES T. BELL

**Editor's Note:** Most 91st aircrews remember their old aircraft with affection, but are shy of details of their plane's history before and after they flew it. Pilot Charlie Bell, with devoted research, has reconstructed the history of his ship, "Superstitious Aloysius," ex-322nd sqdn., from birth to death.

On July 20, 1944, a group of German generals tried to assassinate Adolph Hitler with a bomb planted in a meeting room. They failed. On the same day, the 91st Bomb Group completed its 200th mission over Europe. It lost 8 planes in the process, among its heaviest losses of the war. One of those planes was AF Serial #42-31982, "Superstitious Aloysius," a B-17 G. For many 91sters, old LGS has special memories.

"Superstitious Aloysius" was built by the Boeing Aircraft Company in Seattle, Washington, and delivered to the Air Force on January 10, 1944. It was among the last B-17s to be camouflage painted.

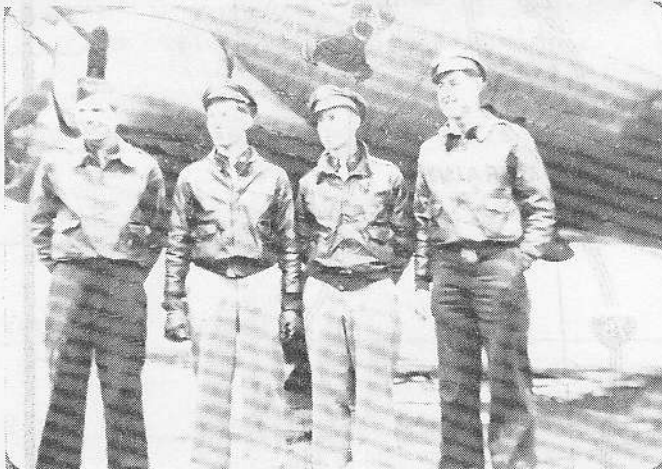
The plane was first flown to Great Falls, Montana, and on January 14, 1944 to Cheyenne, Wyoming, for modification. From there it went to Savannah, Georgia, from which point it was ferried to England and delivered to the 8th Air Force on February 15, 1944. A week later, #42-31982 was assigned to the 322nd Squadron of the 91st Bomb Group, where it received the designation LG-S (Lingers Sugar). A ground crew headed by M/Sgt Urban Drella, an original 91ster, took over its care.

While #42-31982 was being groomed for action, a replacement crew headed by 2nd Lt. Charles T. Bell was completing its training at Dyersburg, Tenn. The crew's instructor pilot was a former 91ster whose name has escaped the record. Having ferried a new silver colored B-17G, #42-32101, over the North Atlantic from Kearney, Nebraska, the crew landed at Prestwick, Scotland on February 24, 1944, the first day of the Air Offensive Over Europe.

Following further training at Bovington Air Base near London, the crew reported for duty at Bassingbourn on St. Patrick's Day. About two weeks later it was assigned to fly #42-31982. Meanwhile, the pilot had received the benefit of flying 3 missions as co-pilot aboard "Chowhound," under the expert tutelage of 1st Lt. Jerry Newquist.

For the next few days the green crew spent every available hour getting acquainted with its new charge. Not without a bit of grumbling, the crew practiced bailout procedures, dinghy drill, orientation to the area, formation flying, and general familiarization exercises.

The practice paid off on the crew's first mission together aboard the plane, which they had soon dubbed "Superstitious Aloysius." The name and cartoon character painted



James Vanpelt, bombardier; Maynard Frey, co-pilot; Charles Bell, pilot; Alfred Kovner, navigator.



Ground crew: front 1 to r, Ralph Randolph, George Zucco. Back, Urban Drella, crew chief, and George Guthmiller.

on the nose were borrowed from a "good luck" card received by one of the crew members. The card is still preserved in the crew archives.

The first crew mission was to Oldenburg, Germany, on April 8, 1944. The 91st was the last group over the target and took very heavy flak. Just after "bombs away" an 88mm shell exploded near Super Al's #3 engine. It knocked the engine out in such a way that it could not be feathered. At the same time it shorted out the controls for the wheels and flaps, causing both to fully extend. Before the crew could crank them up manually, Super Al found itself all alone over Oldenburg, the very last bomber in the area. Naturally, every flak crew began to take pot shots at it. They succeeded in knocking out the supercharger on #2 engine and putting over 200 holes in the fuselage, wings, and nose. Both the navigator and bombardier received minor wounds. The radio-gunner, Johnny Friend, succeeded in contacting air-sea rescue before the plane lost too much altitude. Consequently, fighters were directed to escort the bomber out of enemy territory, which they did.

For a while it appeared that the pilot would have to ditch in the Zuider Zee due to loss of altitude and difficulty in transferring fuel. However the fuel problem was solved and #2 engine provided more power at low altitude, so the decision was made to try for the Channel.

British air-sea rescue set a course for the plane to follow. Soon, the reason became apparent as rescue boats were spotted all the way across the Channel. Had it become necessary to ditch, rescue would have been virtually assured. As it turned out, the plane was soon over England.

Finally, "Superstitious Aloysius" made a wheels down landing at Bassingbourn, about 45 minutes after the main Group had landed. Having last been seen over the target with wheels down, it had been assumed that the crew had bailed out there. Accordingly, all had been tentatively listed as missing in action. Instead, a partnership between plane and crew had been forged which would carry them through many more adventures together.

Between March and July, 1944, Superstitious Aloysius flew in almost every major mission completed by the 91st. The big exception was the D-Day mission. Damage sustained in the June 5 mission precluded that, despite the fact that Urb Drella and his crew had worked all night in the rain to get it ready. At the last minute, Urb had to ground the plane, his biggest disappointment and toughest decision of the war. (When the pilot wanted to fly it, Drella said "I've never lost a pilot yet and I don't intend to start now.")

The bitter end for Super Al came on July 20, 1944. It is documented both by an eyewitness who occupied a unique observation post and by the pilot who last flew the plane.

Norman Ingram, Super Al's original flight engineer, was flying his last mission with Lt. Charles T. Walby's crew aboard #43-37819. Walby was killed in action and his plane was destroyed by enemy fighters. Ingram managed somehow to get out and hit the silk. In a letter written after his release from captivity, Ingram describes how he watched as German fighters hit Superstitious Aloysius. He became so absorbed in the drama that he momentarily forgot his own predicament. For that per-



John C. Friend, radio operator.



iod he could only think about and sympathize with "poor old Superstitious Aloysius going down in flames after all the missions it had flown!" According to Ingram he did not come back to reality until he finally looked down and saw a German reception committee waiting for him.

The last crew to fly Superstitious Aloysius was commanded by 2nd. Lt. Al DeShaw. DeShaw is now a Flight Captain with Pan American Airways. In a telephone interview with Charlie Bell he described the July 20, 1944 mission in pungent terms.

On that day the 91st was dispatched to a target in the Leipzig area (Lutzkendorf), perhaps the most heavily defended area in Germany. In accordance with Gen. Doolittle's concept of how to win the war, no visible fighter escort was provided. Instead, Doolittle's theory depended upon 8th Air Force fighters first to carry out search and destroy missions in the general target area and second to help the bombers. When the Luftwaffe decided to pick on the 91st, there were no friendly fighters to defend it. As the 91st drew close to Leipzig, wave after wave of German fighters attacked, reminiscent of the 1943 Schweinfurt missions. The 91st's loss of 8 planes was its heaviest in 1944.

According to DeShaw, Superstitious Aloysius survived the initial attack, although sustaining some damage. But finally a well-placed volley destroyed the No.2 engine and set the left wing afire. Al pulled out of the formation and ordered his crew to bail out. The plane lost altitude rapidly while the pilot struggled to keep it in the air long enough for a mortally wounded man to get out. Finally the plane blew up, miraculously hurling DeShaw free. Although badly hurt, he managed to pull his ripcord at about 5000 feet and make it down.

Al was rescued by German troops from irate civilians who had already lynched another crewman. It appears that the falling planes had caused some damage and casualties on the ground, inflaming the local residents to seek revenge. DeShaw says they were already primed by Nazi propaganda about the American "barbarians."

Super Al's original crew consisted of Charles T. Bell, pilot; Maynard Frey, co-pilot; Alfred Kovner, navigator; James VanPelt, bombardier; Norman Ingram, engineer/gunner; John Friend, radio/gunner; Joe Staffa, assistant engineer/waist gunner; Paul Fahey, gunner/bombardier; Andy Furminsky, ball turret gunner, and Armand Battista, tail gunner. Battista was credited with shooting down a German fighter over Berlin on May 24, 1944. Kovner was killed in action and VanPelt taken prisoner while flying in the lead plane on the June 21st mission to Berlin. Ingram was taken prisoner on July 20. The rest completed their tours of duty with the 91st. Friend went on to a distinguished Air Force career from which he was retired as a Master Sergeant.

In addition to Bell and DeShaw, Superstitious Aloysius was piloted by Lts. Alford, Hayen, Abbott, Mooney, Hammer, Longaker, Strong, Emmond, and possibly others. A number of other pilots got their first combat experience with the 91st aboard Super Al. Among them were several who flew as co-pilots and later commanded their own crews. The original co-pilot, Maynard Frey, succeeded Jerry Newquist as pilot of "Chowhound" and later flew a tour as a scout in P-51s. Others were Walby, shot down on July 20; Dave McCarty, wounded on June 15 and shot down on September 8 over Ludwigshaven; Abbott, shot down over Berlin on June 21; Goodrich, D.J. Nelson, Wilbert Johnson, and Moeller. Ernie Austin succeeded Al Kovner as navigator when "Kobe" moved up to Group, and flew many missions aboard Super Al.

Anyone who can add to the story of Superstitious Aloysius may write to Charles T. Bell, 8604 Buckhannon Drive, Potomac, Maryland 20854. Pictures would be especially appreciated.

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