Although posing in front of Sleepy Time Gal, the majority of this crew are wearing large A-2 jacket badges for their regular ship Wee Willie. The badges and nose art were all Starcer productions. (USAF)

countered such a heavy and well co-ordinated defence. The main Luftwaffe attacks were timed to strike just as the bomber boxes separated and formed a trail as they started their bomb run. One 91st ship exploded from a direct flak hit and others peeled away trailing smoke and debris as a result of the fighter assaults. So determined were the fighters to get at the bomber stream, they ignored their own flak barrage and pressed home attacks with great ferocity.

In all six aircraft were lost from the 91st including the entire low squadron of five 401st planes. Amongst those missing was *The Sky Wolf (II)* and Stoffel's 92nd Bomb Group crew. The intensity of the combat and the magnitude of the losses prevented other crews from detailing what happened to individual planes. At debriefing, surviving crews were convinced that they had inflicted even greater losses on the Luftwaffe but in fact post-war German records reveal only five fighters were destroyed and five damaged. Claims of 63 destroyed and 32 probables or damaged were far wide of the mark but inevitable in the confusion and speed of such an assault. However, German estimates also confirm that half of the Focke-Wulf Flugzeugbau factory was destroyed by the attacking formations.

SLEEPY TIME GAL
42-102527

B-17G-50-BO
91/322-A/P/H   LG-A/P/H

It is hard to find fault with any of Alberto Vargas's superb pin-up illustrations that appeared regularly in Esquire. Equally difficult is the determination of why a particular image

should become so much more popular than another but his yawning, stretching girl painted for the April 1944 centre-fold with the title 'Patriotic Gal', was a winner for GIs across the world. Combined with the title of *Sleepy Time Gal*, the beautiful blonde was a favourite for many nose art painters and Tony Starcer's rendering on this silver B17G was one of the best.

The plane was delivered to the Cheyenne Modification Center on 14th March 1944 from the giant Boeing Seattle plant. From there it made its way to Bangor, Maine, before departing the USA on 6th April and heading for England. It was 22nd April before it reached Bassingbourn where it joined the 322nd Squadron. On the plane's first combat mission, three days after arrival, flak damaged it over the target of Metz airfield. The ground crew had *Sleepy Time Gal* ready in time for her next sortie, three days later, to lead the 'B' Group attack on another Luftwaffe field at Avord. First Lieutenant Paul Jessop was assigned to the plane for that mission and he would fly several more missions in the ship leading the group to some rugged targets including Berlin on the 19th May. On 1st May, *Sleepy Time Gal*, took some major damage by heavy and accurate flak over the Troyes marshalling yards. Once again the ground crew patched the plane and put her back into the air.

In all, *Sleepy Time Gal* would fly High or Low Group lead on 14 occasions throughout May and June. After Paul Jessop, Edward Waters' crew took over the plane during June flying about half of the lead missions. On 21st June it was the Waters crew who were leading the Low Group,

taking *Sleepy Time Gal* back to Berlin for the second time. German fighters streaked through the formation and left Ed Waters with his ship on fire. Dave Hanst was also flying that mission, in *Wild Hare*, and he noted, "Nearing Berlin our group was straggling and strung out. Off to the left we saw a large gaggle of bandits going towards the rear of the bomber stream..... five minutes later 20mm shells began bursting all through our formation. The pilots of those fighters certainly had nerve, they flew right through our group then rolled over and dove away. Every gun on our plane was going full blast, the whole ship was shaking, the noise was terrible and the cockpit was thick with powder smoke. The bandits numbered about 60-70, they were Me410s, twin engined fighters. One went under our left wing less than 20 ft below, the right engine was streaking smoke and flame, it rolled over and went straight down. On the first pass the bandits got three of our Forts, all were in the squadron we were in, all had their gas tanks on fire from 20mm bursts. Ahead of me was Ed Waters (*Sleepy Time Gal*), to my left another ship. In one glance I could see huge sheets of flame coming from the wings, down they went."

20mm shells had ripped into the leading edge of the left wing of *Sleepy Time Gal*, peeled it back and set it ablaze while other shells hit the No. 3 engine. The fire was building up as the plane peeled off to the right, out of the formation. As it dropped away a massive explosion tore it to pieces in mid air. Three chutes were seen to blossom amid the wreckage and debris that tumbled through the sky. An Me410 curved down and fired a burst at one of the chutes but the result was not observed. Fate decided which men the explosion would kill and which would be flung clear. Flying nearby was top turret gunner Gilbert Bradley on William Thissell's crew. He, too, was in the thick of the action and noted in his diary, "I poured lead at a Ju88, he was on fire on his left wing till he got even with us then he exploded. I then started firing at a 410, he caught on fire and dived down..... I looked around and saw Pappy Miller (an old friend of mine) with his ship on fire. They started pouring out of the plane and I hope he was not hurt."

Miller was the top turret engineer on *Sleepy Time Gal* and he lost his life that day but somehow five men did survive to be taken prisoner by the Germans below.

SLIDE KELLY
?
B-17F
91/
A number of sources list this ship as being a 91st Bomb Group aircraft but nothing further has been established about it other than being a camouflaged F model.

SNOOKS
41-24523
B-17F-20-BO
91/323-N   **OR-N**
Originally assigned to the 323rd Squadron at Dow Field, Bangor, Maine and named by Lt Yuravich's crew as *Lil Audrey*. On 30th December, Joe Yuravich, by then a Captain, and his co-pilot Lt Robert Shaw were both seriously wounded in this plane on the mission to Lorient. Yuravich was hospitalised for a long while with head wounds from 20mm fragments but returned briefly to Bassingbourn before being sent back to the States.

How long the ship continued to carry the title *Lil Audrey* is not certain but when lost on the last day of August 1943 it was carrying a different title of *Snooks*. On that day it was Richard Rodman's crew who were flying in the aircraft to bomb the German airfield at Romilly in France. Soon after assembly had been completed and the formation left the English coast high over Sussex, *Snooks* was involved in a tragic mid-air collision. Just off Beachy Head, at 25,000ft, *Snooks* lurched into *Eager Beaver* and split that aircraft into two, sending it plummeting into the sea below. Hopelessly out of control, what had only moments before been two graceful four-engined airplanes suddenly turned into a tumbled mass of metal that pinned men inside with overwhelming centrifugal force. Only two chutes were seen to come from the stricken plane, although four others were also seen to blossom amongst the wreckage of the two tumbling Fortresses. Surface craft raced to the scene to search for survivors but there were none from Rodman's crew in *Snooks* and only one from *Eager Beaver* — nineteen men died.

SOUTHERN COMFORT
?
B-17F
91/?
As yet unidentified this camouflaged early B17F model is listed by several sources as being assigned to the 91st. No other details are known. It is possible that this was in fact the 305th Bomb Group plane which carried this same title of *Southern Comfort* and was assigned to that group's 364th Squadron. There are many known examples of ships from other groups being on the field at Bassingbourn for some considerable length of time while repairs were being undertaken. Alternatively, it was not uncommon for one group to temporarily loan one or more of its planes to another group who had more crews