

## 'All American' - The Flying Fortress That Refused To Die

Written by Andy Owen



It was to be a 'routine' bombing mission.

Extremely dangerous, of course. But still classed as 'routine'.

It was yet another trip to Tunis, to bomb the hell out of the docks and surrounding areas - to help cut the supply chain to the German and Italian armies operating in Tunisia in WW2.

This was a trip the crew of *All American* had done a number of times. But this trip was going to be very different to any that had gone before.

It was February 1st 1943. A day that the crew on board - ten young United States airmen - would never forget.

The *All American* was a Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress, part of the 97th Bomb Group, 414th Bombardment Squadron, of the United States Air Force.

In early 1943, the 97th and the 414th Squadron were based near Biskra, Algeria, being transferred there in August 1942, as part of the original Operation Torch forces.

From the moment they arrived, they were engaged in heavy bombing raids on targets in Algeria and Tunisia.

They attacked coastal targets in Tunisia - and also concentrations of Rommel's Afrika Corps. They then moved on to airfields, marshalling yards, bridges, troop concentrations and dockyards.

The crew of the *All American* were experienced and battle-hardened veterans.

Ken 'Sonny' Bragg Jr. was the pilot. His co-pilot was Guy Boyd. They were supported by Navigator Harry Nuessle, Bombardier Ralph Burbridge and engineer Joe James.

In addition, there was radio operator Paul Galloway, Ball Turret Gunner Elton Conda, Waist Gunner Michael Zuk, Tail Gunner Sam Sarpolus and Ground Crew Chief Hank Hyland.

The bomber group left Biskra mid-morning, for the 300-mile flight to Tunis. The mission began well and confidence was good.

But Tunis was heavily defended and, as they approached the target, they were attacked by fighters and then by heavy flak. Despite the heavy opposition, they reached their target and successfully delivered their payload into the docks below.

As they turned to return to base, they were suddenly attacked by a pair of Messerschmitts. But the B-17 was well armed and the gunners from the three turrets were successful in driving them off.

The formation settled into their shape and as they left the target area, the return flight was expected to be pretty-much trouble free.

But, some time later, the formation were surprised by two more Messerschmitts. They were first spotted climbing towards the bombers from 2 miles away.



This time, the German fighters pressed the attack.

The pilots were clearly experienced and they split their attack on the two leading planes. One of them attacked the formation leader, flown by Major Robert Coulter.

The other attacked the *All American*.



Gunners from both bombers were delivering heavy fire at the two ME109's - and they were both hit.

The fighter attacking the lead bomber plunged from the sky trailing a plume of black smoke behind it.

The other fighter came in again and attacked the *All American*.

As it rolled away to dive below and behind the B-17, withering fire from the main turrets killed or badly wounded the pilot.

*(He was thought to be 16-victory ace Feldwebel Erich Paczia).*

As the out of control Messerschmitt passed over the fuselage of the bomber, its wing hit the aft fuselage, nearly slicing the tail off.

*All American* lurched upward with the impact, but pilot Ken Bragg and co-pilot Guy Boyd found they could regain control, by using their throttles to manage the pitch.

Ken Bragg asked the crew for a damage report. Flight engineer and top turret gunner Joe James replied that they'd "*received some damage to the tail section*".

Bragg instructed his crew to put on their parachutes.

The other bombers reduced their speed and kept a tight formation around the damaged plane until they were well outside enemy fighter range, then they flew on ahead to base.

Before leaving, Lieutenant Charles "Cliff" Cutforth navigator of *Flying Flit Gun* took the now-famous photo of the stricken *All American*, as it flew home over the Sahara desert.



The tail section was literally swinging up to 18-inches out of alignment.

It was hanging on by a few spars and a narrow section of aluminium skin.

The Messerschmitt's wing had sliced through three-quarters of *All American's* aft fuselage, including control cables, hydraulic and oxygen systems. The left-hand horizontal stabiliser was completely gone.

Tail gunner Sam Sarpolus scrambled forward with his gear.

The atmosphere on board was tense, but Bragg and Boyd showed their experience - and kept spirits up with their remarkable flying skills.

Bragg knew that as they were flying above the Sahara desert, every mile closer to home was vitally important. The desert was an inhospitable place and still bitterly contested.



The flight back lasted 90 minutes. To the crew, every minute must have seemed like an eternity. Every single lurch and vibration could have meant the end, with the tail shearing off.

But it managed to hold itself together, thanks to the rugged design of the B-17 and the incredible flying skills of the two pilots.

As they approached Biskra, they fired three emergency flares and orbited the base at 2,000 feet, waiting for a green flare to give them landing clearance.

When they got the approval, Bragg and Engel put the plane into a gentle wide circle, leading to long final approach, to take as much pressure off the damage as possible.

It worked.

They eased the aircraft down with its throttles until they felt the main wheels touch the ground. They had no hydraulics, so they had no way of lowering the tail wheel.

As the badly damaged B17 settled into its three-point attitude, the tail dragged along the ground. They had to skid the last 100 yards.

But it still held...



The emergency services had been scrambled and, as the plane came to a stop, an ambulance appeared alongside, expecting to meet with scenes of horrible carnage.

But their services weren't needed. Bragg apparently called out, *'No business, Doc.'*

Incredibly, no one on board had been hurt - and they all walked away without assistance.

'Sonny' Bragg reported later, that as a result of the effort of keeping "the bird" aloft, crippled as she was - it was hours before he could feel his arms again.



The *All American* was repaired and returned to service as a 'hack' - a utility plane utilised for run-of-the-mill activities, including delivering to, or collecting from, other airfields - personnel, spare parts, equipment, or documents.

She flew until she was scrapped in Foggia, Italy in March 1945.

She deserved better.

Every one of the *All American* crew survived the war.

Without the photographic evidence, no one would have believed this incredible story. But, it's a testament to the bravery of the crew, the legendary robustness of the Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress...

...and the *All American* herself.

This incredibly rugged old bird got the boys home.

She did her job.

I suppose it once again emphasises the point:

*"When it's not your time, then it's not your time..."*