

AFEHRI File 100.000

Research Materials/Source Documents  
STUDENT PAPERS

**FILE TITLE:** "Where Few Have Gone Before: TSgt Forrest Lee Vosler, Medal of Honor Recipient

**AUTHOR:** SMSgt Christopher F. Smith, AF Senior NCO Academy, 15 July 1997, pp 39.

**Reviewed by:**

**AFEHRI Representative** G. Akin date 16 Nov 97

**EPC Representative** V. G. G. G. date 11-18-97

**Scanner Operator** Gary R. Akin date 11-18-97

**APPROVED BY:** Gary R. Akin

GARY R. AKIN, CMSgt, USAF

Director

Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute

# **Where Few Have Gone Before**

**An Historical Research Paper  
Dedicated to the Life  
of**



**Technical Sergeant Forrest Lee Vosler**

**Medal of Honor Recipient**

**by**

**SMSgt Christopher F. Smith**

**United States Air Force Senior Noncommissioned Officer Academy  
Gunter Annex - Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama**

**15 July 1997**

## Table of Contents

Introduction	3
A Typical Beginning for a Not-So-Typical Person	3
He Wanted to Fly	4
On to Europe	5
Molesworth Air Station, England	5
Chasing Ghosts	7
The Jersey Bounce, Jr.	9
Bremen, Germany, 20 Dec 43	10
Flight for Life	18
Into the Drink	22
Rescue	25
Hospitalization, Recuperation and Other Bits of Info	27
The Medal of Honor	29
Discharge and Civilian Life	32
America Loses One of Her Own	33
The Memory Lives On	35
The Big Picture	37
Bibliography	38
Atch 1      303 <sup>rd</sup> Mission Reports Feb 1943 - Apr 1945	1-1
Atch 2      303 <sup>rd</sup> Pro Reports Jan-Dec 1943	2-1
Atch 3      358 <sup>th</sup> Mission Report 3 Nov 1943 - 3 Jan 1945	3-1
Atch 4      Medal of Honor Citation	4-1
Atch 5      Famous People of World War II	5-1
Atch 6      358 <sup>th</sup> Awards and Decorations 1943 -1943	6-1
Atch 7      358 <sup>th</sup> Personnel Rosters March 1942 - 1945	7-1
Atch 8      358 <sup>th</sup> Statistical Reports and Information	8-1
Atch 9      Personal History File USAF HRA	9-1
Atch 10     358 <sup>th</sup> War Diaries Jan - Dec 1943	10-1
Atch 11     Honorable Discharge Certificate	11-1

## **Introduction**

In the hostile skies of World War II, 100,000 brave hearts gave their lives that others might live. Countless others survived the intense fighting and returned to tell their stories. Some of these stories became famous, while others remained relatively unknown. It's in many of these lesser-known ones where we find some of the greatest acts of courage, strength and heroism. One such story is of a man with humble roots in Upstate New York: Forrest Lee Vosler.

In my research over the past few years I've found the life story of TSgt Forrest Vosler, an enlisted Medal of Honor recipient, to be like one big puzzle that's never been completed. Pieces are found here and there in libraries, personal accounts and historical repositories, but no where could I find the completed picture. For this reason, I decided to do an historical research paper on his entire life, based on the information available to me at this time.

We'll begin with a few pieces of his early life in Upstate New York, then add a few more with his introduction to and early training in the Army Air Corps. The picture really starts to take shape as we read first-hand accounts of a bombing mission where his actions later earned him the Medal of Honor. More pieces are added as we explore his experiences with medical treatment for wounds suffered during the mission, the Medal of Honor presentation and his personal feelings about the Medal. The final picture then comes into view as we add the last few pieces of his life after discharge and beyond. With the completed picture, it will become apparent Forrest Vosler is an individual who has gone where few have gone before. It's a fascinating and touching story that begins in the early 1900s with a newborn and his proud parents.

### **An Typical Beginning for a Not-So-Typical Person**

Forrest Lee Vosler's early years were typical of most who grew up in the early 1900's. In his military biography we find he was born on 29 Jul 1923 in the small Lake Ontario town of Lindonville, New York to William I. and Lottie Vosler (9) An article in the Rochester local newspaper reports his father was an insurance salesman. (12) From the transcript of a personal interview between Forrest and Maj Katz in 1986, we learn at age 8 he and his family of two sisters and one brother moved to Avon, New York, 60 miles southeast of Lindenville. Sometime during the 8<sup>th</sup> grade of grammar school, he and his family made their second move to 23 Linden Street, Livonia, New York. This was their home when Forrest graduated from Central High School in 1941. (4:63)

Continuing on with the personal interview we find during his high school years Forrest was involved in athletics and Boy Scouts. He played basketball but didn't become a great star and didn't pursue the sport any farther after graduating. He was also a Boy Scout, earning his Star Scout award, but was never able to stay in long enough to become an Eagle Scout. After high school, he continued his affiliation with the local troop as an Assistant Scoutmaster. (4:64)

## He Wanted To Fly

According to his official military biography, prior to entering the Army Air Corps, Forrest worked as a drill press operator for the Rochester Products Division, General Motors Corporation. He remained at this position for 15 months. (9) Again, from the personal interview he states during this time many of his friends who were already 21 (Forrest was only 19 at the time) were being forced into the service. They persuaded Forrest to volunteer to get in. Since the Army was only drafting 21 year olds at the time, he needed his father's signature to enlist. (4:64)

Continuing with the interview, with his father's signature in hand and ambitions of becoming a flyer, Forrest went to see the Army Air Corps recruiter and later enlisted on 8 Oct 1942. When he took the pilot's tests, he found they were so stringent and demanding that his scores weren't high enough to qualify for pilot's training. To his dismay, the recruiter told him he was sorry he couldn't become a pilot, but he was going into the service anyway. He went home and called his father and said, "Wait a minute! You've got to get me out of this damned thing you signed for." His father replied, "What's the matter? Are you too afraid to go in?" To prove he wasn't afraid, he actually went ahead and enlisted anyway that same day and became a private in the Army Air Corps. (4:65) He was given an Army Serial Number of 12168197. (3)

Referring once again to his military biography we find although his scores weren't high enough to enter pilot's training, he did receive high marks on the radio test. After attending Basic Training in Atlantic City, New Jersey, he was transferred to Scott Air Field, Illinois for Radio Operators and Mechanics School. Here he spent the next 18 weeks learning Morse code and radio maintenance procedures. During this time, on 4 Mar 1943, he was promoted to private first class. His success with the school almost guaranteed him to become a ground control radio operator. He was also 3 inches taller than the maximum height requirement for an arial gunner position, but he still wanted to fly. Amazingly so, upon course completion he was transferred to Flexible Gunnery School at Harlingen, Texas to become an arial gunner. (9) Forrest relates an interesting account during his personal interview of how he was able to get into the gunnery school.

"My height was six feet three inches....Because of my height, I couldn't get into flying status. The limit at the time was 72 inches, so when I went back to take the physical to get into flying, I didn't really have much hope of making it in because of the height limitation. I happened to arrive there at the noon hour, and I was waiting; everybody went to lunch. All the officers and doctors were at lunch and I had to sit there in my shorts waiting for them to come back. I noticed that the height and weight man had brought a box lunch and he was eating it instead of going out with the rest of them. I walked over to him and said, 'You measure the height and weight?' He said, 'Yes, I do.' I said, 'I've got a five dollar bill here if you put down 72 inches on my form.'" He said, 'You're on.' I handed him the five dollars and I'm on my way to Harlingen, Texas." (4:67)

"I got down to Harlingen, Texas and I was going to get another physical: they gave you a physical every time you moved. I bumped my head going in to get the physical. There was a captain standing there. He said, 'Just a minute sergeant. Come over hear. How the heck did you get down here? I've seen hundreds of people go through this door and they don't bump their head if they are under six feet.' I told him the story. He made me get up on the scales and got the height down. They finally recorded it as six feet one and one-half inches. He sat down and said, 'I don't know. I said, 'I'll tell you, sir, what I'm not going to do. I'm not going to bribe you. I know better than that.' He laughed and said, 'You really want it, don't you?' I said, 'I certainly do.' He said, 'I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to give you a crack at it. The only reason we limit (the height) is because we think you can't get in the turrets, and you must be able to do all the positions on the ship. If you can do them somehow, more power to you. If you can't, you're going to wash out anyway, but you're welcome to try.' " (4:68) He got his wish of flying that day.

## On To Europe

From Forrest's military biography we find what direction he took after training. On 22 May 1943, he graduated from Flexible Gunnery School as an expert arial gunner and began making his way to the European Theater of Operations (ETO). His first stop was an assignment to the 18<sup>th</sup> Replacement Wing at Salt Lake City, Utah. Two days after his arrival, on 24 Mar 1943, he was promoted to sergeant and was now a noncommissioned officer. He remained in Utah until 2 Jun 1943. At that time he was transferred to the Army Air Base at Pyote, Texas. While there he was promoted to staff sergeant, on 1 Aug 1943. Four months later, on 7 Oct 1943, he was transferred to



Molesworth Air Station and the 358<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron, 303<sup>rd</sup> Bombardment Group (H), Eighth Air Force in the ETO as a radio operator-arial gunner. He remained with this unit until returning to the United States on 26 Feb 44. (9) The 303<sup>rd</sup> unit insignia is shown on the left, with the 358<sup>th</sup>

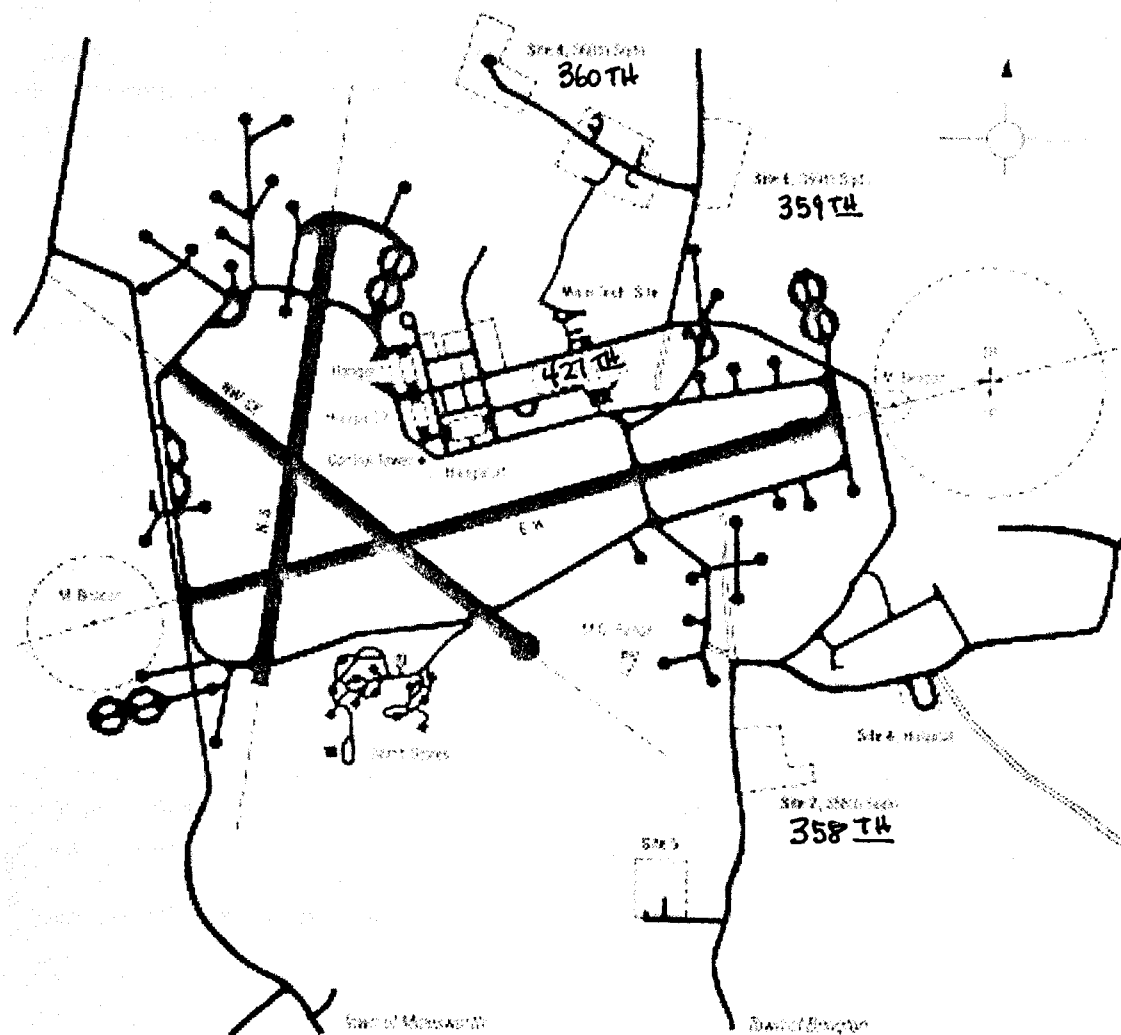


unit insignia is on the right. (2) Before continuing with Forrest's personal experiences, I feel it important to look at Molesworth Air Station and enlisted living conditions existing there at the time.

## Molesworth Air Station, England

Referring to the book Half a Wing, Three Engines and a Prayer, we find some interesting information. Molesworth Air Station was the home of the 303<sup>rd</sup> Bombardment Group (H), commonly referred to as "Hell's Angels." It was a typical Eighth Air Force bomber base as far as layout, facilities, etc. go. Taking its name from a nearby English village, it was officially known as Station 107 and was situated about 70 miles north of London in the midlands of East Anglia. It was surrounded by hayfields and contained within its spacious confines all the facilities and support units

necessary to service the Group's four B-17 squadrons—the 358<sup>th</sup>, 359<sup>th</sup>, 360<sup>th</sup>, and 427<sup>th</sup>. The base also served as Headquarters of the Eighth's 41 Combat Bomb Wing, comprising the 303<sup>rd</sup>, 379<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group located in Kimbolton four miles to the south and the 384<sup>th</sup> Group and Grafton Underwood, some eight miles to the west. (7:15)



Referring to the above map from the book Half a Wing, Three Engines and a Prayer, we see that from the air, Station 107's dominant feature was its triangle of three runways. This was to accommodate the large numbers of aircraft stationed here, along with the extremely high operations tempo. The 358<sup>th</sup> was located just to the south and toward the end of the primary, 7000 foot runway. Each squadron had its own support facilities and the typical air crew member had little reason to venture beyond the confines of his own squadron. It was here that Forrest began to settle in on 7 Oct 1943. (7:16)

Continuing with the account in Half a Wing, Three Engines and a Prayer, we learn of the living conditions for the aircrews. Some squadrons had steel Nissan nuts, but most

the barracks were long, low, drab-looking wooden buildings with crude doors that had antique hinges and hardware. Inside individuals were assigned beds with Royal Air Force (RAF) "biscuit" mattresses that came in three separate pieces. The men needed a blanket under them as well as over them to keep the cold air from coming in between the "biscuits." Two pot-bellied stoves provided heat with a four-day coal ration per week. The rationing often led some of the crew members to "midnight" coal requisitions. Out the back door of the barracks stood a latrine in a separate building and close by was the bomb shelter: a dugout with a mound of sod-covered dirt rising to about six feet. (7:15,16)

Privacy in the barracks was also a rare commodity. In Half a Wing, Three Engines and a Prayer, again we find that the officer and enlisted barracks structures were built just alike and close to each other. The major difference was the enlisted were in one big room with a small room at the end for the barracks chief. Men from two crews shared each building. This compared to the officer barracks where the men were divided into four-man rooms. Each aircrew, consisting of a pilot, co-pilot, navigator and bombardier occupied one of these rooms. Although not a factor in privacy, each one of these rooms had its own stove. (7:16) Guess who stayed warmer at night?

After arriving at Molesworth Air Station, Forrest states in his personal interview he received a quick initiation into what war was really like. He was assigned a bed in the barracks, where he met a man on his right, one on his left and the guy in front of him. These same three men left on a mission the next day and Forrest never saw them again. They never returned from the mission. (4:69) From what I've learned about the barracks layout, I can assume these men were to be a part of Forrest's crew in the future, but they were never able to serve together. The significance of seeing three of your future comrades declared missing or dead the first day of assignment must have been tremendous. Continuing on with the personal interview we find about a week later [although I believe it to be a month later], Forrest was assigned his first mission and right away he knew "he was involved in a very, very dangerous situation." (4:69) With these conditions in mind, we'll now turn back to his experiences in the ETO prior to 20 Dec 1943.

## **Chasing Ghosts**

As stated previously, Forrest arrived in the ETO at Molesworth Air Station on 7 Oct 1943. Things get a bit confusing here with this data. His original military resume states he did arrive on this day, (9) but 358<sup>th</sup> Personnel Rosters don't actually list an arrival date. (11) Also, in Part V, Section Two, Awards and Decorations records from the 358<sup>th</sup> we find him receiving his first Air Medal on 2 Aug 43, his second on 26 Aug 43 and his third on 4 Oct 43. All three of these dates seem to be prior to his actual arrival. (1) To confuse things even more, O'Neill states in his book Half a Wing, Three Engines and a Prayer Forrest was on a mission to Bremen, Germany on 26 Nov 43 when his actions led to the award of an Air Medal. (4:149)



The mystery surrounding his military activities prior to 20 Dec 1943 continue with the actual missions. From my research it's apparent crew integrity was maintained as much as possible. As air crews became familiar with each others actions and personalities, they were better adjusted to mission accomplishment. Each one knew the other's abilities and how they reacted in a given situation. The officer component of the team even bunked together in their own four-person room and the enlisted component also bunked adjacent to each other in their barracks.

Once again referring to Half a Wing, Three Engines and a Prayer, O'Neill states the following when describing the events of a mission to Bremen, Germany on 26 Nov 1943. "Lt John Henderson's crew was also having a rough time. The two waist gunners, Moody and Burkart, passed out during the battle due to an oxygen system failure. From the radio room, Sgt Vosler saw they were out and rushed back to revive them with portable oxygen bottles; he earned an Air Medal for his actions." (7:149) I cross-checked the date of these events to 358<sup>th</sup> War Diaries and found there was a mission to Bremen that day. Thirty-six aircraft from the 303<sup>rd</sup> took off, but none of the 358<sup>th</sup> aircraft list Lt Henderson as the pilot. In fact, there's no other mission with Henderson listed as a pilot prior to 20 Dec 43. (16)

Is there an explanation for these mysteries? After researching information on Forrest Vosler for the past three weeks, I have found O'Neill's research to be reputable and his facts exceptionally accurate. I also think it safe to conclude the 358<sup>th</sup> Awards and Decorations records are inaccurate as far as Forrest's Air Medal award dates are concerned. I doubt he received any of these awards while assigned to Pyote AAF, Texas and no other records indicate he did.

Next, the crew integrity issue and mission record discrepancies, as far as Lt Henderson are concerned, are more difficult to explain, but not impossible. In his personal interview, Forrest states he was on the Fortress *Hell's Angels* for his first mission. (4:83) According to 358<sup>th</sup> Statistical reports, *Hell's Angels* was one of the original 358<sup>th</sup> aircraft. (13) War Diaries also indicate the first mission to Bremen, Germany that *Hell's Angels* participated in after Forrest's arrival was 26 Nov 43. (16) The same report indicates Capt Hungerford was the pilot. This mission was 24 days prior to the 20 Dec 43 mission where Forrest earned the Medal of Honor.

Along with this, when we look at the crew for the 20 Dec 43 mission, according to O'Neill, we find Capt Hungerford on board as an Instructor Pilot. (It's possible the same crew compliment flew on 26 Nov 43 as did on the 20 Dec 43 and here's why. Referring again to the personal interview with Forrest we find he only remembers his first and last mission, but he was on a total of four. (7:83) On 29 Nov 43, Capt Hungerford was the pilot of record for the *Connecticut Yankee* on a mission to Bremen, Germany and on 3 Dec 43, he was listed as the pilot of record for another B-17, number 42-3448. This aircraft isn't listed in the 358<sup>th</sup> Statistical Reports for some reason. This is likely a misprint and it could have been *Sky Wolf*, since a picture in O'Neill's book shows

Forrest and his crew posed in front of it. Hungerford is also listed as pilot of record for the *Jersey Bounce, Jr.* on 20 Dec 43, not Lt Henderson.

With the information in the last paragraph, it's probable and highly likely these four missions were the ones Forrest participated in. It's also probable the same crew members were together for the missions as well. As for the Air Medal issue, I've address it later in this paper. Well, enough of chasing ghosts! Someone else can take up the challenge from here. Let's get back to the facts and events leading up to Forrest's actions that later earned him the Medal of Honor.

### **The Jersey Bounce, Jr.**

As with any other daylight mission, it started early. The wake-up call came at 0430. Winter mornings were always cold and damp in England, and I'm sure climbing out of the sack was not a welcomed event. Everyone waited for news of the day, but they never had to wait long. The mission was soon officially declared a go and as word circulated throughout the squadron, tension built as launch time approached. Thoughts of never returning were prevalent, but there was always plenty to do to keep minds occupied. There were mission briefings to attend, chapel services to participate in, and aircraft to prep and declare air worthy. Forrest and his crew would be flying the *Jersey Bounce, Jr.* on this mission. Whether they had flown in this particular aircraft before is another one of those mysteries, but suffice it to say she was a 'tough old bird.'

According to 358<sup>th</sup> Statistical Reports *Jersey Bounce, Jr.*, a B-17F Flying Fortress, aircraft number 42-29664, was assigned to the 358<sup>th</sup> on 23 Mar 43. And, in case you might be wondering, there was a *Jersey Bounce (Sr.)*. It, too was assigned to the 358<sup>th</sup>. It's listed as one of the original squadron aircraft and was transferred (where, I don't know) on 26 Jul 43. (13) The *Jersey Bounce, Jr.* was a veteran of the skies, with many previous missions under the command of several pilots.

The 358<sup>th</sup> War Diaries list the *Jersey Bounce, Jr.* as having completed 28 missions from 31 Mar to 26 Nov 43 under command of nine different pilots. The most were flown by Capt Nolan. He logged seven missions in this particular aircraft, and Lt Lemmon logged a total of six. The rest of the pilots logged between one and four missions. There are no other missions recorded between 26 Nov and 20 Dec 43. (16) It's possible battle damage or scheduled maintenance kept it out of action during this time. Twenty-eight missions was a significant accomplishment for one aircraft, especially during this period of daylight bombing raids and high operations tempo.

As you can see, the *Jersey Bounce, Jr.* was a tough aircraft and her crew were counting on her "thick skin" to get them to the target, complete the mission and return them home safely. But it would take more than bolts and metal to get them through the day and back to their home base.

## **Bremen, Germany, 20 Dec 43**

The mission to Bremen, Germany on 20 Dec 1943 was one of the toughest the 358<sup>th</sup> had experienced to date. It wasn't the first time bombers set their sites on this target and the Germans were ready for them. According to 303<sup>rd</sup> Narrative Report of the Mission of 20 Dec 1943, 20 aircraft were dispatched to attack Bremen, Germany. Nineteen B-17 aircraft carried 42 M47A1 incendiary bombs and one carried 28 M47A1 bombs and two boxes of leaflets. All planes were airborne between 0820 and 0834. (6) Squadron Mission Reports state eight of the B-17s were from the 358<sup>th</sup>. (8) The Mission Report goes on to say the bombers crossed the English coast north of Great Yarmouth at 1040 hours and went inland at 1106 hours. Bombs away were reported at 1143, low group, and the planes returned to Marmouth between 1450 and 1510. (5)

The 303<sup>rd</sup> Pro Report for the day gives us a first-hand account of what the mission was like. It states "Bremen again was subject to demolishing by the US AAF heavy bombers. This important large port in Northern Germany is becoming hamburgered by large formations of Flying Fortresses dropping their destruction to carry on the elimination of the German war machine. Unlike the last few times our big bombers went to Bremen, today's mission proved to be one of the roughest our crews had been on. Flak has generally been very intensive over Bremen, but today the combination of flak and German fighters did their best to prevent our formation from bombing. They were not successful."

"The weather was extremely cold and contrails were persistent and plentiful, giving the German fighters the advantage of sneaking through to attack the bombers. Approximately 100 Nazi fighters were observed. They were FW-190s, ME-109s and JU-88s. They did not make their attack until the planes were over the target and, despite the escort of P-47s and P-38s, were able to come through the formation to attack. The attack did not last long but while it lasted they poured everything they had at our ships. After a squadron would come in and get out, twin engine rocket ships would keep out level with the formation and lob their projectiles at the formation. It was a terrific battle while it lasted, but the bombs landed right on target. Visibility was excellent and the planes made a perfect bomb run. All the crews were unanimous in their opinions of the excellence of the bombing." (5)

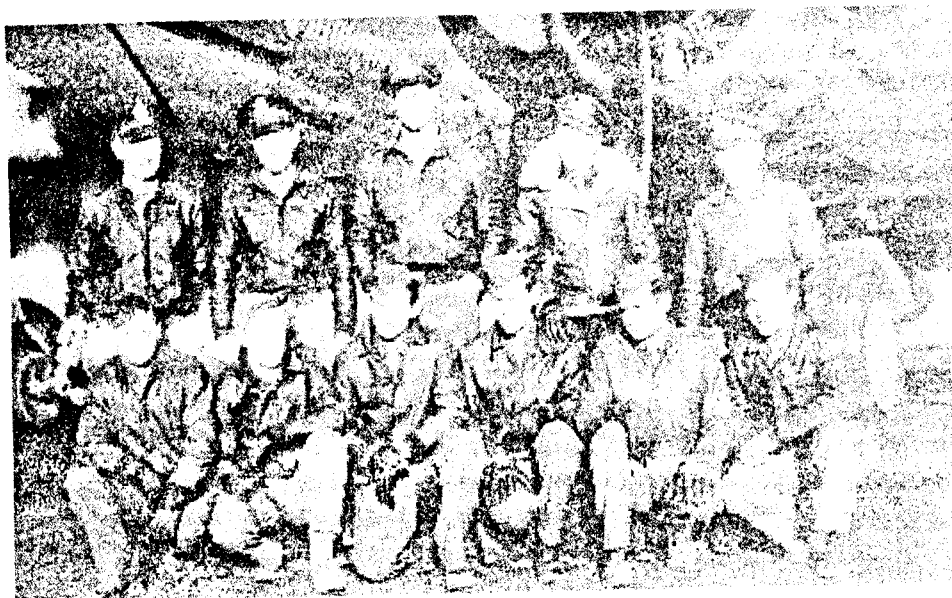
The 303<sup>rd</sup> Mission Summary for the day also confirms the severe enemy resistance and adds the following details. "The attacks [of German aircraft] were particularly viscous and persistent as soon as the fighter support left us. The attacks started at 1118 hours and continued to 1216 hours for a total time of 58 minutes."

"Attacks were made by rocket-firing ME-210s and JU-88s from six o'clock level at 1000 yards. Me-210s dropped bombs about the size of a dynamite stick from 500 feet above. They were dropped when the plane dipped its nose. All sticks exploded at once. Attacks were made in squadron formation from two o'clock high on one aircraft. These enemy aircraft pressed the attack to within 100 yards. Two attacks were

reported as coming from three o'clock level. T/E fighters continued their attacks into the target area. One aircraft reported enemy aircraft flying in formation about 100 yards out and then pressing attack and breaking down under our aircraft to the other side and continuing same tactics. The attacks from the side were made in pairs and sometimes in groups of three or four."

"It is believed that new defenses have been moved into the Bremen area. There were extra large black cloud bursts reported that seemed to roll like clouds. Some bursts appeared to roll in huge billows of smoke such as from oil fires. Spinner flak was reported in the target area." One of the pilots was "very insistent that the anti-aircraft defenses at Bremen have been considerably increased and believes definitely that the anti-aircraft defenses between Bremen and Wilhelmshaven have been definitely increased." (5)

We refer back to Half a Wing, Three Engines, and a Prayer to discover a dramatic event during the mission described above involving Forrest, his crew and their B-17F Flying Fortress, *The Jersey Bounce, Jr.* "One of the bombers the Germans couldn't stop was the *Jersey Bounce, Jr.*, flown by Lt John F. Henderson's crew in the number four position of the lead squadron." (7:190)



As seen in the picture above, the crew for the *Jersey Bounce, Jr.* for 20 Dec 43 consisted of bottom row L-R, Sgt William H. Simpkins, engineer/top turret gunner; Sgt George W. Buske, tail gunner; Sgt Stanley N. Moody, right waist gunner; Sgt Forrest L. Vosler, radioman; Sgt Ralph F. Burkart, left waist gunner; Sgt Edward Ruppel, ball turret gunner. L-R, top row, Capt Merle R. Hungerford, Instructor Pilot; Lt W. J. Ames, co-pilot (not on this particular mission); Lt Henderson, pilot; Lt Woodrow W. Monkres, bombardier; and Lt Warren S. Wiggins, navigator.

Please note the following mission account of *The Jersey Bounce, Jr.* and her crew on 20 Dec 1943 was taken from Half a Wing, Three Engines, and a Prayer. It was derived from personal interviews with surviving crew members in 1989 and 303<sup>rd</sup> historical records located in the USAF Historical Research Agency.

Forrest Vosler begins: "We encountered flak as we entered the perimeter of Bremen. It was the usual, terrible heavy flak, and just before we dropped the bombs, we were struck by some anti-aircraft. We managed to keep up with the formation long enough to drop the bombs on the target. Then, in our 180-degree turn, we were hit hard again and lost a considerable amount of altitude."

"I couldn't see any parts of the aircraft that were damaged. From where I was in the radio room, the only thing I could see, basically, was the vertical and horizontal stabilizer. All I knew was that we had lost an engine—you could tell from the lack of noise in the aircraft—and that we were losing altitude."

From the ball turret, Ed Ruppel was in position to see more. "Right after we came up on the bomb run, we got a heavy hit on the left side of the ship by flak. I knew we were hit hard. I could see holes in the wing, but nothing hanging down. I did see that number one engine was on fire, and called in the intercom, "Pilot, number one is on fire!"

Henderson said, "I know, sergeant!"

Ruppel continues, "I moved the turret and checked the bottom of the ship to see the other engines. I called back to Henderson again and said, 'Everything else appears to be OK, but number one is still on fire.' "

"He said, 'I'll put it out!' and he rolled over on the left wing and started down. I saw the cowlings flaps open on number one as we were going down and the fire blew out, but then we had problems with number three engine. Smoke was coming out, the fan was turning, but she wasn't putting out any power. I knew it was going to be hell from here on in. When you fell out of formation, that's when the German fighters really went after you."

In the top turret, Bill Simpkins also knew it was going to be rough. "The minute you fell out of formation you were going to have fighters all over you, 'cause they liked to prey on the single aircraft, naturally. It was just a matter of time before they jumped us."

It was just a matter of time, and as Henderson's crew waited, Vosler and Ruppel got some glimpses of what lay in store. Vosler next observed, "Two other aircraft were damaged off the back of the aircraft. They were at a higher elevation than we were, and were being attacked by fighters. One of them clearly just blew up, disintegrated and went down. Of course I tried to strain to see if I could spot anybody exit from the aircraft, because you wanted to report this when you got back on the ground. I didn't see any such thing, but I was limited to a very short period of time before the plane fell below my line of site."

Ruppel remembers that "as I glanced off to my right, I could see four or five B-17s being attacked by fighters. There was one B-17 that was pretty close to us. They cut

one of his wings off and he went into a tight roll. Then they went after the others. They just kept pecking away until they got them all. They chopped up one ship, and another, they hit a third one and then they went to work on a plane over to our left and cut him all up."

"I knew people were in there. I hoped like anybody else that chutes would show, but I had no feelings toward them. I knew that when the fighters were finished with them we were next, and I was concerned about myself. When we pulled out of our dive we were down somewhere around 15,000 feet and it seemed like the entire German Luftwaffe was down there with us. They were single-engine fighters, 109s and 190s."

Things happened with enormous speed after this. The crew later reported that the Germans got Sgt George Buske, the tail gunner, on their very first pass. Bill Simpkins remembers him saying on the intercom, "I'm hit," and it appears that this first attack was the one that also wounded Forrest Vosler.

Forrest continues, "Almost immediately, there was a sound like someone throwing rice on the aircraft. There was a lot of shrapnel coming through the aircraft. I don't know where it came from, but to the best of my belief it was pieces of our aircraft. A 20mm shell from a fighter apparently exploded near our B-17 and the shrapnel sprayed up from the rear. I was hit in both legs. At this point I hadn't shot at any fighters. I hadn't seen any."

"I stood there for a few moments terribly scared. When I got hit it just felt like 'hot lead' right out of 'Dick Tracy' and the comics. I could also feel the blood flowing down my legs."

"Several things went through my mind. One of them was that there was no question about my getting the Purple Heart. My next thought was that 'This is very serious business I'm in, and I've got to do something to protect myself or I'm not going to make it.' Survival is paramount to anybody in combat, so I immediately sat down in my chair to try to avoid being hit again. I figured I'd got an armor-plated chair and it curled up around my back."

"And as I sat there contemplating my next move, I thought how silly my actions were, because I didn't know where the next bullets were going to come from. I had to have the chair facing the right direction, or this wasn't going to work. It wasn't going to stop any bullets. So I figured, 'If this is the way it's going to be, at least I'm going to die standing up. I'll do the job. I might just as well get up because I'm not going to protect myself with the chair. This is stupid.' So I got up, grabbed a hold of the machine gun, charged the gun and got ready to fire." (7:190-192)

To understand Forrest's position with the guns, let me take a moment to explain a portion of the B-17 layout. The radio equipment compartment was located behind a bulkhead immediately aft of the top turret and bomb bay. Through the rear door of the

radio room were the left and right waist gun positions. From his position in the radio room chair, all Forrest had to do was get up and take a few steps to the waist gun positions just behind him, if necessary. There was also a hatch above the radio room and a single gun mount where the radio operator could assist other gunners during aerial attacks. In all, there were 13 guns on a B-17. After all, it wasn't called a *Flying Fortress* for nothing.

Continuing on with O'Neill's account of the mission we find that by this time Ed Ruppel, ball turret gunner, and Bill Simpkins, engineer and top turret gunner were already engaging the enemy. Ruppel clearly recalls one single-engine fighter that "made a bottom attack from tail to nose. He came closer in than he should have, and he turned over in a half-roll and started to go down. As I brought the ball around on him he was already in the roll, and the gunsites being what they were, I couldn't frame him, and didn't have a chance to fire. He was going to fast. He was the only one I saw coming from below. All the rest of the attacks were from above."

There were more than enough fighters for Bill Simpkins in the top turret. He remembers them "queuing up eight or nine at a time up at ten o'clock and coming in on them. They came in one right after another. I was lining up and shooting at them. I don't know how many I hit. You didn't have time to count. They were sneaking up from behind, too, and I got a glimpse of Vosler firing. But I couldn't see much more than his head and shoulders out the top of the radio hatch."

Then I was called back to the waist to help get first aid to Buske. Ralph Burkart, the right waist gunner, called me back and Moody, the other waist gunner took my place in the top turret. I headed back, and when I saw the tail I saw Buske was slumped over the guns. A 20mm had come right through the armor plate. His flight suit was torn open and I could see where he got hit, right in the stomach, up front. He was bleeding pretty bad."

"I dragged him back past the wheel well, almost up to the waist where the gunners were. I gave him a double shot of morphine. Burkart was helping me, and he handed me the morphine. It was frozen, so I put it in my mouth— that's how you warmed it up—and I gave it to Buske. Then I put a compress bandage on him. Ralph handed me that, to, and I did the doctoring. Buske was lying here unconscious. I worked on him automatically. It was something you did. If a man was wounded, you helped him. He'd do the same for you." (7:191)

During his personal interview with Major Katz, Forrest said he was the only first aid man on the crew. He mentions providing first aid to Buske. He recalled Buske's "intestines were shot and they were hanging out.... I tucked them in with his flying jacket...." (4:73)

Forrest also mentions he didn't actually crawl back to the rear of the plane to rescue the tail gunner [Buske]. From my research, I have found this action to be part of most accounts of his heroic actions on 20 Dec 43. Forrest himself proves this particular

portion of these accounts false. In the same interview as above he said, "I didn't crawl back [to the back to rescue Buske]. That's the first mission. The first mission was harder than the fourth mission; same target, too, incidentally. I saved two lives on the first mission. I actually did go back and bring them to. They had run out of oxygen. They were both out; they were cold. This is at 32,000 feet. These guys were near death. I hooked them up to oxygen." (4:73)

Getting back to the battle, Sgt Stan Moody was hotly engaged in the top turret. At 1200 hours he spied and ME-110 flying "parallel at nine o'clock, about 800 yards out" and he opened fire with a long burst. He reported that "black smoke came out and the enemy aircraft went down end-over-end out of control." Sgt Rupert confirmed, and Moody was given a "probable."

Five minutes later Moody scored again. The crew told the interrogator that an "ME-109 came in at about two o'clock, dropped down under the wing, came up at three o'clock and came in. The top turret gunner opened fire first at 800 yards, then again at 400 yards. The enemy aircraft nosed over and went down." Burkart reported a chute coming out and moody got credit for a kill. (7:192)

It was standard procedure during post-mission interrogations to report types and numbers of enemy aircraft hit and/or destroyed. They were listed as either "probables" or "kills," depending on whether the crew could confirm just damage or actual destruction. A damaged plane could possibly return to its base for repairs, whereas an actual kill was one more loss for the Germans. Anytime a pilot was seen ejecting, the plane was always listed as a "kill." Not too many planes can land themselves.

Post-mission interrogations were also very thorough. From 358<sup>th</sup> War Diaries we find very detailed information about the types of enemy aircraft, numbers of enemy "kills" and "probables" and tactics. (16) This information was used to train for future missions. Although not listed in the bibliography for reference, the 303<sup>rd</sup> and 358<sup>th</sup> records contain actual training dates, times and subjects covered. Heavy bombing during WWII was the first of its kind and everyone took full advantage of every piece of information available to improve overall operations. Evasive maneuvers and enemy aircraft capabilities were vital to future mission successes and survivability planning.

Once again, we return to first-hand accounts of this particular mission as recorded by O'Neill. In the same minute, Sgt Burkart also got a kill. An ME-210 "came in at five o'clock level" and he "opened fire at 6-700 yards. At 400 yards the right wing of the enemy aircraft came off and the plane went down in flames."

Ed Ruppel confirmed and he recalls the details. "The other boys were calling fighter attacks out. When I heard where they were coming from, I immediately moved the turret over there to try to find them. You didn't look through the scope to see them. You looked through the side shields of the turret in front, the two little windows on the sides, to pick them out."



"Burkart called out an ME-210 and said he was quite a ways off. He was going to let him come in a little bit more. I was waiting and waiting and didn't see nothin', and all of the sudden I saw the aircraft coming down kind of on a tumble, wing over wing. The right wing was busted off and he started to break up. The pilot could never have made it out. I called Burkart and said, 'You got 'em!' "

The fight went on and five minutes later Bill Simpkins scored from the left waist. He doesn't recall the incident, but the crew reported an "FW-190 came in to attack about ten o'clock a little above and then it went in at the waist. The enemy aircraft came in to 150 yards. Left waist gunner opened fire with long bursts at 150 yards. Enemy aircraft caught fire, smoke came out and it went down in a tumbling spin, flames all around." Both Moody and Ruppel confirmed and Simpkins got a probable."

Bill Simpkins does recall returning to the tail and getting on the intercom to help Henderson evade attacks from the rear, and it was probably while he was here the climax of the fight occurred. It took place during moments of give-and-take in battle that were the most significant of Vosler's 20-year-old existence. He remembers them in the following way.

Forrest begins, "A twin-engine fighter came up the back. Apparently at this point the tail guns had been shot out and there was no one at the waist guns either. So this left the entire rear of the ship vulnerable except for my one single .50 in the radio compartment."

"When this plane came up in back of the B-17, he was so close I could actually see the pilot's face. I would have recognized him again on the ground. He was just off the tail, and had throttled back, and could have knocked us down any moment. He could have easily killed me. I was looking right down the barrel of a 20mm cannon. I could see the lands and grooves of the gun, that's how close he was. If he had had any cannon ammunition, it would have been all over.

"My first burst knocked pieces on the left side of his wing off. I was actually after the engine or the pilot. I moved the gun rapidly over to try to get him. I was firing as I turned, and I went right across the stabilizer [of his B-17] and put a hole in it, because this gun had no stops. Our plane seemed to be flying all right, so I didn't bother Henderson with a little thing like my hitting the stabilizer."

"I never saw anybody in my life so scared as that German pilot. He turned white when I was firing, and he dove. Had he stayed there a second longer he'd have been a dead pilot, because I was a pretty good shot. I was after the pilot at this point, not the engines. He was a very lucky man."

"I radioed the ball turret gunner to confirm if I got the aircraft or not. There was a big plume of smoke as he dove the aircraft; that was normal when the Germans poured the

fuel to their engines, so I assumed the pieces knocked off his wing would not be critical." (7:193)

The enemy "probables" and "kills" are also confirmed by the 358<sup>th</sup> War Diary for that day. "Sgt Moody (A/C 664) probably destroyed an ME-109; Sgt Burkart (A/C 664) destroyed a ME-210; Sgt Simpkins (A/C 664) probably destroyed a FW-190...." (16) Forrest was right when he assumed the enemy aircraft he damaged wasn't cause for a "probable" or "kill."

O'Neill continues quoting Forrest. "Within seconds after that I got hit again. This time it was much more serious. I got hit in the eyes, the chest and the hand. The strange part about it is that I had had goggles up on my head. I had pulled them down, and they immediately steamed up. I couldn't see clearly and I pushed them back on my head. I had no sooner put them back, when 'Snap!' I got hit in both eyes. I didn't know what hit me."

Forrest couldn't know, but Ed Ruppert later saw exactly what had happened to the crew's radioman. One glance told him the whole story. "Vosler had a flex-held [non-rigid mount] .50-caliber machine gun. A 20mm shell [from the enemy aircraft] came down the side of his gun till it hit the breach, and that's when she exploded. The cover to the breech was completely blown open, and the gun was black with soft powder from the headspace to the tail of the breech. So I know that's where the 20mm exploded. Vosler must have been bent down over the gun to fire when the shell exploded."

"He was shrapnel from his forehead to his knees, everywhere. There was blood all over him, coming from all those little shrapnel cuts. There was no one place where you could put your hand and stop the blood. I knew he was hit bad in the eyes, too, because I could see the white stuff running down below one eye and onto his cheek."

Vosler recalls his initial reaction to this second, terrible blow. He thought, "This is a heck of a place to hit somebody, this is not really playing fair. They're not playing the game right, hitting a guy in the eyes. I couldn't see well, but when I moved my hand to my chest where I'd been hit—I was trying to open my jacket to find out how badly—I noticed that my hand was shaking. I couldn't control it. Then I reached up and dragged my hand across my face to see if there was blood, and when I looked at it my whole hand was covered with blood."

"The shell fragments had damaged the retina of my eye, and I was seeing blood streaming down the retina *inside* my eye, thinking it was on the outside. So my natural feeling was that I had lost the whole side of my face. Having had a lot of first aid experience, I realized you could have this happen, and the shock would be so great that you wouldn't feel the pain."

"Also, I didn't realize that I had been hit in the hand. It was bleeding profusely, but I didn't feel this injury. The shell fragments had gone through all four pairs of gloves I was wearing. But I thought I only had half a face."

"I became extremely concerned. I was out of control, really. Obviously I wasn't going to have a chance to get out of this thing now. I knew I was going to die. I knew my life was coming to an end. The fear was so intense, it's indescribable, the terror you feel when you realize you're going to die and there's nothing you can do about it. So I started to lose control, and I knew then that I was either going to go completely berserk and be lost, or something else would happen."

"And a strange thing *did* happen. I lived every day of my life. I relived my whole life, day by day, for 20 years. It put everything in perspective. For the first time I realized what a wonderful, wonderful life I had had. There were only a few days in my whole life that were bad, and I asked God to forgive me for those bad days, and thanked Him for the many, many wonderful days He had given me. I said, 'I'm not going to ask you for any more days. It's been nice.' "

"I have never again had that feeling of complete peace that I had at that moment. I only hope that before I die, I might experience that feeling of peace once again. I said to God, 'You've given me 20 years of life. I appreciate it. I thank you for it, and if this is the way it's going to be, I'm happy, let's go.' I even reached out my hand and said, 'Take me God, I'm ready.' " (7:194)

Forrest also relates the same story in his interview with Katz. During the interview he states he had no fear after this experience and had a smile on his face. He described his feelings as a "deep inner peace." (4:89)

Although ready to be taken by God to a heaven of rest from his labors, God apparently had more for him to do that day, and for many years to come. Forrest realized this after a few moments. He was still onboard the *Jersey Bounce, Jr.* He continues his personal account as recorded in O'Neill's book and Katz's personal interview.

"I was a little bit surprised and a little bit disappointed, actually, that God didn't take my hand, because I was ready to go at this point. It would have been selfish to ask for even five more minutes of life. But at the same time I became very content, very calm, very collected. I no longer feared death, which is a terrible thing to fear. And I slowly realized that if God didn't want to take me at that particular point, then I had to go on and do the best things I could do." (4:89 and 7:194)

## **Flight for Life**

There was still plenty to do if the *Jersey Bounce Jr.* and her crew were to make it back to England. Ed Ruppel recalls, "In the course of the combat we got two direct hits to the instrument panel. We couldn't tell whether we were flying sideways, upside down,

backwards, or what. So we hit the deck and started to come home that way. We figured we didn't have anything to worry about with enemy aircraft at that low altitude. We were down real low, still over Germany, and we picked up some small arms fire, but by the time they fired we were already gone."

"Nobody was saying anything, and I got out of the turret to see what was going on. Then the pilot asked us to throw everything overboard, to lighten the aircraft up, so we could get as much as we could out of it. People were throwing things out the rear of the ship to lighten the load." (7:195)

With no fighters around, there was no need for Bill Simpkins to remain in the tail of the plane, so he left his position to assist the rest of the crew in any way possible. O'Neill relates Simpkins' personal account of what happened next. "I went back from the tail up to the waist, and Ruppel was getting out of the ball turret about this time. We were unloading everything, trying to make the plane lighter and trying to make it home. We didn't know if we would ditch yet. We had two engines out, we were pretty low in altitude, and we were low on fuel too."

"I was on my way up to the cockpit. I helped get Buske to the radio room—we laid him on some life jackets—and I saw that Vosler had been hit. His gun was shattered. He had his back to me, and was standing up working the radio. I looked him in the face, and I saw there was stuff dribbling down his right cheek from his eye. He was in a daze, groggy. Visibly shook up. He wasn't normal."

"As we were throwing things out, he said, 'You're going to throw everything else overboard. Well, why don't you throw me overboard? I'm just extra pounds. Throw me out, too.' And he really meant it, just because he asked me more than once to throw him out. I didn't say anything, really. I just sloughed it off. I didn't take him real seriously, even though I knew he was getting serious about it."

Vosler offers this explanation for the extraordinary offer he made. "I was still worried about my face. I saw Simpkins, and I asked him if my face had been shot away. He told me no, that all I had was a little trickle of blood coming down my cheek, plus what I had smeared on it from my hand. Well, I didn't believe him. So I asked a couple of the others. They all assured me that my face hadn't been shot away, but I didn't really believe them."

"So when we were ordered to throw everything out of the aircraft, I figured if there wasn't enough to lighten the aircraft, why don't you throw me out? I figured I was pretty well shot up anyway, so it didn't make any difference whether they threw me out or not."

"Looking back, I suppose I was still a bit disappointed the God hadn't taken me, but I also think I wouldn't have dared have them throw me out. I don't know. It would have been kind of a traumatic feeling to get kicked out of the airplane without a parachute!"

Bill Simpkins proceeded forward and continues his account. "I continued up to the cockpit and met Monkres, the bombardier, heading back to the waist. We met in the bomb bay. As we crossed one another he saw that my flight jacket was all tore up from where shrapnel had hit me. I had picked up a piece of shrapnel in the back and it tore up my heavy sheepskin jacket. He thought I was hit much worse then I was. My hand was stiff, too, and I had it curled up in a fist in my glove. He thought it was frozen."

"When I got to the cockpit, I saw the copilot reading our instruments. They showed we still had fuel, but they couldn't tell how much. So I was doing the fuel transfer, jockeying the fuel in the tanks back and forth from one engine to another as they started to sputter. To do this, I went back towards the radio room. The fuel transfer valve was right behind the firewall of the bomb bay, right near the radio room."

By this time Ed Ruppel had also made it to the radio room, and had seen Vosler first-hand. He remembers that "When I came up out of the ball turret, Vosler was lying on the radio room floor. We helped him into his chair. We asked him if he could get a message out, and he said he could if we put the frequency meters in that he told us. There were metal boxes that you plugged into the radio to use different frequencies. There were three or four of us in there trying to help him get the radio so that he could make contact with the base. He told us where to put the 'freq meters' and we were pulling ones out and putting in the ones that he wanted, and he immediately went to the key and went to work. He didn't need to see to use it." (7:196)

Forrest adds the following to this particular part of the mission in his personal interview with Katz. "The wire that was on the key of the [radio] set had been blown off, so it was a matter of just telling somebody where to put the wire; you could do this by touch. There was no major repair involved....I could field-strip a 50-caliber blindfold. I could put it all back together blindfold. A radio is a little bit more technical; you can't do too much internally on a radio blind. I was lucky if I could do it with site." (4:69)

Continuing on with O'Neill's account, we get Forrest's first hand account of what happened next. "We struggled along, and by this time I could see some damage to the wings. There were holes in both of them as far as I could tell. I remember Henderson, the pilot, being concerned about keeping the airplane in the air. He told me that he needed to send out a distress signal, because there was no way he was going to make it to England. Would I send out a distress signal?"

"Although my vision was blurred, I could see that we were still over land. We did experience another set of flak over the coast, which I could hear. I'm not aware that it hit the aircraft, but it came awfully close. It was pretty dense, but we managed to get through it."

"I told the pilot that I would send out an SOS as soon as we reached some water, out of range of enemy territory. He said, 'I think you better send it now.' I said, 'Sir, let me

know when you're going down, and I'll send the SOS. When you can't keep the aircraft airborne, let me know. In the meantime, if you keep it up, let's not break radio silence."

"So I didn't break radio silence. I remember guarding very carefully the critical equipment for that SOS. I had one hand across the table guarding the receiver, and I had the other one guarding the transmitter, so the others wouldn't touch either piece of equipment. Over in another part of the radio compartment there were stacks of frequency modules that would not be needed. I already had the right module in for the SOS. The rest were thrown out by the other crew members, and in fact they threw out a lot of stuff. I had to watch them. They threw my shoes out, which I resented. I figured if we landed on land, how was I going to walk? I'm barefoot!"

The men did throw out plenty of things, but luckily there was still one gun onboard that was in the right place at the right time. As Ruppel recounts, "Coming up across the coast, there was an ME-109 out in front of us. All our guns in the back had been thrown out, even the tail guns, but Monkres still had his flex gun in the nose. I heard this rapid fire. He fired across the 109. It was making a nose attack, and then broke off. After that, Monkres disassembled his gun and threw it overboard."

"Later, when he came back to where we were, he said, 'I got about three or four good strikes off of that guy, and he pulled off to the right.' That fighter broke off, and never did come back. He didn't want anymore, but if he had come in any other way he could have chopped us up." (7:196)

A short time after this final enemy attack, the *Jersey Bounce, Jr.*, made it past the Western European coast and out over the North Sea. Lt Henderson was an excellent pilot and had somehow managed to keep the aircraft in the air all that distance. It's interesting to note that no one, in their personal accounts of the mission events, ever mentions Capt Hungerford. As an Instructor Pilot, he must have had some role in the action, but what, I just don't know.

We pick up once again with Forrest's personal account as recorded by Katz. "At that point [when the aircraft reached the North Sea] I sent out the SOS message at different speeds, and got an immediate response from England. They received my message, and asked me to give a holding signal for 20 to 30 seconds while they shot a true bearing on me. I responded and gave them the signal, and they came back, and gave a receipt on that one. They said they had my course, and asked me to transmit every 10 or 15 minutes so that later they could correct their bearing." (7:197)

Carrier wave (CW) radio communication was utilized most frequently at this time because of its ability to project greater distances than voice. Voice was limited to several hundred miles, while CW would stretch out to 1500 to 2000 miles using a lower frequency. This is why the frequency modules, or crystals as they're commonly referred to today, had to be changed before sending out an SOS. During the mission, pilots used voice communication (utilizing the very high frequency range (VHF)) to

maintain radio contact with the rest of the formation. For Forrest to contact headquarters at Molesworth, England, the crystals had to be changed to a lower frequency (high frequency range (HF)) for the Morse Code signal reception over the long distance.

Forrest mentions in his personal interview with Katz he was very proficient in Morse Code. He mentions he struggled with it for a time, to the point where his graduation from radio school was doubtful. Then, during the final test, it just came to him. He states, "I just wasn't getting it. I couldn't tell an A from a D or a D from a Z. I had one day; I was going to wash out... I thought, 'What the hell am I doing here anyway?' All the sudden, I began to write; automatically I was printing different characters, you know—A, D, Z, B—and I filled the whole page. I looked down; I couldn't believe it—that I was writing.... It just came. That night I went from four words a minute to 12 words a minute, and the next night I went from 16 to 20 words per minute, and in three days I was at 25 words per minute. I did have the natural ability, you see. It just did not come out until way late after listening to all that code." (4:66)

Again, we return to O'Neill's account and continue with Forrest's personal account of the events after he sent out the distress call. "I sent out two more messages after that, and the pilot informed the crew that we were going into the North Sea. Apparently, before we had to ditch, we had an Air Sea Rescue plane flying over and around the top of us, because the pilot called me up and notified me that Air Sea Rescue was over the top of us. And he thanked me for the SOS. We must have been in the air for some considerable time, at least 20 or 30 minutes [after the SOS transmission] for them to dispatch an aircraft out to us. We weren't very far off the coast [of England], probably 60 miles."

British Air Sea Rescue had sent four aircraft to intercept the *Jersey Bounce, Jr.* and her battered crew. Ed Ruppel remembers them well. "We were heading for what they called 'The Bulge of England.' When we got fairly close, an Anson came out and a Walrus. The Anson was a land-based plane, a twin-engine job, and the Walrus was a flying boat. And we had two 'Clip Nines' come out. These were marine Spitfire IXs with clipped wings. As we got closer to shore, we finally saw land, and it was a tossup whether we should try to land or set her in the drink. With our instruments all out, we figured the best thing to do was set her in the drink."

## Into the Drink

Three crew members remember getting ready to ditch. Simpkins states, "Everybody got in the radio room except the pilot and co-pilot. We were bundled up in there." Vosler recalls, "By the time everybody was in the radio room, lined up facing the front of the aircraft, it made a nice, compact group. We had eight people in there." Ruppel remembers, "Everybody got into position for ditching in the radio room. I was the last one to get down into position. Vosler was there at his desk, still banging away on the

radio. We didn't talk too much to him because you leave a man alone when he's doing his job, and I don't remember any conversations in the radio room at the time. All thoughts that the people in there had were kept to themselves, and I imagined a little prayer in there just at that time."

Vosler, who had already been through so much, believed "The men were all a bit upset, afraid they were going to die. They were really scared. I reassured them that they weren't going to die, that we were going to make it. I'm not putting them down, or anything, but they hadn't been through what I had. I had gone past them. I no longer feared death. All I could do was comfort them, saying, 'Don't worry, you're going to be all right. Don't worry about it. Relax.' " (7:197)

Forrest also notes this situation in his personal interview with Katz. He recalls, "They are all set for ditching. They are all backed up against the bulkhead. The lieutenant [who was only 19] reached up and took hold of my hand and said, 'Woody [Forrest's nickname], are we gonna be all right?' I said, 'You're gonna be all right; don't worry. You are gonna make it.' "

He continues, " 'How far are we from the water?' they just kept saying. I'm looking; I have no depth perception. If you had two eyes, you wouldn't be able to tell. I had put a pillow in front of my radio and braced my hands on the table. Of course, I've got the seatbelt on." (4:90)

Moments later they hit the water. All agreed on the details of the ditching. Bill Simpkins recalls, "We didn't bounce any when we hit the water. We slid right in." Ed Ruppel remembers, "There was a yawl and a trawler out there, and we made a pass in between them and came around and dropped a red flare to tell our escort we were going in. Henderson did a marvelous job. It happened real quick. He brought the plane right over the water, put the tail wheel down, and fishtailed right in. I heard the tail wheel go in. I saw it go down, but I didn't know we were really in the water until it splashed up from the ball turret in my face, and I tasted it and it was salty. I knew we were in the water then."

Ruppel continues, "It was about the smoothest thing you ever saw in your life. We had training on the ditching procedures, and it was amazing how it all came back. It all fell right into place like a million dollars."

Vosler, too, remembers, "They directed us to ditch ahead of this Norwegian trawler rather than having the Air Sea Rescue drop one of their rowboats with a motor in it. They thought it would be safer for the trawler to pick us up. The pilot was told to ditch ahead of the boat, or as near to the boat as possible, and they would come over and get us."

"The actual ditching procedure we did beautifully. He brought it in on the top of a wave; they had six-foot waves there, and he rode the plane in on top of one just like a surfer.



He read it perfectly. The plane stopped quickly, and at about 90 miles an hour, it was like hitting a brick wall. But no one was hurt." (7:198)

Again, referring to Forrest's personal interview with Katz, we find some additional details. Forrest relates, "Holy Mackerel! When that thing hit, it's like hitting a cement wall.... With all of these restraints I had on myself, I came that close to hitting my head even then. It's an awful shock. Boy, you are hitting that water, and it doesn't glide on the water. These people—I looked over and everyone on that ditch procedure was absolutely letter perfect. They didn't move that much [motion]. Everyone of them got up; there wasn't a scratch—perfect, perfect procedure. So training paid off again." (4:90,91)

Once in the water, it was imperative to get out of the plane as quickly as possible, while it remained afloat. Some exited out onto the left wing and others onto the right. It was easier for some than others, because of injuries and exit directions. Again, we are fortunate to have the personal accounts of those involved, thanks to O'Neill.

Ed Ruppel was one of those exiting to the left. He states, "I jumped out the hatch and somebody else helped me pick the raft up. We knew enough not to drag it across the wing, because there might be jagged holes that would put a hole in it. We put it in the water, and decided that we were going to shove off, and then we found out that we were still tied to the aircraft. And the next big joke was, 'Where's a knife?!' We all carried knives strapped to our legs to cut parachute cords. I had mine on me but I couldn't think of that. Finally somebody came up with a knife, and we cut the rope and drifted away. The Anson had marked the spot where we went in with a dye marker, and I saw the trawler coming right toward us. There was a big flare coming out of the bow. When it came alongside we motioned to take the other raft first, which had the wounded in it."

Simpkins was one of those exiting the starboard [right] side of the aircraft. It was here he witnessed another extraordinary act for a man as badly wounded as Vosler. He recalls, "When we came to a stop we all jumped out the hatch and got onto the wings. I got on the right wing with Vosler. I helped Buske out. He was still unconscious. We put him on the wing and went to get the life raft. And while we were doing this Buske started to slide down the wing into the water. Vosler grabbed him, and held him till we got ahold of him. Then we pulled Buske and got him into the life raft. By this time the ship was getting ready to go down. The tail was starting to stand up."

Vosler also recalls the incident well. He states, "I remember them all climbing out of the hatch. Some of them went on one side of the airplane, and some went on the other. We got the wounded tail gunner out. Somebody was going to help me out, but I said I thought I could boost myself out all right. I got up on the top of the fuselage, looked down, and Buske was slipping into the water."

"I yelled to the pilot, but I could see he wasn't going to respond fast enough. They had pulled the life raft out and it was floating on top of the wing, and Henderson was busy trying to cut the cord on the life raft so it wouldn't go down with the airplane. I knew Buske would be in the water in a fraction of a second. I would have to take action. So I jumped and held out my hand at the same time. I grabbed the antenna wire that runs from the top of the tail to just forward of the starboard radio compartment window. I prayed that it would hold, and I was able to grab Buske around his waist just as he was going into the water, sliding off the trailing edge of the wing. I was bent way over. (7:198,199)

Forrest adds to the urgency of keeping Buske out of the water in his personal interview with Katz. He states, "...I noticed the tail gunner was falling into the water. Even air is critical to that kind of wound." (4:77) It's apparent Forrest knew considerably more about the dangers of an abdominal wound than he mentions in earlier accounts. Salt water could have done more damage to the wound and jeopardized Buske's life even further.

He continues, as recorded by O'Neill, "If the wire had broken, both of us would have gone in the drink. It was under an awful strain, and I was yelling all this time. The rest of them responded and got both of us. At that point we all got into the life rafts. We were pretty close to the B-17 when it went down. I saw the whole front under water, and just a few minutes later, the tail went. So it was not up very long. And then there was nothing but ocean. (7:199) Forrest, in his personal interview with Katz, states the navigator noted it took only four minutes from the time the B-17 hit the water until it went completely under. (4:76)

It must have been difficult for the crew as they watched their 'ship' slip into its watery grave, never again to see battle. The *Jersey Bounce, Jr.* was a veteran, a true warrior of daylight bomb runs over the hostile skies of Germany during 1943. She had seen 29 missions under the command of 10 different pilots. Her name, probably taken from a popular dance at that time, would be scratched forever from the active roles of the 358<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron. Although she never made it home that day, she completed her final mission with dignity, and carried her battered crew to friendly waters where they could be rescued. She left behind a legacy that few other B-17s could match: she carried a future Medal of Honor winner. But although she was gone, the crew would never let her story fade. It's as remarkable today as it was almost 54 years ago.

## **Rescue**

With the crew in life rafts, and the *Jersey Bounce, Jr.* gone, thoughts turned to the rescue effort. O'Neill continues with Bill Simpkins' personal account. "We got the paddles out, and could see the cargo ship in the distance. We paddled alongside of it, and they grabbed us and got us aboard." (7:199)

Forrest also recalls the conditions in his life raft in his personal interview with Katz by stating, "I remember it was kind of uncomfortable. We had to stretch the tail gunner the length of the boat [raft] because of his wounds, and the rest of us had to kind of sit around the sides of the boat. I was sitting between his legs. My feet were dripping over the edge in the water. It was kind of an uncomfortable position. (4:77)

He then continues, as quoted by O'Neill, "The next thing I can recall is the ship we had ditched in front of steamed up to us. We promptly unloaded the tail gunner, and when it came my turn I managed to walk up the ladder. This was the first time I experienced real pain in my legs. I got up on the railing, and jumped down on the deck. A couple of sailors tried to grab me, and although my legs hurt, I thought I was all right, and pushed them aside and told them I could walk all right. I promptly went down in a heap on the deck. They stretched me out there, and I was terribly concerned about my vision, my eyes, and my face. It was very disturbing, because I felt I was really disfigured."

Ed Ruppel next states, "They threw us a rope [from the Norwegian trawler]. It landed across the top of our dinghy and we pulled ourselves over to them. They had a cargo net down over the side with half their crew to help us up into the boat. I never got my feet wet."

On board the trawler, Bill Simpkins recalls, "They had a doctor who worked on Buske. We were sitting in a cabin drinking some hot tea that they had given us, and the doctor came in and said Buske was in pretty bad shape. They kept us on the trawler for quite a while, and then we were transferred to a PT boat. They put Buske on a stretcher, and it was pretty straightforward. The trip back was routine, except that they had a fire in one of their engines." (7:199)

It seems a though there was no rest for the weary! Just when they thought things were getting better, potential disaster reared its ugly head once again. It had been this way since they first engaged the enemy on the way to Bremen, Germany earlier that day. It must have seemed like an endless day that simply just refused to roll over and die.

The fire made a greater impression on Ruppel, who, as recorded by O'Neill, recounts, "A British Air Sea Rescue, a PT boat, picked us up from the trawler. We were running on it for only three or four minutes when someone yelled, 'Fire!' I looked back, and one of the engines was fully ablaze. They put that out, worked on the engine a bit, and gave a revised estimated time of arrival (ETA). All day they kept revising the ETA later and later. I thought we would never get in."

For Forrest, the ride was an ordeal. He states, "I was given morphine against my wishes. The one thing I can recall about the ride was that it was terribly fast. I was up by the bow with my head facing astern and the boat was going at least 45 knots. It was an awful position. When the bow went up, the blood rushed to my head. It was miserable."

Ed Ruppel then recalls his experience with Forrest in the PT boat. He said, "On the boat he [Forrest] was down on the deck. The deck hands laid down some kind of canvas cover for him to lay on. And I went over and talked to him. Some more of that white stuff was running out of his eye, but when I asked him how he felt, he said, 'All right.' "

"The only thing he wanted was a drink. So I went down and found that the boat crew was breaking out tea and rum for us. I told Vosler, and he said, 'I'll take the rum.' That's the kind of guy he was, cocky as hell."

Ed continues, "They took us to a hospital at Great Yarmouth, where we spent the night. The next day we flew back to our own base. I didn't see Vosler until after the war, back in the States, and I never saw Buske again, though I was told he survived his wounds. For the rest of us, it was more missions." (7:200)

Forrest also confirmed Buske's survival in his interview with Katz. He also states in later years he lived in Syracuse, New York and Buske lived in Rochester, New York. He also states, "Early on, I got to meet him. They arranged a meeting because they knew he was there. It was quite disturbing, the meeting, and not very productive. He acted, and maybe justifiably, with some resentment towards me.... I know something about psychology and I understand what was going through his mind. He suffered a great deal, much more than I did physically. He almost died. He had many pints of blood, many transfusions. He had many, many punctures of shrapnel. Scars were enormous. He did pull through, but I'm sure he felt that I got all the honor, and he did all the suffering. Who is to say that I saved his life? That may kind of tick him off, too. Actually, who knows? Only God knows whether I saved his life or not, whether he had gone in the water or not. Stranger things have happened. You can't guarantee he was going to die if he went in the water, and he probably felt that, 'Here I suffered enormously, and this guy gets the medal, because of me.' " (4:80)

### **Hospitalization, Recuperation and Other Bits of Information**



Limited resources are available to tell a complete picture of Forrest's hospitalization and recuperation. (The picture at the left was taken sometime during or just after his hospitalization) There are a few press releases and newspaper articles in the personal history collection at the USAF Historical Research Agency. From them, I've been able to piece some facts together for a brief account of what he went through between 20 Dec 43 and May 1944.

Apparently, Forrest remained at the hospital in Great Yarmouth for a time while his wounds stabilized for transportation back to the States. I have no information about surgery, treatment or other care given while he was at Great Yarmouth. An entry on one of the papers in his personal history file at the USAF

Historical Research Agency shows he returned to the States 26 Feb 44. While still at Yarmouth, he was awarded the Purple Heart. I felt it important to include the citation.

Purple Heart, General Order 9, Headquarters 30<sup>th</sup> General Hospital SOS ETOUSA, 25 January 1944.

Forrest L. Vosler, 12168197, Staff Sergeant, 358<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron, 303<sup>rd</sup> Bombardment Group, Army Air Forces, European Theater of Operations, United States Army, for wounds received while participating in an aerial fight in the European Area 20 December 1943. Home address: Box No. 358, Libonia, New York. [I left the town spelling as listed, although it is really Livonia] (9)

From England, he was transferred to Deshon Army Hospital in Butler, PA for extensive treatment, then on to Valley Forge General Hospital on 2 Jun 44. (13)

While at Deshon Army Hospital, The Pittsburgh Press reported on 9 May 44 Forest was presented the Air Medal. It was presented at an outdoor ceremony by Col C. J. Gentzkow, commanding officer. (9) I don't know how many he'd received prior to this time and I also don't know which one this was, if there was more than one. With his wounds and hospitalization, this may be the actual presentation date for his initial Air Medal. Since I haven't included the citation for the initial one it thus far, this seems to be a good place for it. It also hints this may have been the only one Forrest received.

Award of the Air Medal, General Order #229, HQ 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force, 29 March 1944

Citation: For meritorious achievement, while serving as Radio Operator and Gunner of a B-17 airplane on a number of bombardment missions over enemy occupied Europe. The courage and skill which Sergeant Vosler displayed in performing his duties as radio operator and in defending his aircraft against enemy attacks set an example for his fellow crewmen. On the mission dispatched 26 November 1943, Sergeant Vosler was responsible for saving the lives of two of his comrades, who had lost consciousness from lack of oxygen. His actions under hazardous conditions reflect great credit upon himself and the Armed Forces of the United States. Entered military service from New York. (9)

Also, while at the Deshon Army Hospital he was promoted to Technical Sergeant sometime during March 1944. (9) With this 'other' information now included, I'll get back to Forrest's physical condition and treatment, based on what info is available to me on it.

After Forrest returned to the States, many newspaper articles allude to questions of whether he would ever regain his eyesight. This was highly publicized in a Phoenixville Newspaper, *New York Times*, *Stars and Stripes*, *Washington Post* and over Associated Press and United Press wire services. An article in the *Washington Post* on 24 Apr 44 reported the following results to the publicity. "It was first reported that Vosler had lost site in both eyes. Reading this, Mrs Pauline Venard, 25, University of California co-ed offered to have one of her eyes removed and transplanted to restore Vosler's site. Vosler scoffing at his own heroism, was almost speechless at the offer of a sacrifice which he regarded as far greater than his own." (9)

Fortunately for Mrs Venard, the transplant was unnecessary. An article in the Phoenixville newspaper (name and date unknown) reported why this was so. "Blind Sgt Forrest L. Vosler of Livonia, NY holder of the Congressional Medal of Honor, opened his eyes the other morning at Valley Forge General Hospital. [The Medal of Honor statement is false. The article contradicts itself later on] The mass of red, blue, green, purple and yellow colors in the Red Cross afghan lying across his feet startled him."

The article continues, " 'Gosh, they're bright,' he thought, 'just like a technicolor movie, much brighter than I remember and when I could see last December.' He could see now—as the doctors said he would. 'Now,' thought Vosler, 'he would be able to go to Washington to receive the nation's highest decoration from the hands of the President—maybe even accept Mrs Roosevelt's recent personal invitation to visit Hyde Park.' The nurse entered the ward. She looked much different that he had pictured her in his sightless mind when he was brought to Valley Forge on 2 June and his wounded, infected right eye was removed in the hope that the vision in the other would clear."

The article goes on to state the actions leading to his nomination for the Medal of Honor, then continues with his current condition. "The cataract which blurred his left eye was removed at the Deshon General Hospital, near Pittsburgh, PA and he could see light then, but it came and went. Then the morning came when he awoke and saw the riotous checkerboard of colors in the Red Cross Afghan. 'God sure was good to me,' Vosler said. 'I guess I won't see anymore fighting and I wish the war was ended, but I've got to help them out with their bonds drives and so on. I don't like being toted around as a hero, but if it helps the war, I guess it's the only thing left that I can do.' "

(13)

How long he stayed at Valley Forge General Hospital is uncertain. Time restraints once again have kept me from further research into his life after the 20 Dec 43 mission. Katz does state in his personal interview with Forrest he wore a prosthesis [artificial eye] until his death. (4:73) Again, I don't know when he actually received it. There is some information available about the Medal of Honor presentation, though, and I'll include it next.

## **The Medal of Honor**

Whoever started the Medal of Honor ball rolling for Forrest didn't wait too long after his heroic actions on 20 Dec 43. I don't who initiated it, but Ed Ruppel recalls how the crew first found out about it and some of his personal thoughts. We go back to O'Neill's book Half a Wing, Three Engines and a Prayer for Ed's personal account. He states, "A month or so after this mission, Major Black, our flight surgeon, came to us on the crew and said they took Vosler back to the States, and he thinks they're going to put him up for the Medal of Honor. Then one day Headquarters called us and asked us

to come over. We did, and that's when we were told they were putting Vosler in for the Medal."

"They asked us what went on, and we told them what happened. We were afraid of saying anything except what happened, because we didn't want to ruin his chances. Nobody can take away from you what happened. That mission has gone through my head many, many times, thousands of times, and I do think the man deserved the Medal for what he did." (7:200)

Forrest also gives us a personal account of receiving the Medal of Honor and why he didn't receive it until 29 Aug 44. In his personal interview with Katz he states, "The presentation was held up by President [Franklin] Roosevelt because of my blindness. I was totally blind, and he would not let General [Henry B.] Arnold present the medal. He said he wanted to it. General Arnold wanted to present the medal, which can be done with the President's permission. He absolutely refused to have General Arnold do it and said he wanted to do it himself."

"He [President Roosevelt] called my doctor in the hospital and asked the doctor if there was any chance that I would regain my vision. The doctor assured him that there was. He said, 'When he does, let me know.' I did regain the vision about the 25<sup>th</sup> of August, and he immediately summoned me to the White House—31 Aug 44." (4:81) Although Forrest states he went to the White House on 31 Aug 44, all my other sources state he received the Medal of Honor on 29 Aug 44. Specifically, an official memorandum from Lt Col Harold D. Krafft, Army Air Force Awards Board Recorder, to Col M. A. Libby at the Pentagon, dated 31 Aug 44 states Forrest was presented the Medal of Honor on 29 Aug 44. (9) Forrest himself admits at the end of the personal interview, "it was very long ago, and things get out of context; even with me they become hazy." (4:95)

Getting back to his personal interview, Forrest continues, "Roosevelt was a very, very interesting man. I had to ask what the protocol was when you met the President. They had looked all these things up. I had to be very careful; when you meet someone like that, you do the right thing. I was assured that all I did—you don't salute the Commander in Chief because he is a civilian, and there's no way he can return a salute—was to stand at attention. I was in uniform. I marched up to his desk and went into a brace. I'm shaking from my rear end down to my ----."

"He looked up and he said, 'Sergeant, come here; come around here.' So I walked around the desk. He said, 'You look kind of scared; I'm not going to bite you; just relax. I wanted to tell you something; I don't want the press people to hear it. First of all, I want to apologize for not being able to get up and give you this medal because I held it up, and I wanted to do it, but the doctor won't let me get up.' There was a doctor behind him. 'But I want to tell you why I did this [held up the presentation]. Come here.' I bend down and he said, 'Sergeant, I want to tell you something. I've given out a number of these medals. This is the finest one I've ever had the pleasure of presenting, and that's why I held it up. I wanted to do it myself.' "

"To this day I've never asked any of the other recipients that saw Roosevelt what he said; I don't want to know what he told them. That's their business. I thought that was quite an honor. Now whether he said it to all of them, I don't know, and I don't care. He said he had given out about 50. That was next to the last one he gave out. But he obviously had some reason. Of course, there were two reasons why Roosevelt held it up probably. Maybe what he said was true, and the next thing was that Roosevelt was a very sensitive man as far as afflictions were concerned, as far as physical disabilities were concerned. He just could not tolerate or stand the pain that would have caused him to have me walk in there blind, so that was one of the reasons he wanted it held up." (4:82,83)

During another part of the interview, Forrest had this to say about the Medal of Honor presentation and President Roosevelt. "Of course, it was a great, great thrill. There isn't a thrill in the world that can equal meeting the first man of any importance in your life. Roosevelt, particularly, was a master politician, particularly friendly, and particularly a nice man. I have met every President since Roosevelt, and there is no one that would ever take the place of the first President." (4:81)

Of all the research I've done for this paper, Forrest's personal account of his encounter with President Roosevelt during the Medal of Honor presentation ceremony and the actual citation itself have made a lasting impression. It's only fitting to include the Medal of Honor citation at this point.

Award of Medal of Honor, General Order #73, War Department, 6 September 1944

Citation: For conspicuous gallantry in action against the enemy above and beyond the call of duty while serving as a radio operator-air gunner on a heavy bombardment aircraft in a mission over Bremen, Germany, on 20 December 1943. After bombing the target, the aircraft on which T/Sgt Vosler was serving was severely damaged by antiaircraft fire, forced out of formation, and immediately subjected to repeated vicious attacks by enemy fighters. Early in the engagement a 20-mm cannon shell exploded in the radio compartment, painfully wounding T/Sgt Vosler in the legs and thighs. At about the same time a direct hit on the tail of the ship seriously wounded the tail gunner and rendered the tail guns inoperative. Realizing the great need for firepower in protecting the vulnerable tail of the ship, T/Sgt Vosler, with grim determination, kept up a steady stream of deadly fire. Shortly thereafter another 20-mm enemy shell exploded, wounding T/Sgt Vosler in the chest and about the face. Pieces of metal lodged in both eyes, impairing his vision to such an extent that he could only distinguish blurred shapes. Displaying remarkable tenacity and courage, he kept firing his guns and declined to take first-aid treatment. The radio equipment had been rendered inoperable during the battle, and when the pilot announced that he would have to ditch, although unable to see and working entirely by touch, T/Sgt Vosler finally got the set operating and sent out distress signals despite several lapses into unconsciousness. When the ship ditched, T/Sgt Vosler managed to get out on the wing by himself and hold the wounded tail gunner from slipping off until the other crewmembers could help them into the dinghy. T/Sgt Vosler's actions on this occasion were an inspiration to all serving with him. The extraordinary courage, coolness, and skill he displayed in the face of all odds, when handicapped by injuries that would have incapacitated the average crewmember, were outstanding. (10)





TSgt Forrest L. Vosler is pictured here just prior to or soon after discharge.

## Discharge and Civilian Life

After his eye injuries were completely healed and after being pronounced physically fit, Forrest was honorably discharged from the Army at Valley Forge General Hospital 12 Oct 1944. A article in the Phoenixville, PA newspaper that same day quoted Forrest as saying, "I feel like a heal. I'm getting out but other guys are staying in." The article goes on to say Sergeant Vosler will go on to Savanah, GA to take a job as a radio technician. He plans to go to college next year. (9)

Less than two years after his discharge, according to the Book Crusade for Airpower, Forrest became one of the founding fathers of the Air Force Association (AFA). On 24 Jan 46, Jimmy Doolittle became the first president of the AFA and Forrest was elected to the board of directors. The two of them, along with Willis Fitch, Tom Lampier, Jr., Meryll Frost, and Jimmy Stewart (the actor) traveled to the White House in early 1946 to meet with President Truman to discuss the future of the fledgling organization. (14:57) (See picture on next page) How long he remained an officer with AFA is unknown to me, but judging by his character and love of airpower and country, it would be easy to assume he remained a faithful member of AFA for many years to come.



Whether he actually went to Georgia or not as the article stated, four years later on 8 May 49, *The Sunday Star*, a Washington DC newspaper, ran an article that told the following about Forrest. "Mr Vosler now lives at Marcellus, NY and is employed by the Veterans' Administration at Syracuse. Before joining the VA he studied at Syracuse University and later took a job as a radio station engineer. While at the university, Mr Vosler married the former Virginia Slack of Springfield, VT. They have a daughter, 3, and a year-old son." (9)

Forrest went on to spend 30 years with the Veteran's Administration as a counselor and officer in charge. He held several offices and had a couple assistants working for him. He also said after retirement he missed interviewing the veterans. "Of course, I got to the point where I only interviewed the difficult ones," he said during his interview. (4:86)

After retiring from the VA, Forrest continued to enjoyed life to the fullest and continued his contributions to the military. I had the opportunity to speak with his wife Jenny, in 1992. She said they moved to Florida after Forrest's retirement. While here, Forrest participated in two personal interviews. The first was with Maj Katz in 1986, as listed in the bibliography. This was conducted as part of the US Air Force Oral History Program. The second was in 1989 when he was asked to appear with other Medal of Honor recipients in an ABC special presentation, titled Heroes. It aired that same year before a prime time viewing audience. When opportunity presented itself, Forrest was always ready to do whatever he could to promote the good life as an American citizen and fulfill what he considered his responsibility to the Medal.

### **America Looses one of Her Own**

Jenny went on to say they had a wonderful retirement life right up until 17 Feb 92, when he died. When asked, she mentioned she had no regrets for the type of life they had lived, nor did her husband. Soon after his death, the May 1992 issue of Sergeants magazine paid him a "Memorial Day Salute" with the following words:

"It is a tradition on Memorial Day for politicians and other self-styled orators to talk of patriotism. For many of them, however, patriotism is simply a word they pay lip service to on appropriate holidays and then relegate to their rhetorical dustbins during the rest of the year.

But American history had chronicled the lives of countless men and women of whom patriotism was much more than just a word. Many were warriors whose brave hearts were stilled while performing wondrous, seemingly super-human deeds in the searing cauldron of battle.

They looked upon patriotism, not as a mere word, but as an act of self-sacrifice, and act of unselfish devotion to comrades and country. Many now lie alongside their fellow warriors in the poppied fields of foreign lands or the gentle sloping hillsides of Arlington and similar national cemeteries. Others rest among family and friends in the numerous tranquil small-town churchyards of the nation they served so well.

But no matter where they lie, they are united in the common bond of the oath they swore when they entered the Armed Forces of the United States.

On this Memorial Day, let us remember two of the many heroes who faithfully fulfilled their oath to defend the Constitution and whose deeds and resolve will serve as a beacon to guide us in the treacherous times ahead.

One such hero was laid to rest not so many months ago on a bleak, late-February day in Arlington National Cemetery.

Once a technical sergeant in the World War II Army Air Corps, Forrest L. "Woody" Vosler was honored by family, friends and comrades-in-arms during a moving memorial service at Fort Meyer Chapel.

A Medal of Honor recipient, his flag-draped casket was carried by horse-drawn caisson to the national cemetery. Following the funeral ceremony and a haunting rendition of "Taps," Lt Gen Charles A. May, Jr., Air Force Assistant Vice Chief of Staff, presented the flag to Vosler's wife, Virginia.

Unlike scores of his fellow Medal of Honor winners who preceded him to Arlington National Cemetery, Vosler was granted full life before succumbing to a heart attack on February 17. He earned his country's highest award for heroism 48 years before in the flak-filled skies over Bremen, Germany."

The article continued with a brief account of his actions that earned him the Medal of Honor and concludes with the last line of the citation. "The extraordinary courage, coolness, and skill he displayed in the face of all odds, when handicapped by injuries that would have incapacitated the average crewmember, were an inspiration to all who

served with him.” (15:16) Forrest once said it was a great responsibility to live up to the Medal. And responsible he was! His entire life became a testament to what the Medal of Honor actually stands for.

## **The Memory Lives On**

When word of Forrest’s death reached the faculty and staff of the Peterson AFB NCO Academy in Colorado Springs, CO, they were touched. Later that day as we were together in one of the classrooms (I was an instructor there at the time), someone mentioned naming our new facility in his memory. The idea was met with instant enthusiasm and we began the necessary preparations to have it named after an enlisted hero.

The entire process took lots of time and work, but proved to be well worth it. On 9 Sep 92 the dedication ceremony took place under a crystal clear Colorado Day. Gen (ret) Thomas S. Moorman, Jr., Space Command Commander at the time and future Air Force Vice Chief of Staff, officiated and gave the keynote address. It was an moving ceremony with many local dignitaries attending. From that day forward, the Peterson NCO Academy would be known as the Forrest L. Vosler NCO PME Center.

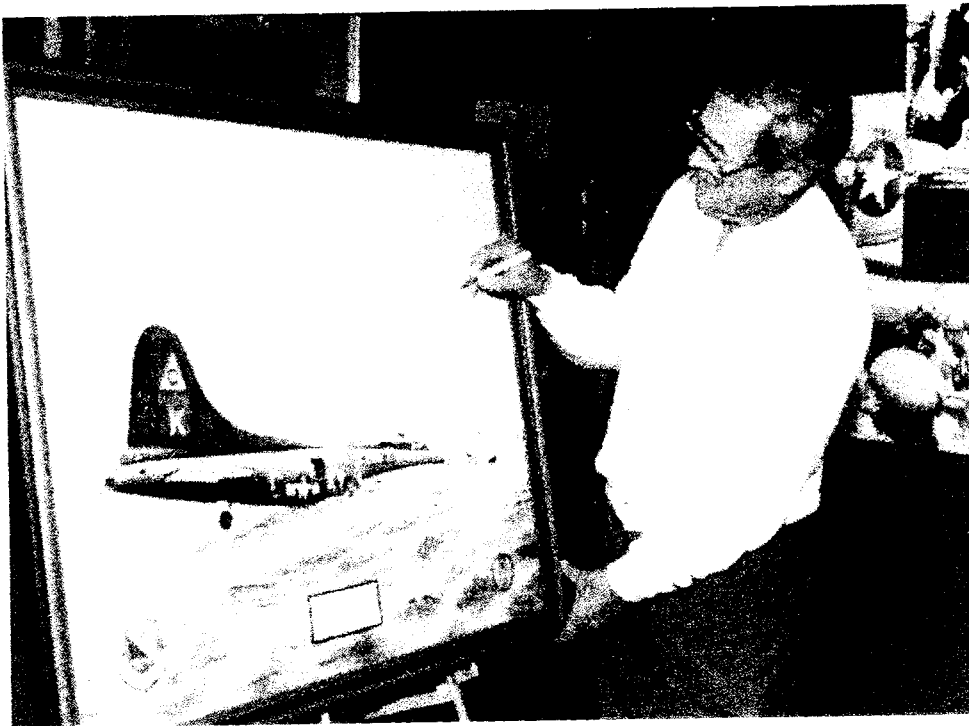
Fortunately for us and the occasion, Forrest’s wife, Virginia was able to attend the ceremony. Accompanying her was Forrest’s brother Col (ret) Cleon Vosler. I had the distinct privilege of serving as an escort for them during their two-day stay in Colorado Springs. Jenny, as Mrs Vosler preferred, was a delightful person who took time to talk with us about her years as the wife of a Medal of Honor recipient. Forrest’s love and respect for his wife were just as impressive as the rest of his life. It was a choice experience for me: one I will never forget.

The Vosler NCO PME Center stands as a monument to his life of great achievement, but it’s not the only facility named in his behalf. On 27 Oct 95, the 333 TRS Qualification Flight at Keesler AFB, Mississippi formally dedicated their OJT Center for Excellence in memory of Forrest. It now bears the name of the Vosler Academic Development Center. Attending the dedication ceremony were Col (ret) Cleon Vosler and his two sisters. Brig Gen Karen S. Rankin and Col Vosler performed the ribbon-cutting ceremony. As Forrest emphasized the importance of training throughout his life, it’s fitting to have two important training centers named in his behalf.

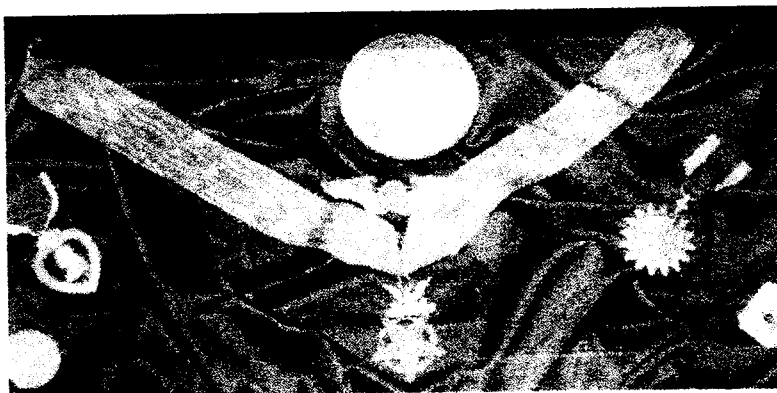
Along with the two facilities named in memory of Forrest, the USAF Enlisted Historical Research Institute at Gunter Annex - Maxwell AFB AL has a display in honor of him. The display contains numerous pictures of Forrest as well as a painting depicting his heroism. He is shown holding the tail gunner from slipping into the water just prior to rescue in the English Channel. The painting was personally autographed by Forrest.

Besides the painting and picture, the display also contains Forrest’s original medals. These include ETO Campaign Medals, Purple Heart, Air Medal, and the actual Medal

of Honor presented to him by President Roosevelt. There is also a small collection of memorabilia from his military service. Overall, it's an impressive display fitting for a Medal of Honor recipient.



Forrest is shown in the above picture signing the painting depicting the *Jersey Bounce, Jr.* ditched at sea. In the painting he is standing on the wing holding onto the wounded tail gunner to keep him from slipping into the water.



Above is the actual Medal of Honor presented to Forrest Vosler by President Roosevelt. He donated it to the USAF Enlisted Heritage Research Institute where it remains on permanent display.

## **The Big Picture**

Looking back on these pages of printed material we find the pieces of Forrest Lee Vosler's life puzzle finally together in one great picture. It depicts a remarkable life. From his birth to Army Air Force induction, a young boy determined to fly, grew from infancy to adulthood under the leadership of goodly parents. He took everything seriously, especially training received as a radio operator and aerial gunner and set his sites high. He remarked several times throughout his life how important it is to be trained and prepared for life's many situations. On two of his four combat missions over hostile Europe he demonstrated the value of this training as well as courage and tenacity not normally displayed by a 20-year old. These characteristics saved lives and earned him an Air Medal and the Medal of Honor.

After a sight disability forced his discharge from the Army Air Corps, he continued a life of service to mankind. He was a founding father of the Air Force Association and a 30-year employee of the Veteran's Administration, where he assisted other veterans with disabilities. Even after retirement he continued serving the public until his death.

Today we have two training facilities which bear his name. One is an enlisted PME Center and the other is an Academic Development Center. They stand as living memorials to a man who always spoke highly of training and its importance in all we do.

In 1992, America had lost one of its true heroes: not the kind you see in movies or in a sports arena, but one anyone can look to for inspiration when there's no where else to turn. As Americans, and especially as enlisted Air Force members, we should never forget those who have gone before us and paved the way for us to follow. If the day ever comes when we are so caught up in ourselves or when we decide the past has no place in our future, God help us all! That will be the day when people like Woody Vosler will truly die. But as long as we remember his courage and dedication to a higher cause, and then stake our heritage in what these principles stand for, he, along with other men and women like him, will forever live on. Our history is rich and our future bright, thanks in part to one man, Forrest Lee Vosler, who has gone where few have gone before.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Aircraft, Awards and Decorations, and Weaponry Reports, January through December 1943, 358<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron. USAF Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB AL, call number SQ-BOMB-358-SU-AW.
2. Donnelly, Captain Walter G. The First 300. England: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1945.
3. History, October through December 1943, 358<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron. USAF Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB AL, call number SQ-BOMB-358-SU-RA-D.
4. Katz, Major Judd. Interview of Medal of Honor Recipients: Forrest L. Vosler. Gunter AFS AL, 5 Mar 86. Tape recording and transcript, USAF Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB AL, call number K239.0512-1703.
5. Mission and Pro Reports, January through December 1943, 303<sup>rd</sup> Bombardment Group (H). USAF Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB AL, call number GP-303-HI. Also a part of GP-303-SU, Feb 1943 to Apr 1945.
6. Mission Summaries, 42/00/00 through 45/00/00, 303<sup>rd</sup> Bombardment Group (H). USAF Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB AL, call number GP-303-OP.
7. O'Neill, Brian D. Half a Wing, Three Engines, and a Prayer: B-17s Over Germany. PA: Tab/Aero Books, 1989.
8. Operations Reports, 1943 - 1944 - 1945, 358<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron. USAF Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB AL, call number SQ-BOMB-358-SU-OP.
9. Personal History Collection, TSgt Forrest L. Vosler. USAF Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB AL, call number K141.2421.
10. Personal History File, TSgt Forrest L. Vosler. USAF Enlisted Heritage Research Institute, Gunter Annex - Maxwell AFB AL.
11. Personnel Roster, March 1942 through March 1945, 358<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron. USAF Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB AL, call number SQ-358-SU-RD.
12. Rochester Democratic and Chronicle. 16 Feb 1944.
13. Statistical Reports, September 1942 through March 1943, 358<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron. USAF Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB AL, call number SQ-BOMB-358-HI.

14. Straubel, James H. Crusade for Airpower: The Story of the Air Force Association. USA: Aerospace Education Foundation, 1982.

15. "The Supreme Sacrifice." Sergeants (May 1992).

16. War Diary, 358<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron, Jan-Dec 1943. USAF Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB AL, call number SQ-BOMB-358-HI.