



# B-24 LIBERATOR THE "DRIP"

Text and photography by Vic Verlinden

On November 5, 1943, the crew of the B-24 Liberator heavy bomber "The Drip" were briefed: the 579<sup>th</sup> Bomber Squadron was to leave Wendling in the heart of Norfolk, England, to fly to the German city of Munster. Their mission was to bomb the weapon factories in and around that city.

It was 2 p.m., and the crew still had time to eat something before the truck ride out to the aircraft. The mood of the men was good. Some of them were already thinking about the 48-hour holiday pass to London that would be granted once they had completed the mission. Spirits were high as they planned how they would spend their time. When navigator George Winzenburg fell out of the truck and landed quite roughly on the tarmac, the mood soared even more as his friends and fellow crew members laughed good-naturedly at his mishap.

At 9:00 p.m., the pilot, Wallace D'Aoust, had completed his checklist with his co-pilot, and the engines were running smoothly. "The Drip" edged up the line ready to take off. D'Aoust pushed all four throttles up to full, the nose picked up, and the plane began a steady climb. The four powerful Pratt & Whitney engines made a monotonous sound during the long flight to the hostile area.

With almost no clouds, the silver B-24's were clearly visible in the sky, even at 7000 meters. So it didn't take long before they were spotted by the ground flak gun crews who hurried into action, attacking the formation with grenades. The plane was quite shaken by grenades exploding nearby. But they were lucky this time and were barely damaged by the attack. Co-pilot Lt. James W. Marchal observed that the other planes, nicknamed "Gregory the Great" and "War Horse," also made it through the grenades.

The B-24 Liberator bomber was one of the most famous American built aircraft of World War II. A design of the Consolidated Aircraft Corporation of San Diego, California.

The B-24 was an extremely versatile aircraft and carried out many roles during the war, not just its designed mission as a heavy bomber. It was used for anti-submarine and anti-shipping work with great success, as a long-range transport, for photographic and weather reconnaissance, supply dropping, minelaying, radio countermeasures and many more varied roles.

The grand total of 19,256 Liberators of all variants built between 1939-1945 made it the most numerous American warplane of World War II.

Specs	B-24D (late models)
Wingspan	110 ft. (33.527 m.)
Length	67 ft. 4 ins. (20.218 m.)
Weight	34,000 lbs. (15,422 kg.)
Weight (full)	63,500 lbs. (28,803 kg.), with 5,000 lbs. (2,268 kg.) of bombs
Powerplants	Four Pratt & Whitney R-1830-65 Twin Wasp radial engines.
Max Speed	303 mph (488 km/h)
Range	2,300 miles (3,703 km)
Armament	11 x .5 inch (12.7 mm) calibre Browning machine guns. Two each in dorsal, tail and ball turrets; one in each waist window and three in single mounts in the nose.



## **"BOMBS AWAY!"**

When they neared their target, it was up to Second Lieutenant Mart T. Etheridge from Kentucky to drop the 7100 kg of explosives on the right spot. Meanwhile, the ground flak gunning had picked up again, and it was increasingly difficult for the pilot and co-pilot to keep the plane on course. Finally, the target man got a clear view of his target, and pushed the button to drop the bombs. As soon as he signaled "bombs away," they could head back to base.

The pilot made a sharp swing to the right, but luck was not with them and they were hit by a grenade. One of the engines fell out, and the plane lost height, becoming an even easier prey for the flak guns. Meanwhile, it was clear that navigator George Winzenburg had been hit by a piece of an .88 grenade, which exploded right under the plane's nose. After the barrage, the Messerschmitts honed in to finish off the lamed B-24 with their cannons.

Nose gunner John Jereb and wing gunner Ralph. H. Sutton fought back with their .50 machine guns. A short time later, two of the remaining engines were on fire, and the wing gunner was hit in his elbow and leg by bullets. The plane was near Bergen op Zoom, a city in the south of the Netherlands, when the side door opened and some of the crewmembers jumped out. Eyewitnesses later said that seven men jumped out and two parachutes opened.

The 579<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron's B-24 Liberator crashed into the North Sea.

## **THE DISCOVERY**

One Saturday in August, I call Patrick Sloot to ask whether there is a free spot for me on Sunday to dive in the North Sea. The vessel I usually dive from is in maintenance, but Andre, captain of the T'Zeebeest, sometimes has a spot for me. These guys have Flushing as their home port, and dive with a crew of four experienced wreck divers. Unfortunately, the boat is already full. The following week, however, Patrick has great news. They have discovered a new wreck, close to shore: a B-24 Liberator, one of the workhorse bomber planes of the Second World War! My first reaction is disappointment because I once again missed the chance to dive on a virgin wreck. But when Patrick proposes to join them the following Saturday, my temper, which was below freezing point, starts to come back!

## SEARCHING FOR A NEEDLE IN A HAYSTACK

It's not a simple task to find the wreck again. A plane is not designed nor constructed to support the heavy impact of a crash. It falls apart when it hits the water, and the wreckage is spread over a large area. There are only a few parts, such as the landing gear, which give a clear sign on the sonar. It is also extremely difficult to hook one of these parts. After more than an hour of trying, we finally hook something...and we get ready to splash. The site is only seven meters deep, so we can make a long survey of the site. For the first time in my diving career, I am about to dive on a plane wreck in the North Sea — and I'm really curious about what there is to discover on the bottom.

## THE DIVE

As I expected, the anchor hooked a big object. I recognize a big wheel, attached to the landing gear. It's strange to see that the high-pressure cylinder is in nearly new condition after almost 60 years on the bottom. I attach my reel to the anchor line because I can't spot other wreckage nearby. I decide to swim east. Some bits and pieces are protruding from the sand, including a piece from the propeller. A little further on, Patrick signals me with his light that he has found something. It turns out to be one of the machine guns from the B-24's nose. After taking some pictures, we go on to discover a large piece of the wing. As the current picks up, the visibility gets worse, and it's no longer possible to take pictures. We head back, discovering more wreckage — though it is impossible to recognize the bits and pieces, as we are not specialized in this. Going easterly, we discover more objects, though nothing big. It's time to end the dive, because the current is now really racing over the North Sea sand.

## THE WRECK AND THE CREW IDENTIFIED

The discovery of the 50mm machine gun is a breakthrough in the effort to identify the plane and crew. When Patrick mails the gun's serial numbers to the U.S.A., he receives an answer a few days later from the people at B-24.net. This organization is made up of many WWII researchers and WWII history buffs who have created a great database of the airplanes and crews of the 392<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group. They were delighted with the discovery and the opportunity to update their database — even more important, they can contact the crew's relatives to share precious new information with the American families. The researchers at B-24.net sent us some pictures of the plane and the crew. From additional information that we found in the Flushing city hall, it appears that three crewmembers, Winzenburg, O'Neill, and Marchall, were buried in Flushing; but shortly after the war, they were moved to the American military cemetery in Neuville-en-Condroz in the French part of Belgium. It is here that we salute for the last time the young soldiers who came to liberate Europe, and paid with their lives.

