

Miss Ponca City Bomber

On Sept. 12, 1944, the nine-member crew of the B-17 Flying Fortress bomber, Miss Ponca City, flew its 55th mission. It was an ill-fated mission to bomb Ruhland, located east of Berlin, Germany. At 11:35 a.m. the plane was shot down with six of its nine crew members perishing. Three other crew members were captured and held as prisoners of war until 1945.

The citizens of Ponca City raised funds for the bomber during its fifth war bond drive. The local campaign, organized by the Kiwanis Club and W.D. "Bill" Edwards, raised \$988,000, which exceeded the needed amount by \$250,000. A drawing of the bomber was made by then 15-year old Don Welch, who later served as Eight Judicial District Special Judge for Kay and Noble Counties. Welch's artwork hung in the window of Smitty's Men's Wear store on Grand Avenue to encourage citizens to purchase war bonds. Another effort that encouraged citizens to purchase bonds allowed buyers to vote in a "Miss Ponca City" contest.

The need for bomber planes was so great in the summer of 1944 that the Miss Ponca City went straight to duty without visiting the community for a christening ceremony. However, it made connections with Ponca City residents and servicemen at home and abroad. Its crew chief and flight engineer, Staff Sgt. Merlin D. Summers, was a Ponca City resident and sent letters home concerning the activities of the plane and its crew. Another Ponca City resident, Master Sgt. Harold Warren, saw the plane when it landed in July 1944 at his air corps base in Newfoundland.

In 1951 the former co-pilot of the B-17, Curtis M. Barber, related his memories of the bomber to The News. Following training in Florida the crew departed for Europe on July 12, 1944, making stops in Newfoundland, where Warren saw the vessel, and Ireland before continuing to England. Upon its arrival the airplane underwent an inspection at an undisclosed location while the crew received additional training.

The B-17's crew had to complete five missions with another crew before it could make one in the Miss Ponca City. On Sept. 3 Miss Ponca City flew to Ludwigshaven, Germany, and on Sept. 5 it flew to Menheim, Germany, carrying 5,000 pounds of bombs. Barber recalled that the crew was "given the name of 'The Three Engine Kids' because of the many times we had come back on three engines."

On Sept. 12, 1944, the crew departed for a mission to Ruhland, located east of Berlin. As crew member Barber recalled in 1951, the plane "was attacked by fighters about five miles north of Staaken, Germany, north of Berlin." Staff Sgt. Summers, crew chief; Staff Sgt. Kenneth Levers, radio operator; Sgt. John Holmes, ball turret gunner; Lt. Marvin Freeman, flight officer; 2nd Lt. Charles E. Stansbery, navigator; and Flight Officer Francis Smith, bombardier, perished in the accident. The three survivors, Staff Sgt. James E. Hughes, waist gunner; Flight Officer Barber, co-pilot; and Sgt. Robert Appell, tail gunner, sustained injuries and were taken prisoner by German forces.

In 1994 Burton J. Stansbery, a brother of Lt. Stansbery, discovered a letter that was written, but never mailed, by the crew of the B-17 in a footlocker that had belonged to his brother. Dated Sept. 10, the note, signed by Crew No. 5, expressed their gratitude to the residents of Ponca City who purchased the bomber. The crew wrote, "She is a good ship and you may well be proud of her."

The story of the Miss Ponca City bomber and the fifth war bond drive to raise funds stands as a testament of the desire of Ponca City residents to do their part during World War II. A digitally-restored image of Welch's drawing of the Miss Ponca City bomber and other memorabilia from the era, was donated by Lillian Taylor and is on display at Marland's Grand Home.

