

**Seven Little Fortresses, a closer look at the B-17G-35-BO:s of the 381st Bomb Group**



Ms. Vivien Leigh speaks at the Stage Door Canteen christening ceremony at Ridgewell, 21/4/1944. The plane was christened by Ms. Mary Churchill, daughter of the British PM Winston Churchill.

Boeing B-17G-35-BO was a large production block, which ran from serial number 42-31932 to 42-32116 and included 185 aircraft. They were delivered to the USAAF during January 1944 when the need for replacement bombers was at its peak, and also to yet raise the number of Bomb Groups.

Initially the aircraft didn't differ externally from the previous G-30-BO block, but that would change radically as the production advanced to its second century, serial number 42-32045 to be precise. The camouflage painting of Olive Drab upper surfaces over Neutral Grey lowers was then dropped, and all the B-17:s from the Boeing plant ever since were delivered in unpainted, natural metal finish. This cut down the production time as no painting was required, plus it saved weight. On the other hand, the unpainted surface was noticed to have a slightly higher air resistance due to bare rivets. The technical changes included a new B-22 high-speed turbo supercharger and revised elevator trim tabs. The next block would be the G-40-BO, with very little modifications compared to this block, just external access to dinghy release and an RC-43B marker beacon added.

Two of these G-35-BO:s were first assigned to the 381st BG, but got transferred to other groups before doing any missions carrying the Triangle-L insignia. The remaining seven aircraft were assigned to all four squadrons of the group. The 532nd BS got two, the 533th and 534th got one each, and the 535th got no less than three of them. Their warpaths differed significantly. Some were lost early, some lasted a bit longer and two of them managed to survive through the war. Of the aircraft that went missing in action, one was ditched in the North Sea, two aircraft crashed in Germany and two were force landed and then salvaged due to their battle damage. One was salvaged at Ridgewell and the other one in France. Losses and damages were mostly caused by anti-aircraft artillery, but one Fortress fell to the Luftwaffe fighter arm still in strength. None of these aircraft were lost in accidents without direct enemy input. When the war in Europe was over, only two of them were left to be returned to the US. One was most likely transferred to another group just to be flown back, but went to war only with the 381st.

So what did they look like, then? The common features, coming from the assembly line and modification centers, were the short "snub" nose cone and unstaggered waist gun positions with three-panel hatches. Boeing had a subcontractor that had already delivered large stocks of fin center panels painted in olive drab, that lasted well beyond the change to unpainted aircraft. These panels were then painted silver to match the rest of the airframes in these planes. The difference in tone is subtle, though, and you need to know it's there to notice it! This subcontractor's olive drab differed from the shade applied in the Boeing's own paint shop too, and the camouflaged aircraft have a markedly darker green fin center panel. That is often confused in black and white pictures with the same panel later being painted insignia red in the 1<sup>st</sup> CBW. The color of the Triangle-L tells us which is the case – white triangle on green, black triangle on red.

This block had some aircraft with the modified "Cheyenne" tail position, but it needs a photo to prove it. Likewise, the windshield in few planes had the "pop-off" or all-weather windows. The 8th Air Force in general preferred the armored windshields, and had most of its Fortresses equipped with them. To complicate things further, some longer-lived aircraft are seen with two types of nose cones and windshields.

Insignia and markings followed the regular pattern of the bomb group and its squadrons. The aircraft that remained in service at least until late June -44 had their fin center panel, horizontal stabilizers

and wing tips painted in the 1<sup>st</sup> CBW identification color, which was insignia red. B-17:s #980 and #088 were lost before this happened.

These seven aircraft did appear in four different color schemes, there were some that were camouflage painted with and without the red empennage, and natural metal finish with and without the red empennage. The mix was unique among all Boeing B-17 production blocks.

The pictorial record of this block is decent. There were some aircraft that attracted photographers more than others, and some that had their operational career cut short by the enemy. One of these aircraft, #890, shall remain a mystery to us due to the total lack of publicized photos. On the other hand, Fortresses #990, #025, #060, #088 and #102 are well documented from various angles. Of #049 there is but one photo, but it's a good one, with only the type of the tail gun position to remain unknown.

Of these pics can be found out that,

- #025, #060 and #102 had the Cheyenne tail;
- #990 and #088 had the Stinger tail;
- of #980 and #049 this remains unknown.
- All-weather windshield can be verified in #088, #102 and the early #990;
- the armored windshield is seen in #025, #049 and #060, and #990 was later converted.
- the nose art, which in most cases was just the written name of the plane, is known from all the other aircraft except #980 again.

#969 42-31969

Transferred to 306th BG

No missions in 381st BG

Delivered Cheyenne 8/1/44; Assigned 381BG 6/2/44; Transferred 306BG 22/2/44; MIA Berlin 8/5/44

**#980 42-31980 -**

532 VE\*J MIA 21/6/44 7 KIA 2 POW

4 missions

Delivered Cheyenne 12/1/44; Assigned Ridgewell 26/5/44

MIA Berlin 21/6/44 w/Roger Dussault, cp-Bernie Segman, n-Valerio Magnabasco, tog-Ralph Holcomb, ro-Wendell Lawing, wg-Alonzo Ehler, tg-John Mahar (7 POW); ettg-Elmer Meier, btg-Howard Corum (2 KIA); enemy aircraft, crashed northeast of Schonhauser, 17 miles northwest of Prenzlau, Germany

*"Nine of our crews took part in an attack on Berlin, flying in the high group of the 1st "A" Combat Bomb Wing. Flak was intense over the target and our formation was attacked by 75-80 enemy aircraft in the area of Breslau, resulting in many claims. This was the largest daylight attack on the German capital to date. Taking part were: Lts Davis, Klare, Durbin, Cann, Cupernall, Guy and Dussault, who is missing in action. This aircraft, #980, was seen to have an explosion in the right wing, and went down under partial control, with the chin turret on fire. One man bailed out of the forward escape hatch, while another crew reported that they saw three chutes."*

532nd BS War Diary, 21/6/44

There are no known (to me) pics of this aircraft. She was delivered in olive drab over neutral grey camouflage paint and went down most likely before the 1<sup>st</sup> CBW identification colours were applied.

**#990 42-31990 Stage Door Canteen 535 MS\*R Returned USA**

116+ missions

Delivered Cheyenne 10/1/44; Assigned Ridgewell 6/4/44

Returned to US 5/45; RFC Kingman 26/2/46.

*"Stage Door Canteen", the B-17 christened a month ago by Mary Churchill, turned in another spectacular performance today, landing back at base with two parachutes acting as brakes. She was a 535th ship flown by a 533rd crew. The unusual stopping device was necessary because the big bomber's hydraulic system had been shot out over Berlin, when enemy fighters hit the formation in the course of the attack on the Germany capital earlier today. The Jerries made one pass just as the ships completed the successful bombing. Loss of the hydraulic system was not the only damage the plane suffered. Five 20mm shells smashed into the ship, knocking out #3 engine, the radio compass and the oxygen system from the waist to the tail. 1st Lt Arthur J. Bailey, was unable to feather the #3 prop and it windmilled for the rest of the flight, causing "Canteen" to vibrate wildly. "We thought even more damage had been done," said co-pilot, 2nd Lt John J. Anderson. "The red stuff from the hydraulic system spurted up into the astro-dome, and it looked like blood. We had an idea the boys in the front had been wiped out." Unable to keep up with the formation, "Canteen" embarked on the grim task of coming home alone. There were thick clouds and haze all over Germany to make the job of navigation difficult. Once the bomber went off course, passing over Bremen, where "We got more flak that we saw at the target." Flak bursts tore about 20 holes in the bomber, but failed to stop it. With "Stage Door Canteen" hidden from enemy aircraft by the clouds, Lt Bailey gave the command to lighten the ship, and the crew jettisoned everything moveable except the guns and 50 rounds of ammunition for each fighting position. In the radio room, the waist and tail gunners, their oxygen system cut off, existed precariously by passing round three emergency oxygen bottles. S/Sgt Charles J. Campbell, Jr., the engineer and top turret gunner, was a busy beaver all the way. The ship has lost all of the gas from the #3 engine, and he was constantly transferring fuel from one tank to another to keep the other three engines turning. Arriving back at home base, Lt Bailey remembered he had read of another bomber's landing with parachutes for brakes. At his command, Sgt Alfred Paoli, the tail gunner, pushed a chute out of the tail trap door, while Sgt Coral C. Highsmith, performed the same stunt from the waist door. With two chutes floating out behind, the bomber stopped neatly three-quarters of the way down the runway and all the crew climbed out unhurt. In addition to those already mentioned, the crew included 2nd Lt Lloya A. Peterson, navigator; Sgt William F. Coleman, toggler; S/Sgt Dale E. Moon, radio operator; and Sgt Walden W. Forke, ball turret gunner. It was "Canteen's" 20th mission in a month. The crew averages 16."*

533rd BS War Diary, 24/5/44

*"A few days ago, on the 23rd, Lt Bailey, 532nd, in "Stage Door Canteen" got attention for his use of parachutes to slow down his brakeless ship on landing, but today Lt Beackley, on his second mission, with a crew on their first, went to the limit when he came all the way home from Leipzig on two engines, literally on the deck, so close his equipment jettisoning crewmen could see Germans shooting or scurrying, French children waving at them. Beackley later said every gun on their line of flight must have opened up on them, but they changed course frequently in deception, made it safely home - without the ball turret. The boys gave a lot of credit to escorting P-38's, which stayed with the Fort as long as possible, attracting flak in addition to their regular job of covering the cripple."*

535th BS War Diary, 28/5/44

*"Marshalling yards at Hamm, selected after bad weather prevented bombing of primary targets at Gelsenkirchen, were attacked PFF today. On the return trip Lt Clark, who had turned back in "Stage Door Canteen" after one engine went out over Germany, nursed his ship home with a windmilling #1, which spun off as the ship touched the runway, slicing a blade off #2 and crashed into the hatch of the radio room, where all of the crew, except pilot and co-pilot had gathered for safety. None were injured, but M/Sgt Bankston is charged with a mechanical abort."*

535th BS War Diary, 30/10/44

*"Stage Door Canteen", M/Sgt Clarence B. Bankston, crew chief, is now top plane in the group with 116 missions, and two aborts."*

535th BS War Diary, 15/3/45

The Celebrity SDC with her original snub nose, all-weather windshields... and a replaced top turret?  
I believe this pic was taken on the same day and in the same place she was christened.



Darker green fin center panel, yellow serial numbers and call letter "R" can be seen in SDC's tail.



Later, her windshields and nose cone had all been changed. Note all those flak damage patches.



The end is near now... fading to history in Kingman, Arizona. The tail looks like the long Stinger-one.



#007 42-32007

533 VP\* Transferred to 384th BG

No missions in 381st BG

Delivered Denver 15/1/44; Assigned Ridgewell 21/2/44; Transferred 384BG 1/3/44, MIA Bonn 4/3/44

#025 42-32025 Dreambaby 533 VP\*P Returned USA

73+ missions

Delivered Cheyenne 15/1/44; Assigned Ridgewell 25/2/44; Transferred to 34th BG

Returned to US 121 BU Bradley 23/6/45; 4168 BU South Plains 21/10/45; RFC Kingman 20/12/45.

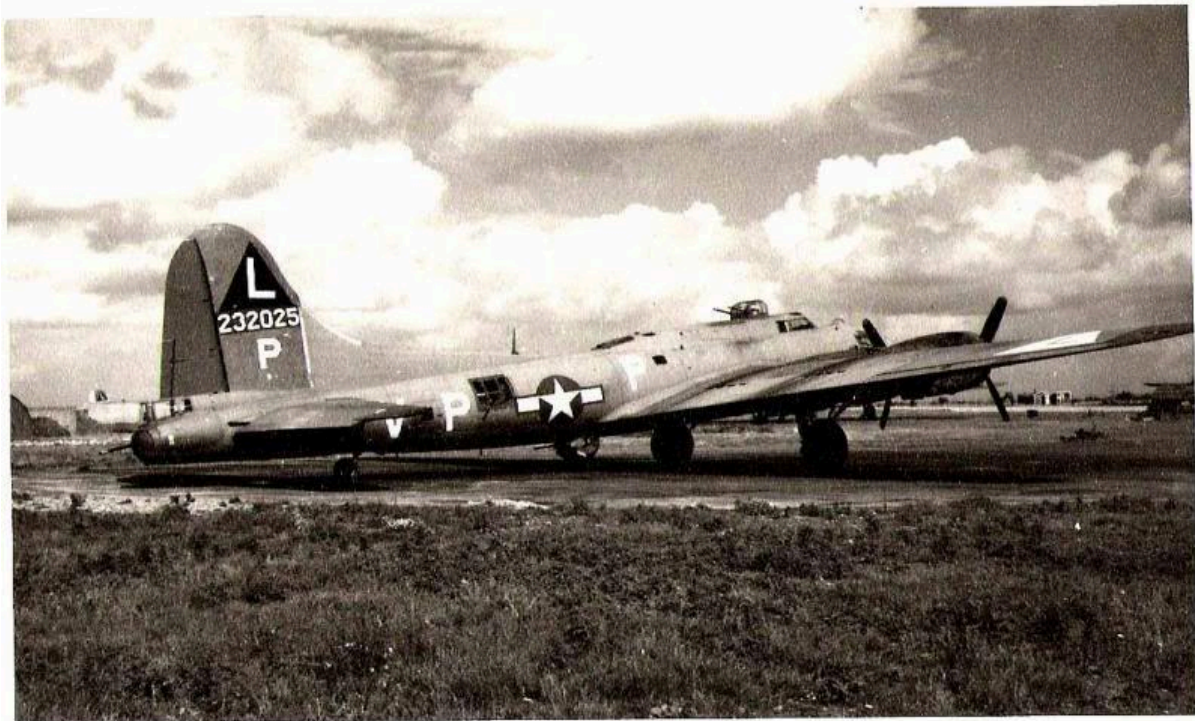
*"Between 50 and 60 enemy fighters, mostly ME 109's, made one pass at low elements of the group on the way to the target, but were engaged and driven off by P-51s, part of the vast umbrella of Allied fighters escorting the bombers. "I didn't see any ME 109's, but I had a good look at about 25 FW 190's," said S/Sgt Charles J. Campbell, top turret gunner in "Dreambaby". "Some of them came to within 200 yards of us, but since they were below us and I'm top turret, I got just one short burst at them." S/Sgt Harold Jernigan, ball turret on the same ship, already holds credit for one enemy fighter destroyed, and today he made the most of his second chance at an FW 190 during the group's mission to Luxembourg. The Jerry was one of a pack which made a quick pass at the low squadron of the group. "Before we made the bomb run," he told interrogators later, "about 25 FW 190's queued up 1,600 yards ahead of us, played around for a few seconds and then started in fanwise. I set my sights on one and followed him in all the way to about 800 yards, when I pressed the triggers. Nothing happened. It's been a long time since any of us have seen Jerries so close, and I guess I had forgotten to turn my gun switches on." "I switched on," he continued, "but by then he was inside 400 yards and coming fast. I gave him nearly 60 rounds, almost steady. Suddenly his right wing exploded and fell off. He dropped down about 200 feet and blew up. I didn't see any chute." Today's mission marked Sgt Jernigan's first real brush with the Luftwaffe in more than two months. It was his 29th trip over a German target."*

533rd BS War Diary, 11/5/44

One of the best in-flight colour pictures of a B-17, in my opinion. Cheyenne tail, longer nose cone, armoured windshields and the look of a combat veteran. Some sources state this was the first 8th AF bomber to reach 100 straight missions without aborts, some say this was the first unpainted B-17 to be assigned to the 381st BG. I think I need more solid evidence to believe the former, and very much more of it to believe the latter - just look at the picture below!



A look at the other, less publicized side of Dreambaby. Some shiny flak patches on her fuselage too.



In correct alphabetical order, VP\*O Rotherhithe's Revenge is keeping VP\*P Dreambaby company. Looks like she's having all of her Wright Cyclones changed – outdoors, of course.





#049 42-32049 Yankee Rebel 534 GD\*D MIA 3/8/44 9 KIA

20+ missions

Delivered Denver 16/1/44; Assigned Ridgewell 6/4/44

MIA Mulhouse 3/8/44 w/John Wilcock, cp-Stan Hutchinson, n-Chas Marsh, b-Norbert Lucas, ettg-Alf Prinz, ro-Bob Friel, btg-Chas Evans, wg-John Ramsay, tg-Dick Fall (9 KIA); flak, one engine out, crashed in North Sea off Holland; pilot's body washed up Orfordness, UK, a few days later.

*"The Nord Railway marshalling yards of Mulhouse, France were attacked by nine of our aircraft this date. Crews reported bombing results as unobserved due to cloud cover. Anti-aircraft fire was moderate and accurate. Participating on this raid were Lts. Soale, Sentner, Slavik, Penrod, Evans, Gallagher, Black, Harding and Wilcock. At the target Lt. Wilcock's ship was observed to be hit by flak and lose an engine. Over the North Sea, on the return route, Lt. Wilcock radioed that his ship was in bad condition and that he was going to "bail" the crew. A/C not observed at this point. Lt. Wilcock was reported dead when picked up by Air-Sea Rescue patrols. The rest of the crew is still missing."*

534th BS War Diary, 3/8/44

Little can be said about the poor Yankee Rebel. A very generic look for a mid-production B-17G.



**#060 42-32060 Boulder Buf 535 MS\*V CLOC 9/12/44 9 RTD (5 WIA)**

48+ missions

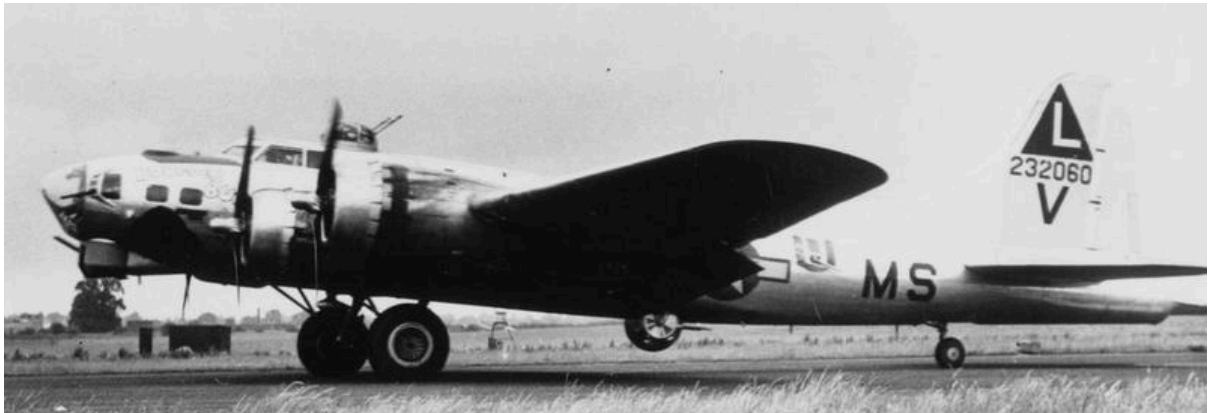
Delivered Denver 20/1/44; force landed base 6/3/44; Assigned Ridgewell 6/4/44

MIA due to severe battle damage over Stuttgart 9/12/44 w/Bill Clark, cp-John Murphy, nav-John Simpson, togg-Bill Robey, btg-John Sladek, r-op-Harry Hallstrom (5 WIA); 4 RTD; force landed with # 2 & 3 engines out at Nancy, France. Salvaged on continent 22/12/44.

*"Col Leber led our group of 37 Fortresses to a PBO bombing of the Unterturkheim railway marshalling yards at Stuttgart today. The formation met moderate but accurate flak which wounded six men, one known to be seriously, but none in our squadron. Weather began fouling at the German border and continued increasingly bad until in the target area. It was uncertain until the very last minutes whether instruments or visual technique would be used at bombs away. Only a few men cared to make any comment on bombing results, generally obscured by broken overcast. However, S/Sgt James C. Smith, ball turret on Lt O'Connor's "Pair of Queens", reported seeing tight patterns bursting red, sending up thick smoke from the yards. No enemy aircraft were encountered and our escort was there all the way, but a late report has Lt Clark and crew on "Boulder Buf", down near Melun, with five wounded aboard. No details yet."*

535th BS War Diary, 9/12/44

Pre-July -44 pictures of Cheyenne-tailed "Boulder Buf" seen here from both sides. Note silver painted fin center panel and neutral grey painted chin turret. Aircraft call letter "V" is painted only on her tail.



**#088 42-32088 Dry Gulcher 532 VE\*M MIA 19/5/44 9 POW**

1+ missions

Delivered Cheyenne 23/1/44; Assigned Ridgewell 6/4/44

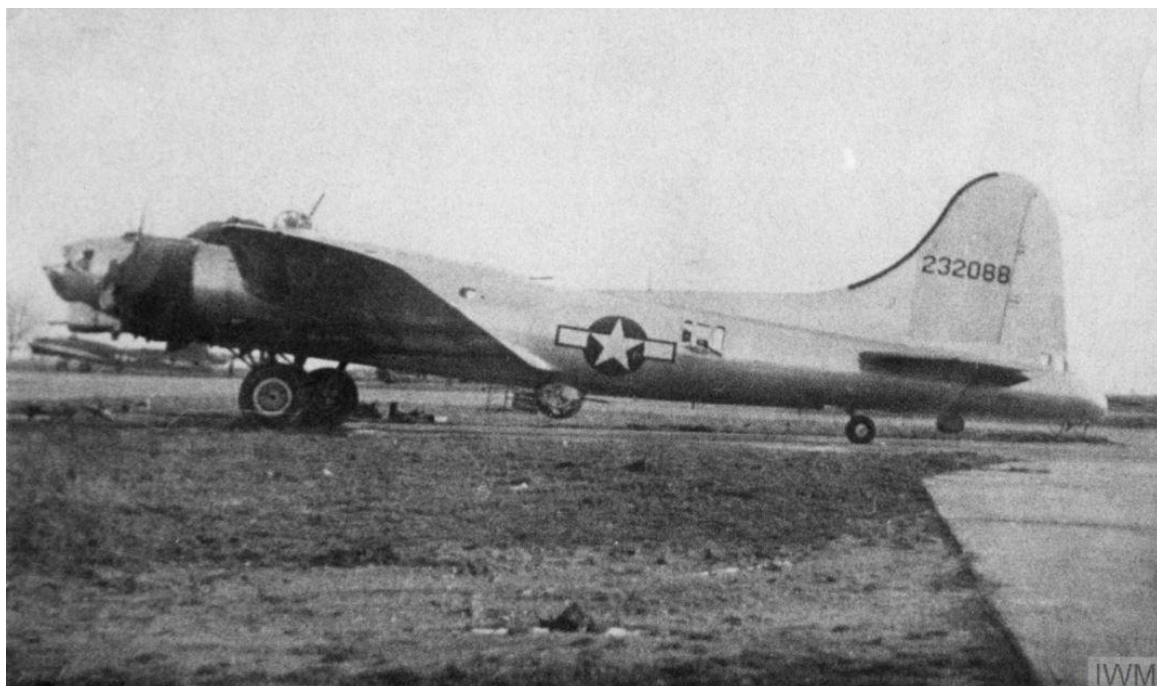
MIA Berlin 19/5/44 w/Harold Blog, cp-Fred Dill, n-George Dennis, b-Henry Miller, ettg-Jack Thompson, ro-John Heidebrink, btg-Stan Poloski, wg-Sam Humphrey, tg-Cornelius Anderson (9 POW); severe flak damage, crashed in forest 11 miles south of Mohrin Airfield, 37 miles northeast of Berlin, Germany, now in Poland a place called Moryn.

*"The capital of Germany, Berlin, was the objective for today's mission, the formation being led by Capt Winter and Lt Clark, along with: Lts Bradner, Bailey, Zapinski, Sutherlin, Martin, Devine, Cupernall and Blog, who is missing in action. Intense accurate flak was encountered at the target, however very little enemy air opposition was met. Piloted by Lt Blog, #088 was hit by flak over the target and dropped out of formation with #2 engine on fire. When the ship was last seen it was under control and eight chutes were seen."*

532nd BS War Diary, 19/5/44

This aircraft is often mixed up with another "Dry Gulcher" VE\*B 42-97594, a PFF- aircraft lost in a takeoff accident near the base on 4/8/44.

She was delivered without any camouflage paint and went down definitely before the 1st CBW identification colors were applied. Here's a pic of her before even the 381st BG markings were applied. It shows a silver painted fin center panel and the original tail gun position.



Picture added 11/11/2021 and captions edited accordingly, where necessary.

15/4/2024 Rick Roberts posted another pic of her at the Museum's fb group, showing the nose art and all weather windshield, magnificent! I got permission to add the picture here too. Let's dedicate a whole page for the "Dry Gulcher" and her anonymous ground crew member.



#102 42-32102 Male Call/Julie Linda 535 MS\*O CL 1/2/45

55 missions

Delivered Cheyenne 24/1/44; Assigned Ridgewell 3/5/44

Battle damage Mannheim 1/2/45, crash landed base w/Curtis Kuhns 1/2/45; Salvaged 2/2/45

There's a hint, but it's enough, to verify she did indeed have an all-weather pop-off windshield.



Poor Julie Linda, back in base with her back broken in a belly landing, caused by the intact ball turret. Her Cheyenne turret has "lost the ball" too. Any landing you walk away from, is a successful one.



*Written by Veli-Pekka Pelttari, 12/10/2021. Edited 11/11/2021 and 15/4/2024.  
"Triumphant They Flew"*

*P.S. Boulder Buf- noseart of the #060. It just fit the layout better here, in the end.*



**Printed sources:**

Bill Yenne, Building The B-17 Flying Fortress

Ron MacKay, 381st Bomb Group

Ron MacKay, Ridgewell's Flying Fortresses

Paul Bingley, Hallowed Ground

**Online sources:**

Dave Osborne, The B-17 Master Log (available online at 91st BG website)

381st Bomb Group

381st Bomb Group Memorial Association

The Ridgewell Airfield Commemorative Association

Imperial War Museum, The American Air Museum

B-17 Bomber Flying Fortress - The Queen Of The Skies

91st Bomb Group

398th Bomb Group