

## **Silvery Seven (8) Staggered Forts, a look at B-17G-55-BO:s of the 381st Bomb Group**

Boeing B-17G-55-BO was one of the larger production blocks, containing 200 aircraft. It ran from serial number 42-102544 to 42-102743. This was the second Boeing production block with the staggered waist gun positions, giving more room for the gunners than the previous one where they were handling their guns back-to-back. It didn't differ externally from the previous G-50-BO block and the only technical change was the addition of a main landing gear safety switch. The aircraft left assembly line in less than twenty days before the end of March 1944 – more than 10 planes a day.

The 532<sup>nd</sup>, 533<sup>rd</sup> and 534<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadrons got two planes each, and this time the 535<sup>th</sup> BS got only one. When the war in Europe was over, one plane (#656) was transferred to 92<sup>nd</sup> BG to be deployed to occupational forces in Western Germany. That plane was later salvaged on the continent by the 9<sup>th</sup> Air Force. One plane (#578) was first assigned to the 306<sup>th</sup> BG and transferred to Ridgewell in May 1945, only to be flown back to the USA without doing any missions carrying the Triangle-L insignia. One plane (#663) was released from its internment and flown back to the USA to be scrapped there.

In 1944, one plane was lost in both May (#672) and June (#585), two (#663 and #664) failed to return in July; one (#703) was salvaged in October due to battle damage and one (#590) reached a full year at the 381<sup>st</sup> before being shot down in the end of March 1945. That leaves only one (#656) of the original seven to survive through the war in regular combat operations! Of the aircraft that went missing in action, one (#664) was ditched in the North Sea, two aircraft (#590 and #672) crashed in Germany and one (#585) in France, one (#703) was force landed in the UK and then salvaged due to battle damage. One of the planes that failed to return in July was not lost. Due to flak damage on a mission to German Baltic Sea coast, it was forced to seek refuge in neutral Sweden (#663). It spent nearly a year caged in internment as a *Yardbird*, true to its name. Losses and damages were mostly caused by anti-aircraft artillery, but one Fortress (#672) fell to the Luftwaffe fighter arm. None of these aircraft were lost in accidents without direct enemy input.

The common external features, coming from the assembly line and modification centers, were the short “snub” nose cone and staggered waist gun positions with large one panel windows. Boeing had a subcontractor that had delivered large stocks of fin center panel 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! Browsing through pictures of tens of planes in this block, it looks like at least the early ones had the painted fins. This block had some aircraft with the modified “Cheyenne” tail position, but it needs a photo to prove it one way or another. Likewise, the windshield in many planes had the “pop-off” or all-weather windows, but mostly not. 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.

None of these aircraft were painted in the previous olive drab over neutral grey camouflage scheme. 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.

There were some aircraft that attracted photographers and some that were very shy in front of cameras. Two of these aircraft (#656 and #672) shall remain a mystery to us due to total lack of publicized photos. That's kind of weird, as the former was a survivor in combat through to the VE-day and beyond yet escaped all the photographers. Two aircraft (#663 and #664) are well documented from various angles with at least two pictures of each, and they both show the Cheyenne tail gun position. There are only nose pictures of three planes (#585, #590 and #703) and the type of the tail gun position remains unknown in these and the two unphotographed ones (#656 and #672). Armored windshields and a nose art, which in most cases was just the written name of the plane, is known from all the five photographed aircraft (#585, #590, #663; #664 and #703).

The big change in rear fuselage layout had taken place in the previous G-50-BO production block. Instead of having the waist windows and thus the waist gunner's positions back-to-back on both fuselage sides, the starboard opening was moved about five feet forward. This gave the gunners more room to handle their guns. The waist gun hatches were also replaced with a single panel plexiglass and a new K-5 type gun mount was installed on the windowsill. Externally, that meant a change in starboard side markings too. The US national insignia was usually moved aft between the rear entrance door and the waist window, and squadron code letters even further aft. The port side remained mostly unchanged, except the new single panel waist window and the new gun mount in it (see #663, pic 2).



Above is 533<sup>rd</sup> BS 42-97059 "Marsha Sue", a B-17G-40-BO with the unstaggered starboard waist. Below is B-17G-50-BO 42-102423 "My Devotion" showing all the changes to her starboard waist.

Both "V" and "P" are painted aft of the door and the "Stars and Bars" is located aft of the waist window. The rear entrance door can be seen and located only by its small rectangular window...



Both aircraft have the original "Stinger" tail gun position with matt olive drab anti-glare panel.

#578 42-102578 We Promised Transferred from 306<sup>th</sup> BG  
 No missions in 381<sup>st</sup> BG, 100+ missions in 306<sup>th</sup> BG  
 Delivered Cheyenne 16/3/44; Assigned 398<sup>th</sup> BG 30/4/44; Transferred 306<sup>th</sup> BG 18/5/44; Transferred  
 532<sup>nd</sup> BS/381<sup>st</sup> BG -/5/44; Returned to the USA Bradley 10/6/45; South Plains, Texas 14/6/45;  
 Recycling completed 7/6/46. *No picture here because of her short service in Ridgewell.*

#585 42-102585 **The Betty-L** 534 GD\*A MIA 24/6/44 4 KIA 4 POW 1 EVD  
 12 missions  
 Delivered Cheyenne 16/3/44; Assigned 534<sup>th</sup> BS/381<sup>st</sup> BG Ridgewell 24/4/44  
 Missing in Action Tours 24/6/44 with Vic Romasco, Navigator: Jim Chandler, Flight engineer/top  
 turret gunner: Elbert Giddens, Tail gunner: Ernie Waldow (4 Prisoner of War); Co-pilot: Dick Kellum,  
 Radio Operator: Paul Cosandier, Ball turret gunner: Grover Scoggins, Waist gunner: Harry Owens (4  
 Killed in Action); Bombardier: Ray Stewart (evaded capture) flak hit in radio room, crashed Valleres-  
 le-May, 12 miles SW of Tours, France; Missing Air Crew Report 6534.

*"Today's target is designated as the Railway Bridge over the Loire river, W. of Tours, France. Under  
 command of Lt. Romasco, who was our squadron leader and led the high group in the 1st CBW, 9 A/C  
 bombed visually with good results. Lt. Romasco led the formation through heavy flak and attacked  
 the primary. Soon after "bombs away" his a/c was observed to receive a direct burst of flak in the  
 radio room. He kept his ship under control until part of his crew bailed. The a/c then went into a spin,  
 burning and was seen to hit the ground and explode. Around six chutes were seen to come out."  
 534<sup>th</sup> BS War Diary, 24/6/44*

10 bombs are painted as mission markers on the nose of The Betty-L, basking here in sunshine with  
*The Railroader* in the end of May 1944. On the same day, *Ol' Swayback* was shot down in Germany.



#590 42-102590 In Like Errol 535 MS\*M MIA 30/3/45 3 KIA 7 POW

91 missions

Delivered Cheyenne 17/3/44; Assigned 535<sup>th</sup> BS/381<sup>st</sup> BG Ridgewell 22/5/44

Missing in Action Bremen 30/3/45 with Bob Bennett, Navigator: Paul Cawley, tog-Elbert Holt, Radio Operator: Bob Mumper, Ball turret gunner: Calvin Hockley, Waist gunner: Guy Stubblefield, sj-Chas Majors (7 Prisoner of War); Co-pilot: Alex Nelson, Flight engineer/top turret gunner: Chester Slomczenski, Tail gunner: Chas Knaus (3 Killed in Action); flak, crashed Syke, Germany; Missing Air Crew Report 13542.

*"The squadron lost Lt Robert A. Bennett and crew to heavy flak on the bomb run of a 6/10th covered Bremen today. He was last seen lagging after bombs away, with two engines out, and there was no report by midnight. It was Bennett's crew who lost Sgt Bolin on the 24th. The ship was "In Like Errol", #42-102590, crew chief was S/Sgt Dave S. Martin. The formation approached the target down a cloud free "alley", had perfect visibility for the bomb run and did an excellent job, with tight patterns on the Deschimag submarine and shipbuilding yards. There were no enemy aircraft attacking our formation, but the boys reported an ME 262, twin-jet fighter, destroyed by Mustangs after attacking a straggler in a group behind ours."*

535<sup>th</sup> BS War Diary, 30/3/44

No fancy pictures or handwriting, directly (in)to the point like Errol himself would have done it. There's a hint of an identical writing seen in a pic of the starboard side of the nose, too.



**#656 42-102656 Carol Leigh 534 GD\*L Transferred to 92<sup>nd</sup> BG**

70+ missions

Delivered Cheyenne 23/3/44; Assigned 534<sup>th</sup> BS/381<sup>st</sup> BG Ridgewell 21/5/44; Transferred 327<sup>th</sup> BS/92<sup>nd</sup> BG Podington 10/5/45; Salvaged by 9<sup>th</sup> AF in Germany 10/12/45.

She must have had an exciting tour of Europe, going to places and seeing a lot of action... but she was a good ship, and a happy ship, that left no sad markings in squadron war diary. And no pictures!



**#663 42-102663 Yardbird 533 VP\*U INT 18/7/44 9 INT**

23 missions

Delivered Cheyenne 24/3/44; Assigned 533<sup>rd</sup> BS/381<sup>st</sup> BG Ridgewell 21/5/44

Missing in Action 18/7/44 Peenemunde, flak, bombs salvoed over Denmark, force landed in Bulltofta, Sweden; with Frank O'Black, Co-pilot: Bob Karch, Navigator: Francis Treanor, Bombardier: Herb Higginbotham, Flight engineer/top turret gunner: Gene Beck, Radio Operator: Wesley Rich, Ball turret gunner: Ollie Brown, Waist gunner: Bill Rich, Tail gunner: Bernie Fridberg (9 INT); Missing Air Crew Report 7552. Returned to the USA Bradley 13/7/45; Reconstruction Finance Corporation Independence 16/7/45; Reconstruction Finance Corporation Kingman 13/12/45.

*"Berlin felt the weight of Fortress bombs today for the first time since the invasion begun, huge formations of the four-engined bombers roaring over the German capital in the attack. The ships fought their way to the target through enemy fighters and flak to perform a bombing job which the jubilant crews called "the best pasting Berlin ever got." Major Charles L. Halsey, 535th commander, served as combat wing leader for the operation. He said that bombing was accomplished visually. The aircraft faced no difficulty until they began to approach the target area. There, flying off to the left was a large formation of "60 to 80 planes", which Major Halsey thought at first must be Fortresses until he took another look. They turned out to be enemy fighters. The fight began in a few minutes. "It was a battle royal," said Major Halsey, "and came in high, level and from both sides at the same time. The duel lasted 25 minutes. It looked as if we got plenty of them, too." The ship flown by 2nd Lt Frank O'Black, "Yardbird", took a direct attack from a swarm of ME 210's, estimated to be over 60 or more. "They came in just once, all around us, and peeled off," said Lt O'Black. "They didn't make a second pass at our ship." The fighters left the formation a few minutes before the bomb run, and then the flak came."*

533<sup>rd</sup> BS War Diary, 21/6/44

*“Ten bombers of the 533rd took part today in an attack on the German experimental station at Peenemunde, on the Baltic Sea. Europe was completely cloud covered, except for a few small breaks at Peenemunde itself. The formation met moderate, inaccurate flak, but the ship piloted by Lt O’Black is missing in action, believed to have landed safely in Sweden.”*

533<sup>rd</sup> BS War Diary, 18/7/44

“Yardbird” probably still in the UK or is she already in Sweden – at least her “Stars and Bars” insignia is clearly visible in the fuselage. She looks like a stereotypical mid-production B-17G with a snub nose and armored windshields.



This pic shows the 1<sup>st</sup> CBW red fin center panel and horizontal stabilizers, 381<sup>st</sup> BG Triangle-L and 533<sup>rd</sup> BS squadron code VP – but her national insignia has been painted over to display her internment in a neutral country. Note the Cheyenne tail too.





#664 42-102664 Happy Bottom 532 VE\*F MIA 16/7/44 9 RTD

8 missions

Delivered Cheyenne 24/3/44; Assigned 532BS/381BG Ridgewell 19/5/44

Missing in Action Munich 16/7/44 with Jack MacGregor, Co-pilot: Jim Schomburg, Navigator: John Krc, Bombardier: Alex Stepanich, Flight engineer/top turret gunner: Chas Hodges, Radio Operator: John J. Smith, Ball turret gunner: Lloyd Roedding, Waist gunner: John Marinace, Tail gunner: Les Alexander (9 Returned to Duty); ditched North Sea off Clacton, Essex, and all rescued by ASR

*"Aircraft of this squadron bombed Munich today, the target, an aero engine factory, was hit by PFF method and results were unobserved. Lt McGregor had to ditch due to a shortage of gas, but through skillful maneuvering and foresight he landed near an Air-Sea Rescue boat in the Channel. The landing was perfect, and no one was injured. The crew had ample time to leave the plane which remained afloat approximately half an hour."*

532<sup>nd</sup> BS War Diary 16/7/44

Christening 5/7/44 by Edward G. Robinson. Note, there are no gun barrels in the chin turret.



#664 Happy Bottom in a perfect picture for anyone wishing to build a model of her – nevertheless Hasegawa included her in its 381<sup>st</sup> BG edition of their 1:72 kit with a serial number 42-102684.



**#672 42-102672 Ol' Swayback 533 VP\*? MIA 30/5/44 4 KIA 5 POW/3 WIA**  
Lost on its first mission?

Delivered Cheyenne 24/3/44; Assigned 533<sup>rd</sup> BS/381<sup>st</sup> BG Ridgewell 21/5/44

Missing in Action Dessau 30/5/44 with Merrill Burton, Co-pilot: Dave Bredeson, Flight engineer/top turret gunner: John Eylens, Ball turret gunner: Ralph Powell (4 Killed in Action); Navigator: Alvin Berry (Wounded in Action), tog-Sgt Bob Hammond (Wounded in Action), Radio Operator: Jim Marbry, Waist gunner: Vic Pillotmia, Tail gunner: Bob Hittel (5 Prisoner of War); enemy aircraft, set wing afire between #3 and #4, ship exploded before all could bail out, crashed between Werderhausen and Piethen, 17 miles SW of Dessau, Germany; Missing Air Crew Report 5233.

*"The large Junkers engine plant at Dessau, southwest of Berlin, took a terrific pounding today from B-17's, which fought their way to the objective through enemy fighter attacks and a skyful of flak. Col William M. Gross, combat wing commander, led the Air Division, flying in a 534th ship with a 533rd crew. He reported persistent enemy fighter attacks for 100 miles in the vicinity of the target. The fighters, estimated at between 40 and 50, made three head-on passes at the bomber formation and sniped at the B-17's from the wings for the rest of the time. The Jerries were first seen about 40 miles from the target lining up for the attack, their contrails making white patterns high in the sky. They struck just as the Fortresses started on their bombing run, ten M! 109's making the first pass from about 12 o'clock. Two enemy fighters roared through the Fortress pack, one tipping just*



*over and one just under the lead ship's left wing. "When they came so close," Col Gross said, "it felt like an air bump." A shell struck the batteries in the lead ship and filled the nose and cockpit with smoke. Col Gross called the navigator and bombardier "because I suspected they weren't there any more. "Despite the heavy flak, the harrassing fighters and the difficulties created by the smoke, the lead ship made a long, steady bomb run and strike photos show bombs landing right on the aiming point. Col Gross paid tribute to the work of the leaders, all 533rd squadron men. They included 1st Lt George K. Sandman, his pilot; Capt John W. Bruning, navigator; Capt William H. Johnson, bombardier. "They never tried to fire a gun during the bombing run," Col Gross said, "In spite of the way the Jerries were swarming all over us. They were there to get bombs on the target and, in spite of Hell, they did." The fierce enemy fighter attacks exacted their toll, shooting down two 533rd ships, Lts Monahan and Burton."*

533<sup>rd</sup> BS War Diary 30/5/44



**#703 42-102703 Pella Tulip 532 VE\*M SAL 16/10/44**

30+ missions

Delivered Cheyenne 26/3/44; Assigned 532<sup>nd</sup> BS/381<sup>st</sup> BG Ridgewell 22/5/44

Battle damaged Cologne 14/10/44 with Chas Reseigh; two minutes before bombs away a flak hit smashed cockpit and nose comp. Pilot Reseigh severely wounded and cp Dave Rautio knocked unconscious by shrapnel; ice cold air revived him whose oxygen mask, goggles and flak helmet torn away; instruments were all out, while blood from Reseigh's head wounds, shattered left arm and leg splattered everything, plus the plexi-glass over the navigator Maryan Winicki's astrodome was shattered. Four hours later frostbitten and nearly blinded by the open cockpit Rautio skidded in at an US base on the English Channel coast. En route home engineer Nushy extinguished the fire, bombardier Paul Smith closed the bomb bay doors, and along with radio op Leon Kaplan, ball turret man Herb Penner and waist gunner Erling Anderson hand cranked the wheels down, and they made it back, just missing out on colliding with another ship; Salvaged 2 SAD 16/10/44.

*"Ten of this squadron took off to bomb Cologne. Bombing was done by PFF method and results were unobserved. No enemy aircraft were encountered, and flak was moderate and accurate. Taking part were: Lts Sunderland, Worrell, Devenish, Durbin, Belskis, Copeland, Marshall, Schomburg, Bailey and Reseigh. In this mission Lt Reseigh was seriously wounded, Lt Rautio and T/Sgt Nushy slightly wounded. They returned after having #3 and #4 engines shot out on the bomb run. Lt Rautio and T/Sgt Nushy piloted the ship home from the target while F/O Winicki navigated home on pilot's compass as all navigation equipment was out of commission."*

532<sup>nd</sup> BS War Diary 14/10/44

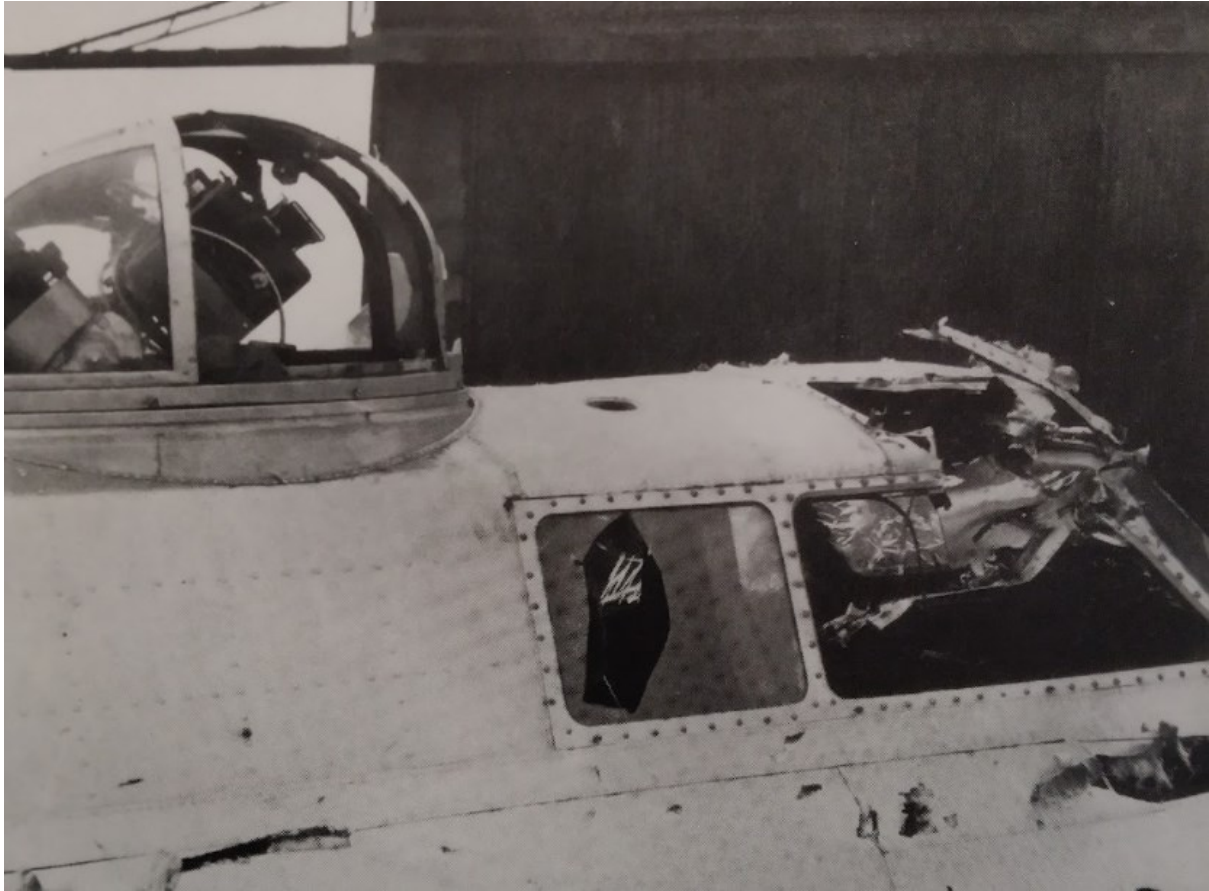
#703 intact nose before the fatal (to her) mission to Cologne.



Post-mission pic from port front showing some of the damage to her cockpit.



Starboard side seen from the wing. Nobody died in that plane and that's a miracle.



*Written by Veli-Pekka Peltari, 16/11/2021. "Triumphant They Flew"*

**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

**Unknown airplane**- symbol courtesy of IWM, thank you!