

The 432nd Air Service Group Sees Germany, May 12, 1945

By Kevin Wilson

Within a week of VE-Day, ground personnel and members of the 432nd Air Service Group were taken on a tour of many 381st mission sites within Germany. The service group personnel had arrived in England on May 18, 1943. Along with the ground crews, they serviced the group aircraft throughout the entire combat history from first mission of June 22, 1943 through final mission (#297) to Pilsen, Czechoslovakia on April 25, 1945. For the first time, they saw for themselves the results from the strategic bombing campaign which they had supported over the prior two years. My late father, S.Sgt. Howard Wilson, Electrical Shop-858th Air Engineering Squadron, wrote his impressions of the flight in a letter to his future wife, Anne, with whom he corresponded over a three year period while he was in service. The attached map shows the flight of the service personnel as they toured Germany. Kevin Wilson.

Excerpt from Original Letter

May 13, 1945

England

Hello My Darling:

Well Sweets, how is everything going with you? What kind of weekend did you have? O.K. I hope. Things have been going pretty good with me. The weather has been swell, plenty of sunshine which is quite unusual. We have had some of the warmest days yet over here in the past week. It felt good going about with less clothes on as usually you have to keep pretty well bundled up.

Yesterday (May 12, 1945) was quite a day for me. I did something I had hoped to do for a long time. I went on an observation flight over part of what is left of Germany. It was quite an experience and I enjoyed it. I flew in "Frenchie's Folly" (Aircraft # 42-39997, 533rd BS), one of our old ships with about a hundred missions. It was a swell day, warm and sunny. We took off about 8:15 all set for a long hop. We were in the air about seven hours and covered well over a thousand miles. It was too bad we weren't flying in a straight line in the other direction. Hon, well I can dream, can't I? We flew at about 2,000 feet which was plenty good as it was easy to see from that height. Perhaps was a good idea too as someone might have liked to take a pot-shot at us.

We crossed the channel and into Belgium. The first big place we passed was over Brussels. It must have been a big city in past years. It sure was a mess, not many houses left with roofs on, just bare walls reaching up into the sky. There were a few people moving about but not many compared to the thousands that used to live there. We left there and flew over the Meuse River. Not a very large one but there were a few barges moving along it. The next place was Aachen. This was battered worse than Brussels. We circled here while some aboard took pictures. Here again the place looked deserted, just like a big dead city. There were a few smokestacks, but it will be a long time before any smoke comes out of them again, if ever.

From here it was Düren. That place really had it. There wasn't anything but rubble everywhere-not even any walls standing, just a big mass of bricks and concrete. We circled here a couple of times and then went on to Cologne. Here we had our first glimpse of the Rhine. Cologne must have quite a place at one time. The river sort of divides the city in half. The cathedral was still standing; around it was just piles of debris. We flew low here and we could see that there wasn't much left of anything. The cathedral was just a shell of a building but still standing, big and black with all the ruins around it. The bridges across the river were all lying half-submerged. There was a pontoon across here and a few tanks and trucks were inching their way across. A few of the factories seemed to be operating- almost a miracle after seeing the rubble all around them.

We flew north from here up along the twisting Rhine, passed over Düsseldorf and from there, on over the huge Krupp works which were just big heaps of twisted girders and rusty steel. Big bomb craters dotting the whole area. It was easy to see why tanks and guns would never roll from there again. What a kick that must have been. From here we went over Essen, then Dortmund and from there to Münster. All these places were bombed by our planes at some time in our history. They must have made some good hits as there certainly weren't many things left standing.

From Münster we went south and over some of the most beautiful country I've ever seen. It was mountainous here and the little villages way up high didn't look like they had been touched by the war. We flew quite low here and a few people could be seen, very few though. Perhaps they got so used to running when they heard our planes that they still do it.

Frankfurt on the Main was our next city. We circled here and boy what a mess. Gun emplacements could be picked out with huge craters in them-perfect hits. The airport was just one mass of craters. You could see where they must have patched the runways only to have them ripped up again. Mainz was the next town. Here there was a large railway terminal which was just a lot of rusty steel girders. From there we went over Bingen which told the same story. Boy, it is hard to see how anything could survive under the pounding they took .

We flew up along the Rhine. It was pretty here. There was a plateau on one side with terraced hillside on the other. All along the banks were barges and tugs sunk in the water. Not a bridge was left standing. A few pontoon bridges were stretched across and supply lines could be seen in an endless chain. From Bingen it was Koblenz and then Bonn. From Bonn we flew back over Aachen and Brussels for another look. We passed over flooded lowlands on our way out. Some of the water had subsided but it was still pretty deep in places. Here we left the continent and headed back for the little island and home base. What a difference could be noted in the countryside. Not shell packed and rubble lying everywhere. What hell those people must have endured but they asked for it and only got what they deserved. They no doubt will be so busy rebuilding that they won't have time to think about another war. It will serve to remind them for years to come.

In all, the trip was well worth it. It gave me a first hand view of places talked about after missions or in the newspapers. It erased any doubts I might have had about the good our bombing did. After seeing it you don't feel as though your time spent here was to no avail as it must have all been to quite an advantage to the advancing troops. I was going to write last night but was so tired I just hit the sack and really sawed some wood. Can just imagine how those guys that flew over there when flak and enemy fighters were there to contend with.

End of excerpt.