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A B-29 Superfortress on the ground at Iwo Jima after a flak shell had blown off its No. 3 propeller. Debris from the shattered prop flew into the No. 4 engine, knocking it out, and other pieces of shrapnel ripped open the fuselage. Despite total loss of power on the right side, the B-29's crew got it back down and lived to tell the tale.

ugh Old Birds

These amazing photos from the US National Archives leave you wondering: How on Earth did they ever make it back?

Photo research by Brick Eisel



Despite catastrophic inflight damage, thousands of World War II aircraft made it safely back to Earth, often carrying wounded and dead airmen. The aircraft of the era were beloved for their durability. They could often fly—and land—with damage that nearly defies comprehension.

Pictured at right is a B-17 Flying Fortress of the Britain-based Eighth Air Force. After being struck by flak over Ludwigshafen, Germany, during a raid against a chemical plant, the crew told intelligence officers that the hole in the wing was big enough for four men to stand in. They were right. Shown l-r are pilot 1st Lt. Roy Murphy, copilot 2nd Lt. Norman Tesch, navigator 1st Lt. John McComb Jr., and bombardier 1st Lt. Donald McKenna.

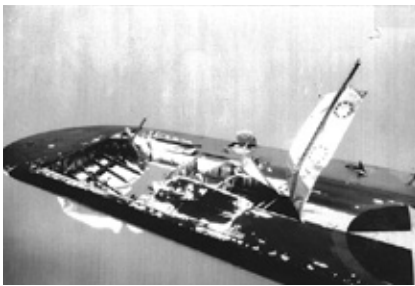


At left, after 65 missions, the B-17 General "Ike" received major damage. Flak ripped off the No. 3 propeller, and a blade tore through the fuselage on the side of the bomber, narrowly missing the supreme commander's image. This aircraft was christened by its namesake with a bottle of Mississippi River water. That was before he had become General of the Army, and the 91st Bombardment Group had not had an opportunity to add Ike's fifth star to the portrait.

At right, a pilot with the 7th Fighter Squadron on Okinawa inspects the damage to the propeller of his P-47 Thunderbolt. A Japanese 20 mm shell had torn a fist-sized hole straight through his prop.

Far right: A B-17 tail gunner's position is bracketed by damage where enemy 20 mm fire tore into the aircraft. This bomber, assigned to the 379th Bomb Group, made it back to England despite the loss of half its rudder. German fighters often tried to knock out a bomber's gun positions prior to administering the coup de grace.





Top left: Decelerating after suddenly losing an engine over St. Omer, France, in October 1942, the Boeing B-17 shown here was inadvertently rammed by a following bomber. The B-17's rudder, much of its vertical stabilizer, tail gunner's position, and horizontal stabilizers were chewed up by the props of the trailing Fortress.



Top right: The crew of an Eighth Air Force B-26 Marauder inspects damage to the bomber's tail gun turret, rudder, and rear stabilizer.

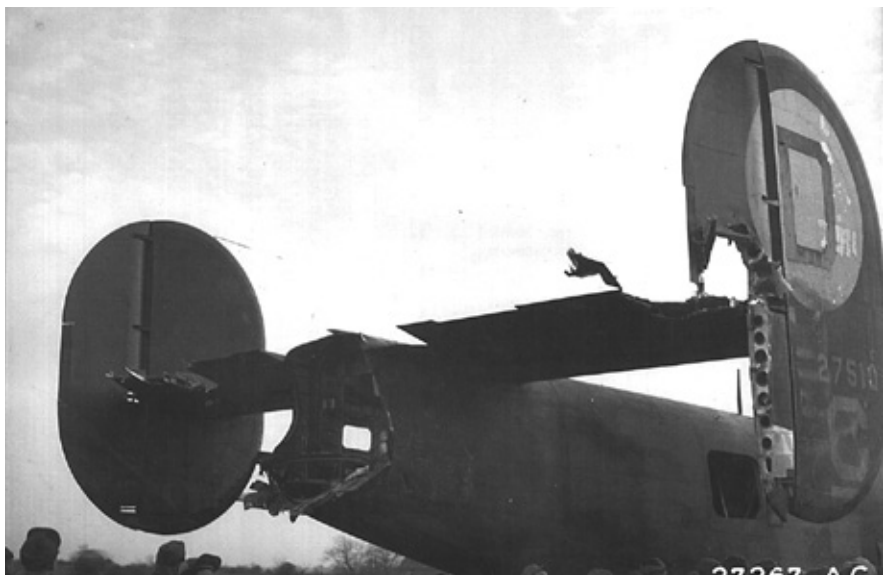
Above: The wing of a Fifteenth Air Force B-24 Liberator was badly damaged by flak during a mission over Austria in April 1945.



Above: The nose assembly is missing from the B-17 known as Duke of Paducah, which operated out of Bassingbourn, England.

Landing a crippled aircraft was often the most perilous moment of the recovery. At left, ground crews of the 303rd BG battle a fire.

The B-24 bomber at right, belonging to Eighth Air Force, completed its mission over Europe despite severe damage, shown here. The Liberator lost use of its rear stabilizers and was mostly missing its tail.



On Saipan in the Pacific, Capt. James Pearson and his crew line up before what is left of their B-29. The fuselage at left was actually lucky to be in such "good shape." After a mission over Tokyo, this bomber returned 1,500 miles through bad weather with both engines out on one side and with the fuselage torn open by a runaway prop. Finally, the nose was completely torn off in the aircraft's crash-landing.



Above, this B-26 Marauder landed hard in England in September 1943 after flak had hit its landing gear lock.

Right, Lieutenant James Fisk shows off the flak damage he survived over Italy.





Top left: This B-17 forward fuselage survived one of the more freakish accidents of the war. It was flying in a tight formation when the Fortress below it was hurled upward by unexpected turbulence, smashing the nose of this B-17. The other bomber's radio operator was killed and his body wound up inside the airplane above. The entire crew of the pictured Fortress survived.

Top right: Jeanette, a B-25 bomber, made it back to base missing its left elevator and part of the left rudder.

At right, in Pisa, Italy, pilot Lieutenant Richard Sulzbach (l) explains to Lt. Col. Harold Whiteman that he flew too low during a strafing run and went through a clump of trees.

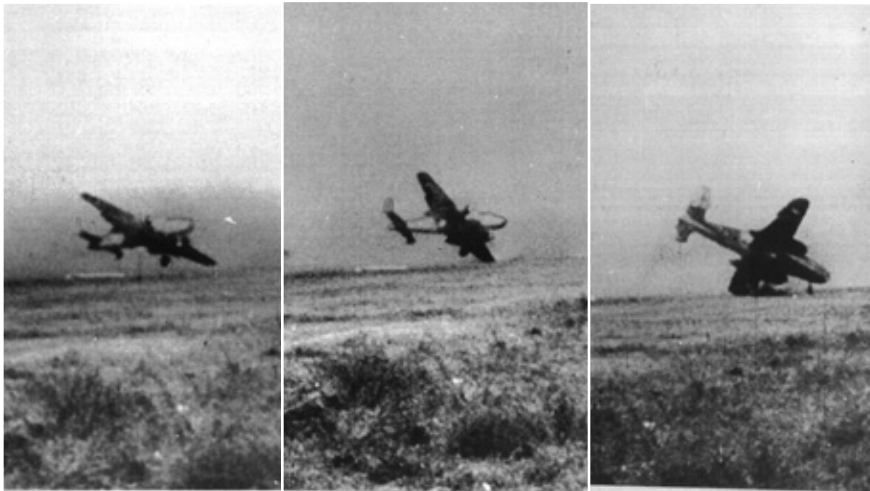


The photos at left show a pair of B-24s on the ground in England. The bomber at far left was hit by German attackers over Coblenz after attacking the railroad marshaling yards at Hanau in November 1944. The Liberator at near left had crash-landed a week earlier near Norfolk.

This photograph shows what happened to 1st Lt. Edwin King's P-47 after its main oil line was cut by enemy flak.

While strafing enemy gun positions near Brescia, Italy, King took return fire that severed his oil line. The R-2800 engine kept on chugging despite losing every drop of oil, which streamed over the airplane and coated the fuselage and canopy.

Since he could no longer see forward, King flew in formation with his wingman all the way back to base. The engine finally seized up while he was on final approach. The mission was this Thunderbolt's 110th—and last—combat sortie.



Series of photos at left shows the one-wheel landing of a crippled B-25, which was returning from a mission over Salerno. The pilot kept the bomber balanced on the left main gear and nose wheel until he ran out of airspeed. The airplane then ground-looped to the left. No crew member was injured.

Bottom left: First Lt. John Dooling of the 318th FG inspects the flak damage to the wing of his P-47. He was hit after a strafing mission over Japan in 1945.

Bottom right: Old Bill, a B-17 from the 305th BG, lost its nose but still made it safely back on the ground in England in 1943. In the foreground, Capt. Bruce Bairnsfather, the artist who drew the "Old Bill" cartoon character, surveys the damage.





At left, TSgt. Paul Taylor, the top turret gunner of this B-17, peers out a hole caused by a 20 mm cannon shell.

Below is the damaged top gun turret of a B-17 that survived a mission over France in 1943.



A flak shell pierced the bottom of this B-24 at right—but the shell didn't detonate until it struck the top of the bomber's waist section. Besides killing a crew member, the exploding round blew the top of the mid-section away, severing the aircraft's rudder cables.

Below, a flak-riddled B-24 of Fifteenth Air Force skids in on a crash-landing at its base in Italy.



Left: The tail gunner's compartment of this B-17 nearly has been ripped away from the aircraft. This was an unfortunate fratricide incident: The damage was caused by a falling bomb.

USAAF's World War II aircraft were very tough birds. Many pilots and aircrew members owe their lives to the airplanes that made it back to base under the most extreme conditions. ■