

Jimmy Stewart's Air Force

By Rebecca Grant

The famous actor's wartime service was at a deadly time for Eighth Air Force.

A B-24 from the 453rd Bomb Group over Karlsruhe, Germany, Sept. 5, 1944. Jimmy Stewart was then the group operations officer.



Jimmy Stewart at Moffett Field, Calif., shortly after he was drafted in 1941. Stewart failed his first air forces physical due to his slight build, but passed a subsequent one.



USAF photo

Two graying war veterans, out of a job, took a radio-controlled model airplane into the hills above Los Angeles to pass the time.

The two had been friends since long before the war. Once they'd built a model of a Martin bomber in a small apartment they'd shared back in New York City, before they'd come west to Hollywood. Now with time on their hands they were indulging in boyish pursuits again, both trying to re-establish themselves in a profession where they'd been immensely successful before World War II. The date was 1948, and the good friends were Henry Fonda and Jimmy Stewart.

Every biography of Stewart, movie star, mentions that he served in the Army Air Forces from 1941 to 1945 and flew at least 20 missions in the European Theater of Operations.

What's rarely captured is that Stewart did more than leave a Hollywood career; he forged a new one as a combat leader in Eighth Air Force at its most crucial hour—the battle to defeat the

Luftwaffe and clear the skies of France for the invasion of Normandy.

Two accomplishments stand out in Stewart's wartime career. First, Stewart commanded the 703rd Bomb Squadron, a unit of B-24s that deployed to England where he guided them through their first combat missions from December 1943 to March 1944. He was then promoted to operations officer of the 453rd Bomb Group, attacking targets deep in Germany and flying support missions on D-Day.

It wasn't an easy path. Stewart was 32 when he was drafted into the Army. He failed the first physical because he was underweight for the air forces. Skinny was a ticket to the infantry. He passed a second physical and enlisted in March 1941 with hopes of becoming a combat pilot.

Then there was the matter of his fame. Stewart had just won the Best Actor Oscar for his role in "The Philadelphia Story." From 1936 to 1940 he appeared in 26 films with nearly all of Hollywood's biggest stars, male and female. He dated Norma Shearer, Ginger Rogers, and Olivia de Havilland, to name a few. In 1938 he starred in "You Can't Take It With You," winner of the Academy Award for Best Picture, and in 1939 came the box office smash, "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington." In a time before television, approximately half of all Americans saw at least one movie a week. Stewart was a white-hot star.

THE LIBERATOR

None of this counted for anything in the Army Air Forces. What did count was that Stewart had a pilot's license, and 200 hours of flight time before he was inducted. As a corporal, he built up flying time at his own expense, then earned a commission and his wings. The Army put him to work as an instructor for his first two years in uniform starting at Mather Field, Calif., and culminating with six months as a B-17 instructor pilot in Boise, Idaho, and later Sioux City, Iowa.

Then came his big chance. The expansion of the heavy bomber groups called for men with experience. "At Sioux City I was finally given command of a squadron," he later said. Stewart got a hasty check-out in the B-24 Liberator and took command of the 703rd Bomb Squadron in August 1943.

Waist Gunner Sam Mastrogiacomo was an original member of the 445th Bomb Group and told oral historian Aaron Elson how on a flight one day, word spread that the instructor pilot checking out the pilot up front was Jimmy Stewart. "So one by one we'd go up, we'd have an excuse to

go up in the cockpit through the bomb bay and look at Jimmy Stewart," Mastrogiacomo said in a 2005 interview.

In November the 703rd deployed to RAF Tibenham, UK, 120 miles north of London. The 703rd was one of four 12-aircraft squadrons constituting the 445th Bomb Group.

The basic fighting unit of Eighth Air Force (VIII Bomber Command until February 1944) was the group. Aircraft from a group's four squadrons assembled into the formations where needed. The 389th, 445th, and later, the 453rd bomb groups made up the 2nd Combat Bomb Wing under the command of Brig. Gen. Edward J. Timberlake. The 2nd was one of four wings in the 2nd Air Division. All flew B-24s.

Stewart and his crews arrived in the thick of the air war. Deep raids into Germany by Eighth Air Force had started in May 1943. But they were relatively small formations of rarely more than 200 bombers. Loss rates were 20 percent per month through October 1943.

Just weeks before Stewart arrived, bomber attacks of October 1943's so-called "Black Week" claimed more than 1,500 air crew and 148 bombers, nearly 13 percent of Eighth Air Force's strength, recorded historian R. Cargill Hall in *Case Studies in Strategic Bombardment*.

"The cornered wolf fights hardest," Commanding Gen. Henry H. "Hap" Arnold wrote to Maj. Gen. Ira C. Eaker, commander of VIII Bomber Command.

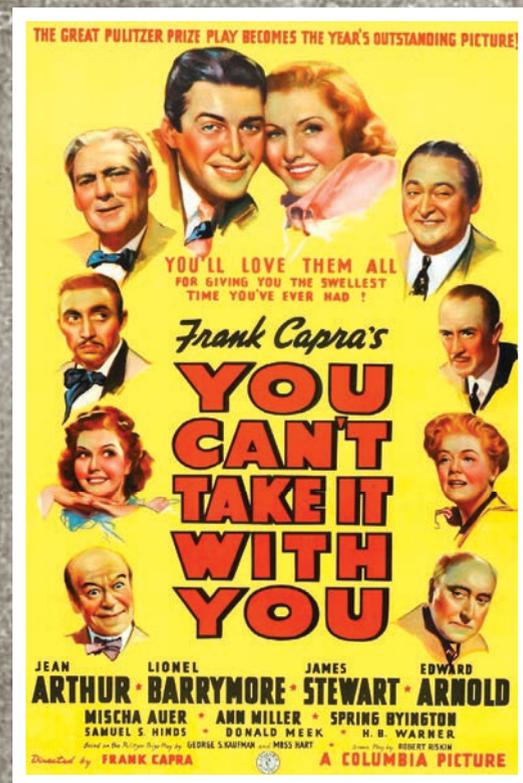
Defeating the German Luftwaffe was the problem. The Luftwaffe pilots who rose to meet the bomber formations were a lethal and experienced force. German fighter pilots attacked bombers head-on and devoured stragglers. Long-range escorts were only just becoming available. "Neither Eaker nor Arnold knew that the Luftwaffe in the west was now stronger than ever, or that German fighter production continued to grow," summed up Hall.

"My dear Jim boy," Stewart's father, Alexander, a World War I veteran, wrote to him in November 1943. "Soon after you read this you will be on your way to the worst sort of danger."

TO BREMEN AND BACK

Stewart flew his first combat mission on Dec. 13, 1943, as part of an attack on submarine pens at Kiel, Germany. He was the copilot, with 1st Lt. Leo W. Cook in the left seat of ship No. 512, according to the mission reports declassified in 1998. The 703rd Bomb Squadron contributed four B-24s that day, all armed with 500-pound bombs. Three of the 703rd's





Stewart was flying high in 1938 with films such as "You Can't Take it With You." His career hit a lull when he left the service, but bounced back with performances in such movies as "Harvey" in 1950 and "Strategic Air Command" with June Allyson in 1955.



B-24s, including Stewart's, flew the rear echelon of the lead squadron.

Stewart took off from RAF Tibenham at 8:36 a.m. and headed straight over the North Sea. Clouds socked in the target. According to the flak officer, the anti-aircraft fire that day was no more than moderate and extremely inaccurate. With the clouds, the formations saw only a handful of fighters. The 445th Bomb Group flew a four-minute radar targeting run at 23,000 feet with bomb release on signal from the lead bombardier.

The 703rd made it home safely from Kiel, but Stewart's squadron lost a B-24 in a Dec. 30 mission. It ditched in the English Channel off Beachy Head, UK, with four dead, four rescued, and two taken POW. Another B-24 from the 445th crashed on landing at Tibenham.

However, the missions of December were giving the group the vital combat experience necessary for survival. They needed it. For 1944, the Eighth planned relentless attacks on German airfields, aircraft industry sites, and fuel plants under its new commander, Lt. Gen. Jimmy Doolittle.

Stewart flew a mission to Bremen on Dec. 16 then led the 445th Group on a mission to strike a plant complex manufacturing synthetic oil and gasoline additives at Ludwigshafen on Jan. 7.

Trouble began on the way home. Stewart's formation joined with the 389th Bomb Group. But the lead ship of the 389th was pulling both groups 30 degrees off course. Stewart radioed the lead B-24 on VHF but no correction was made. Stewart kept his bombers with the errant leader. Near Paris, German fighters

attacked the two formations. First to go down was the lead off-course B-24 of the 389th. Fortunately, all of the 703rd made it back to Tibenham.

Col. Milton W. Arnold, in command of the 389th Bomb Group, wrote to Stewart's boss at the 445th Bomb Group, Col. Robert H. Terrill. "The good judgment of Captain Stewart, your group leader, in maintaining an excellent group formation, yet making every attempt to hold his position in the combat wing formation, is to be commended," the colonel praised.

"By risking his neck to protect an erring teammate, he had probably saved the 389th from annihilation," concluded Col. Beirne Lay Jr., a fellow bomber pilot who wrote up Stewart's achievements in the *Saturday Evening Post* in December 1945. Missions to Bonnière, France, and Frankfurt followed.

Eighth Air Force was making progress but had not won air superiority. "It was, however, only in the spring of 1944, in March to be specific, that the deterioration in quality of the German pilots first became really apparent," noted World War II historians Wesley F. Craven and James L. Cate. Until then the German air force always had enough experienced pilots to give attackers "stiff battles, not to say a few resounding defeats."

The answer, in part, was “Big Week.” From Feb. 20-25, 1944, weather cleared, and the Mighty Eighth made its major push against Germany’s aviation targets. Stewart flew the first mission as deputy leader of the 2nd Combat Bomb Wing’s B-24s as they headed for Brunswick, Germany. Weather at home and over the targets for this first mission was so uncertain that Doolittle nearly called it off.

At Tibenham crews hedged by briefing for two options: an instrument approach, or an alternate visual approach, where Stewart would lead. “When the target was reached, it became apparent that visual bombing was possible and Major Stewart smoothly assumed the lead position” despite aggressive fighter attacks and heavy flak. So said the Distinguished Flying Cross citation signed by Doolittle himself.

For the DFC, the standard was “heroism in flight evidencing voluntary action in face of great danger above and beyond line of duty. Achievement in flight must evidence exceptional and outstanding accomplishment,” stated the US War Department regulation of October 1943.

One of the 703rd’s toughest missions was to the Messerschmitt plant near Gotha, Germany, in the dreaded Schweinfurt industrial area on Feb. 24, 1944. Stewart didn’t fly that day; he planned, waited, and listened for his B-24s to return.

But only one B-24 from Stewart’s 703rd appeared in the pattern at Tibenham that afternoon.

The mission had turned into a two-hour running battle between German fighters and Eighth Air Force bombers trying to reach home. The 445th took the worst losses of the day with 13 aircraft shot down, while their sister 389th lost seven. Of the 445th’s 12 surviving B-24s, eight with battle damage touched down at other airfields.

First in was a B-24 named *Dixie Duro* with a veteran crew commanded by pilot Lt. Ralph Stimmel and copilot Lt. Milton Souza. “We were the first crew into the debriefing room,” navigator Hal Turell recalled in his account written for the 445th Bomb Group website. “The ship we were flying was incredibly shot up,” Turell said. “We were still in shock and in disbelief that we had lived. Our squadron commander Jimmy Stewart (yes, the actor) listened intently to us.”

Stewart himself was on the schedule for a mission over the same route the next day, although to a different target. The grim dinner in the near-empty combat mess hall that evening caused Stewart to think that his “number was up,” as Lay wrote in

his article. Nevertheless, the mission successfully attacked Nuremberg on Feb. 25.

Next came another mission to Brunswick with a tough pair of decisions. Stewart took off leading the 2nd Combat Bomb Wing’s groups in heavy overcast and mist. B-24s climbed at 900 feet per minute, and groups took as long as an hour to form up on brightly painted B-24s before turning toward occupied Europe. On this day, the weather left some wings formed at high altitude and others in the soup. Without coherent formations, the bombers would be sitting ducks. Stewart radioed an abort to the wing and turned them for Tibenham. Moments later, Eighth Air Force headquarters called off the entire 1,000-bomber mission, justifying his decision to turn back.

Stewart was leading the same formation to Brunswick on the next mission, March 15. Flak was heavy. Weather obscured the primary target, forcing Stewart’s group to conduct radar bombing on its secondary target. Approach accuracy was critical. Then Stewart’s navigator reported the radar scope had failed. Could Stewart turn the group and set up another pass at the target?

It was more agonizing minutes over the target and exposure to heavy flak, but Stewart did it.

Wednesday, March 22, 1944, saw Stewart’s last mission as commander of the 703rd. The B-24s were assigned to bomb Heinkel aviation industry plants at Oranienburg and Basdorf, but cloud cover forced them to their secondary target: Berlin. The mission with 474 B-17s and 214 B-24s was a success. More than 800 fighters provided escort up to and over the skies of Berlin. Just five of the B-24s went down, none from the 445th. Eighth Air Force now had control of the skies nearly in its grasp.

HELPING THE 453RD

However, another group in the 2nd Combat Bomb Wing was not holding up well. On March 30, 1944, Stewart transferred to a new assignment as group operations officer for the 453rd.

This unit was the last of the 2nd CBW’s groups to arrive in theater in January 1944. The 453rd plunged into



Stewart confers with a crew member in front of a B-24 during his service in the European Theater.

combat on Feb. 5 with a mission against airfields in France—airfields stuffed with German fighters.

Over the next seven weeks the 453rd flew 23 missions, including the Big Week push. Their group commander was killed.

Deaths in a crew forced survivors to join others to make a composite crew. For example, a pilot and his bombardier might be driven out to a strange aircraft with unfamiliar crews on the morning of the mission. The shuffle of faces ate into morale. “The 453rd Bomb Group was struggling to find its way; combat initiation had been challenging,” wrote Stuart J. Wright in his book about the 453rd, *An Emotional Gauntlet*.

On March 18, group commander Col. Joseph A. Miller was shot down over Friedrichshafen and taken prisoner. On March 27, the B-24 *Cabin In The Sky* took direct flak on a mission to bomb the Luftwaffe training airfield in Pau, France. The bomber crashed into the Bay of Biscay in full view of the returning formations. None survived, and the 453rd’s operations officer was among those killed.

Lt. Col. Ramsay D. Potts, age 27, took over command of the 453rd. Potts had flown some of the first missions



Gen. Curtis LeMay (l), head of Strategic Air Command, and Stewart at an Air Force Association event in 1955.

with the Eighth as a lieutenant in 1942 and survived Ploesti in August 1943. The young economics teacher from Tennessee was an instant hit with his crews. In a 1999 interview, described in Wright's book, Potts recalled that he "asked for a new operations officer, somebody from outside." The obvious choices were the eight group commanders from other groups in the wing. Potts said, "Lo and behold, they sent an officer from another group—a guy named Jimmy Stewart."

Crews in the 453rd were surprised but not overawed by having an actor in their midst. Some were downright cynical. According to Wright, they'd heard how movie star Clark Gable "flew five missions, got an air medal, and was sent home to sell war bonds," said 732nd Bomb Squadron pilot Bob Bieck. Their lost ops officer had been an experienced pilot "and we did not exactly jump for joy to have a celebrity take his place," Bieck recounted.

Stewart did not cozy up to them. "He was always friendly, approachable, and unassuming and was very well-liked," wrote Wright, "but he was not close to anyone" except Potts and Capt. Andrew S. Low Jr., the assistant group operations officer, with whom he shared quarters.

"He simply did his work as the group operations officer just like any other major was supposed to do," recalled Bieck.

And there was plenty to do. Stewart and his assistant Low spent the dusk to dawn hours generating operations

orders after targets came down from headquarters. Stewart also continued to fly missions as did other group and wing leadership.

Yet he had a quiet charm that was effective with subordinates and superiors, Wright stated in his book. "Major Stewart did impart a sense of camaraderie by just being there and I believe that many of us wanted to perform better just because he was there," said Sgt. Robert Victor, a radio operator with the 453rd at RAF Old Buckenham, UK.

GREATER THAN THE MOVIES

For his young boss Potts, Stewart was of clear value. "We hit it off very well, even though he was eight years older than I was," Potts said, according to Wright. Stewart was "100 percent as a pilot," in the opinion of Potts, "and he also had a tremendous rapport with the men—that languid, humorous way he had of settling them down in some pretty stressful situations."

Potts appreciated how Stewart grasped the view that aircrew lives were important and "that meant they better fly close formation ... if they expected to return to base," as Potts put it. It was a message Potts and Stewart preached continually. "He impressed them with living as well as winning, and more than that, an officer can't do," said Potts.

However, Stewart was no angel. As author Starr Smith recounts in the book *Jimmy Stewart, Bomber Pilot*, one day in April 1944, Stewart and Low took a B-24

up by themselves to "shoot some landings" at "Old Buc" and perhaps, blow off some steam. They did their takeoff and landing practice with a few chandeliers thrown in and might have gotten away with it until they fell prey to a familiar, irresistible urge: buzzing the tower back at Tibenham, 10 miles away.

Potts was furious when he confronted them in the combat mess at Old Buckenham. "The more I struggled for words (the colonel did not give me much opportunity to speak), the more I realized that what we had thought was a grand idea some three hours earlier now seemed pretty dumb," Stewart wrote in a reunion magazine decades later. He was later chewed out by the wing's commanding general and his old group commander and as penance forced to write a memo reminding airmen about regulations on minimum aircrew requirements and altitude safety.

In June 1944, Stewart was promoted to lieutenant colonel. He served as the 453rd's chief planner for the four missions flown on June 6, 1944, as B-24s supported D-Day, and he was again awarded the DFC.

Stewart was next assigned as chief of staff for the 2nd Combat Bomb Wing, working directly for Timberlake. Here Stewart contributed to a statistic only airmen could fully appreciate. The 2nd Combat Bomb Wing ranked first out of the four wings of the Second Air Division in bombing accuracy from August 1944 through May 1945. Stewart was, by then, a colonel.

His movie contract with MGM expired while he was in uniform. He made only two movies until 1948 and his first—a dark, artsy 1946 film titled "It's a Wonderful Life" flopped at the box office—only becoming a Christmas classic in subsequent years.

Eventually radio, a stint on Broadway in "Harvey" (a play about an imaginary rabbit), and finally, Westerns and director Alfred Hitchcock opened up a stellar third act for Stewart.

Stewart remained in the Air Force Reserve until 1968 and retired as a brigadier general. With Jimmy Doolittle, he helped found the Air Force Association after his wartime service. President Reagan promoted him on the retired list to major general in 1985.

Of World War II, Stewart later said: "I think that whole military experience that I had is something that I think about almost every day and one of the great experiences of my life. Greater than being in the movies." ✪