

Biography of First Lieutenant Gale B. McGowan's Last Missions



After primary, basic, and advanced pilot school training, McGowan was transferred to Hammer Field, Fresno, California, then on 30 January 1944, he was assigned to the 399th Bomb Group, AAB, March Field, California. On 18 Feb 1944, to the 470th Bomb Group (H) B-24 Liberator bomber flight training, Tonopah, Nevada, where he joined Crew #329 with pilot 2/Lt. Daniel Bingham. At the end of May 1944, after their B-24 bomber training at Tonopah, the crew was to report to Hamilton Field, California 16 June 1944, for eventual assignment in the Pacific Theater of Operations, but the Pacific assignment was changed and the crew was transferred to Camp Myles Standish, Massachusetts, and then sent by ship to England and the European Theater of Operations (ETO). On July 3, 1944 the crew (among about 2,000 Army personnel) sailed from Boston Harbor on the *USAT Brazil* (a former cruise ship). After two days as sea, the *USAT Brazil* joined with a large convoy of Navy destroyers, battle ships, a hospital ship, cargo ships and other transport ships. The first stop was Port of Glasgow, Scotland, on July 9, and after about 10 days (some of the time spent in Ireland) the crew went on to England and were permanently assigned 3 Aug 1944, to the 8th Air Force, 2nd Air Division, 446th Bomber Group and the 707th Bomber Squadron and stationed at base Station 125, near the village of Flixton, Suffolk, England, approximately 2 miles from Bungay.

The first flight by co-pilot McGowan was 8 Aug 44. The first combat mission he flew with the Bingham crew all together was 15 Aug 44. Sgt. Tom Egan (waist gunner) kept a notebook of his missions and in it he wrote:

Aug 14, 1944. Our first mission- We were assigned to bomb Dijon, France. My notes say the trip was rather long, but easy because of no enemy fighters and light flak.

Aug 15 – (Airfield N. Germany) Today because everyone was rather inexperienced we couldn't find our assigned group. So we joined another group and dropped bombs with them. (Light flak).

Aug 16 – Madgeburg, Germany (target oil) target only 50 miles from Berlin (flak very heavy). Saw one bomber go down. Lost two planes I didn't see.

Aug 24 – Brunswick, Germany (target assembly plant). Today the plane on our left wing was hit and went down in flames (heavy flak).

Aug 25 – Rostock, Germany (target Heinkel plant). Heavy flak – today we picked up some flak.

Aug 26 – Today we started for Berlin. Got as far as Norway when we were recalled. Everyone very happy because we never saw such bad weather as we encountered today.

Sept. 12 – Kiel, Germany (target oil). Heavy flak today. We thought we had it over the target. We lost the right outboard engine (Co-pilot side). The inboard engine on the same side was blowing oil all over the place. Our intercom system between pilot and us went out, so we opened the rear door and put on our parachutes getting ready to bail out. As we were waiting, the intercom system came back on and the pilot was telling us to not bail out. We looked out again and the inboard engine had stopped blowing oil. Of course with one engine out the group went ahead and we flew back by ourselves on three engines. We never got an answer as to what caused the engine to blow oil and then stop.

Skipping over some of the Egan mission entries (Sept. 22, 26, Oct. 3, 5, 7, 25, 26, Nov 11, 25) here are a few more examples of some interesting mission entries in Egan's notebook:

Sept 30 – Hamm, Germany (Didn't do a very good job the last time so went back to hit the same target).

Oct. 17- Cologne, Germany. (Target marshalling yard). Heavy flak expected, but rather light. Approximately 1,000 bombers have hit this target for the third straight day.

Nov 4 – Hanover, Germany (target oil). Getting to be a rough place (Heavy flak).

Nov 26 – Bielefeld, Germany (target 300 FT viaduct). Saw no fighters (German Luftwaffe), but was informed we lost 18 bombers due to enemy fighters in this general area.

Nov 29 – Bielfeld, Germany (target viaduct). Missed the target the other day – so back again today – told by G-2 to expect at least 300 (enemy) fighters, but we saw none.

Dec 2 – Bingen, Germany (target marshalling yard). Before reaching target we ran into solid clouds and couldn't see a thing. The formation broke up and everyone flew back on their own.

Dec 10 – Bingen, Germany (target marshalling yard). Dropped out of formation due to engine trouble and came back on our own. So we flew over Brussels and saw where the Germans opened the dam and flooded the whole country side.

Dec 27 – Today we lost our Co-pilot. He ditched in the Channel only three were rescued...

From (one of) the crew members that survived, I was told the last time he saw Co-pilot McGowan, he was putting something up against the windows for protection just before they hit the water. To my knowledge, no one remembers seeing him get out.

(Note: The surviving pilot, Lt. Malone, said Lt. McGowan had a bag with a blanket and was putting blankets up to protect from flying broken glass and he might have gotten tangled up in the blankets after the crash.)

Thomas Egan (from Warwick, Rhode Island) flew with Gale McGowan on about 22 missions. Sgt. Egan was a waist gunner on the Bingham crew (1/Lt. McGowan's original crew) and 1/Lt. McGowan were sitting together waiting to see if they would be scheduled to fly on 27 Dec 1944. They and other members of their crew were on standby as replacements that day as they had been on many previous missions. At that time most of the crew had flown approximately 22 combat missions together, while their co-pilot, 1/Lt. McGowan, had flown about 33 missions. 1/Lt. McGowan had volunteered for extra missions in order to complete his required 35 missions. December 1944, was a time of the major German offensive known as the Battle of the Bulge and there were plenty of opportunities for replacement co-pilots and other position crew members to fly extra missions. Egan said, "On the morning of 27 December, we were once again scheduled to standby. That morning I remember very clearly because I've told the story many times through the years. Lt. McGowan and I were sitting together. He was rather tired and said he hoped that he wouldn't be called to fly that day. As things went, once again a co-pilot was needed [as a replacement on 2/Lt. Wallace Malone's crew] and Lt. McGowan had to go."

Egan remarked that 1/Lt. Gale B. McGowan was affectionately referred to as "the old man" by his crew. McGowan was a few months over 26 years old and the other members of his regular crew were 23 and younger with the exception of the ball turret gunner, Clarence Lidke (from Idalia, Colorado), who was "old" also (25 years old at the time).

Dan Bingham remembered that the crew started out flying their missions on a B-24 called "Gerty the Gremlin" and flew most of their missions on "Gerty" until it was pulled from rotation. Tom Egan and Clarence Lidke both said the crew's next B-24 was named by Lt. James

Cunningham (the crew's navigator). Cunningham named the new B-25 "KYHOOYA" in remembrance of a fraternity he belonged to while attending college.

Attempting to complete his 35 missions so he could return to the States, 1/Lt McGowan had been volunteering for extra missions. Also, replacement co-pilots were sorely needed during the Battle of the Bulge German breakout during December 1944. On the morning of 27 December, McGowan was selected to be Co-pilot on the 2/Lt. Wallace R. Malone crew. Malone's regular co-pilot, 2/Lt. Hulet Mack, was ill and so McGowan was the assigned as his replacement. 1/Lt. McGowan was flying his 33rd or 34th combat mission with the 446th Bomb Group, on December 27, 1944, when the B-24 Liberator bomber he was co-piloting lost power in two engines due to mechanical failure and ditched in the freezing waters of the English Channel near Dover. McGowan and six others were at first declared Missing in Action (MIA) and then, upon confirmation, he and the others were declared Killed in Action (KIA): the pilot, 2/Lt. Wallace Malone; the bombardier, 2/Lt. Jack Heuser; and the ball turret gunner, S/Sgt. Thomas Strohaker.