

Collier's

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"NO BUSINESS, DOC"



By John Lardner

The remarkable adventure of a Flying Fortress that traded its tail for a Messerschmitt and gave Lonesome Sam Sarpolus his nickname—to say nothing of a few bad moments

THIS squadron of B-17s had been on seventy missions since August, when the first All-American raid against Europe struck Rouen. The boys had scattered their calling cards all over Occupied France, Holland and Belgium, and then, at the beginning of November, the battle winds blew them south and they commenced with equal impartiality to powder the fringes of the big lake that Mussolini once claimed as his own. Another day, another Axis base: Gadames, Cagliatisipoli, Gabès, Palermo, Sfax, Medenine, Kasserine, Sousse.

Ask a pilot or gunner where he was on January 3d or March 10th and he'd have to refer you to the box score in the Operations tent. It's been a long war already, in airmen's terms. The towns run together and so do the fires and the Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs and the upended hailstorms of flak and the dates.

The exception is February 1st. That was the day the Messerschmitt 109 almost chopped Lieutenant Bragg's ship in two and left Lonesome Sam Sarpolus swaying around in the tail like a squirrel on the limb of a falling tree.

The men of the squadron can tell you the date and the name of the target—Tunis. As with the blizzard of 1888, each witness has his own special memory of the plane as she came in. It still puzzles some of the boys that she did come in. You get the impression they would ask for a retake if Bragg and his crew would oblige. But Bragg and his crew say, "No dice." They are very firm on this point, especially Sarpolus.

Bragg's citation said, "It appeared to be an impossibility." Writers of citations and communiqués have low boiling points, as a rule. Much better proof that something out of the ordinary happened over North Africa on February 1st is the fact that every man in camp can still tell you the story with diagrams.

Lonesome Sam



Sgt. Sam Sarpolus, tail gunner, found himself practically flying alone through space. The Boeing Flying Fortress broke in two a few minutes after landing

It's partly Bragg's story and partly Sarpolus', and Bragg happened to be in camp when we rolled up to a prairie-dog village of tents on a cold, bare plateau stockaded by mountains. Sarpolus was "out"—that is, the squadron was back over Tunis again with more of its friends than Rommel cared to contemplate. A slight finger wound had grounded Bragg for the day.

"You want some blow-by-blow?" asked the pilot, standing slim and medium-tall. "Well, let's see."

He set on the table a blackened toothbrush used for cleaning typewriters.

"That's us," he said. "Here's the Messerschmitt," he added, moving a box of paper clips into position. "We hit the Tunis docks from twenty thousand feet and were heading for home when these two enemy pursuits suddenly sort of decided to mousetrap us."

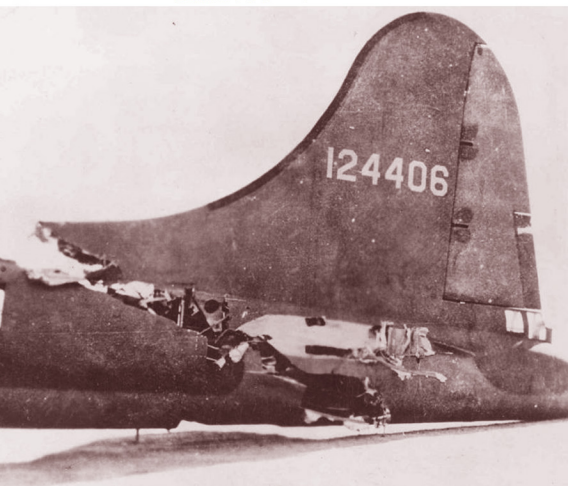
Bragg told the story of his plane sparsely but with enjoyment. Then he tossed aside the toothbrush and box of clips and cocked an ear. "They're coming in now," he said, leading the way out of the tent. "Nice timing. You talk to these boys and maybe they'll tell it to you good and maybe they won't. You know how these kids are about talking."

Clouds were in front of the sun and it was cold, as the big bombers circled and came in. This is the red hour of the day at a bomber base—the hour the men on the ground have waited for, tense and quiet, since the mission took off. All at once, everyone loosens up and is talking freely and finding friends in the sky and getting mess kits ready. Our truck pulled alongside Sarpolus' plane just as the crew began piling out. Sergeant Sam Sarpolus, in the tail-gun compartment, was the last to detach himself.

"You're famous, Lonesome Sam," said Tech Sergeant Joe James, the top turret gunner. "A reporter, already."

Sarpolus smiled the width of his long, whiskered young face. His blue eyes were windbeaten. He tucked a thumb in his coverall and leaned against the wing of his temporary vehicle, resigned. He talked pretty good.

Lonesome Sam



The All-American had bombed Tunis from 20,000 feet and then headed home on this day of February 1st. They called her All-American because her crew came from pretty much all over—Georgia, Maryland, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Missouri, both Carolinas. The echelon was seven minutes on its way back from the target when the Messerschmitts struck.

The Japs used to hit B-17s on the tail until we put guns there. Then they didn't hit much of anywhere. Germans today often strike by the nose, doing a belly roll as they fire, in order to drop beneath the oncoming Fortress. The pilot who tackled the All-American never finished his roll. He may have been dead, because Bombardier Second Lieutenant Harry C. Neusle let him have it with the nose gun and Sergeant Mike Zuk with his waist gun. At any rate he was half upside down as his plane glanced blindly off the port side of the big ship and fell in pieces. Right away Tail-Gunner Sam Sarpolus was practically alone in the world.

The technical report sheet later spoke as follows: The Fortress' left horizontal stabilizer and left elevator were completely torn away; the vertical fin and rudder damaged; fuselage cut approximately through two thirds of its thickness; various control cables severed; the electrical and oxygen systems damaged.

What it amounts to is that there was a piece of Messerschmitt wing in front of Sam Sarpolus and, by all apparent evidence, nothing else.

As far as Sarpolus could tell, he was flying through African skies alone in the tail end of what had been, if his memory did not deceive him, a B-17. It was like riding a kite, and Samuel did not like it. At least, that was his conclusion later on. For the time being, he had no likes or dislikes whatever—he just swayed and neglected to think or feel.

The crew in the front end at first considered themselves without a tail and without Sarpolus.

Sergeant James remembers that someone said, "The tail's gone," and he remembers reflecting that this absence must involve his friend Sam Sarpolus from St. Clair, Michigan, as well.

Pretty soon someone else was yelling, "It ain't gone, but you could drive a jeep through that hole." Whoever it was, he kept repeating "You could drive a jeep through that hole," all the rest of the way home. Everybody remembers that, but nobody knows the identity of the speaker.

When Bragg went back from the cockpit to investigate, he saw the rest of his ship was still with him by virtue of the margin of the catwalk and a narrow strip of the right side of the fuselage. He also saw crawling toward him along the cat-

Lonesome Sam

walk Sergeant Sam Sarpolus, smiling very sheepishly and bearing four gun brushes, a parachute and Bragg's jacket.

"You forgot this, Skipper," said Sam, indicating the jacket with his chin. Sergeant Sarpolus admits that he left four gas masks behind on his death-defying crawl. "I looked at them a minute and thought the hell with them," he says.

Bragg and Sarpolus stood together, staring sternward, and saw the rear of the ship sway a foot to the left and a foot to the right. Bragg brooded briefly. It would, as his citation said later, have been easy to give the order to abandon ship. But it was three hundred thousand bucks' worth of ship, and they were over enemy territory. Bragg played a hunch. Subconsciously he was betting on his own skill. At least one elevator cable seemed to be working. So he brought the miracle off.

It was a strange trip home. There was an outsider in the crew that day—Sergeant Elton Conda. Before the mission started, when Bragg asked him if he wanted to fill in, Conda had asked brashly, "Can you fly?" Two minutes after the pilot brought the All-American down on her two front wheels on her home field, having first set off a red flare to insure having an ambulance ready in case of a crack-up, Conda walked up to Bragg. He clutched the lieutenant's right hand, pumped it for fifteen seconds and then lurched away.

Bragg turned to the ambulance surgeon who had rushed up with what seemed to be half of the camp's personnel. "No business, Doc," he said.

Inside the plane now were three inquisitive guys from another crew inspecting the scene of the crime.

"Say," called one of them to Lonesome Sam Sarpolus, "why didn't she break in two?"

Lonesome Sam, feeling slightly guilty in behalf of himself and the ship for coming home whole, was about to extend his apologies when the ship saved him the trouble. She did break in two, there on the ground, beneath the weight of the sight-seers' feet.

When Sam goes home to his family's dairy farm in St. Clair, which is now being worked by his younger brother—aged nineteen—he will take along a piece of the Messerschmitt wing as a souvenir. Long before then—in fact any day now—he and Bragg and the crew will be flying the All-American again, for the stern half of another damaged Fortress has been grafted onto the All-American's front, and the mongrel plane is ready to go.

Being a tolerant gang, the boys are able to put up with the humor of Captain Bill Foster, the squadron's operations officer, who is trying to have the bomber's old serial number, 124207, replaced by 124206½.

