

Introduction

by Alan Neal Levy

Lt. Leonard Levy was the Navigator on a B-17 bomber nicknamed *Shack Rabbits*. The crew was:

- Lt. Augustine “Christy” Christiani (Pilot)*
- Sgt. Salvator Ciaccio (Engineer)
- Lt. Clarence Farrington (Co-Pilot)*
- Sgt. John Griscom (Tail Gunner)
- Sgt. William Kline (Left Waist Gunner)
- Lt. Leonard Levy (Navigator)*
- Lt. Raymond “Rock” Newmark (Bombadier)*
- Sgt. William Mayne (Radio Operator)
- Sgt. William A. Pope, Jr. (Right Waist Gunner)*
- Sgt. Rupert Smith (Ball Turret Gunner)

On Monday, March 6, 1944 the crew of the *Shack Rabbits* took part in a massive bombing mission. They were shot down at approximately 2:50 pm British Summer Time. Of the ten crew, six bailed out near Bentheim, a town near the German-Dutch border and were taken prisoner. The five survivors were Christiani, Kline, Levy, Newmark and Pope.

The *Shack Rabbits* was one of the B-17s assigned to the 388th Bomb Group of 8th US Army Air Corp (now designated the US Air Force.) The mission was the first full-scale daylight attack on the German capital of Berlin. All previous missions had taken place in the evening, where the danger from surface-to-air “flak” attacks was minimized. The accuracy of evening bombing raids was weak, however.

The March 6 mission would be Lt. Levy’s seventh mission since being sent in February to Knettishall Air Base in England, where the 388th Bomb Group was based. It would also be the largest and deadliest air force mission ever: 814 bombers from dozens of bases around England, arranged in three divisions. When all aircraft were in the air in their designated positions, the “bomber stream” was anticipated to be 90 miles long.

Unfortunately, the mission, which was deemed a success, was the most costly in the history of the highly-respected 8th Air Force. 69 bombers, including the *Shack Rabbits* failed to return to their bases. Two events accounted for almost half of the casualties – both events involved the 3rd Bomb Division.

First a break in the formation occurred over 100 miles away from Berlin. The lead bomber in the 1st Bomb Division made a navigation error and led the entire 1st Division off-course. The 100th Bomb Group stayed on course, followed by the rest of the 3rd and 2nd Divisions. This also left them vulnerable to German fighters. Sixteen bombers from the 100th Bomb Group were shot down shortly after noon. The *Shack Rabbits* and the 388th were in formation directly behind the 100th.

The target for the 3rd Bomb Division was the Robert Bosch Electrical Works factory in Klein Machnow, just south of Berlin. Weather was not clear over the target, however, and bomb groups were told to find secondary targets. The 45th Combat Wing A Formation, which included the Shack Rabbits, failed to find a clear target in the southern part of the city, so they headed north towards the central part of downtown Berlin, where they came under heavy flak attack. At least one of the 388th's planes (the *Blitzin' Betsy*) was damaged in the flak attack over Berlin.

The *Shack Rabbits*, along with the other members of the 388th, left Berlin air-space without ever emptying its bomb bays. After the 3 divisions reformed to make their way home, the 388th completed a bomb run over a German town west of Berlin. By 2:30 most crews were happily rejoicing their survival. Unfortunately, the German fighters regrouped for one more deadly assault on the bombers as they made their way back to England. The 388th suffered the brunt of the attack. At approximately 2:50 pm, seven bombers from the 388th went down. Hauptmann (Captain) Hugo Frey was credited with shooting down four of the B-17s.