

The Man Who Wouldn't Go Home

Manny Klette's war against Nazism would end only when the Third Reich collapsed.

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ON April 25, 1945, Lt. Col. Immanuel Klette landed his B-17 at Bassingbourn at the end of a nine-hour mission to Pilsen, Czechoslovakia. It was the last day of the strategic bombing campaign in Europe. Twelve days later, Germany surrendered unconditionally.

Manny Klette didn't know at the time that he had set a record for heavy bomber pilots unlikely ever to be equaled. He had flown ninety-one missions totaling 663 combat hours—twenty more than his closest runner-up and sixty-six beyond the standard twenty-five-mission tour. Thirteen of his early missions were penetrations of German airspace before there were long-range escort fighters, when, statistically, the chances of completing a combat tour were zero.

In March 1943, Klette began his remarkable combat career as a second lieutenant with the 306th Bomb Group based at Thurleigh. For him, the war was a crusade against the evils of a totalitarian government headed by a megalomaniacal racist—a conviction Klette had inherited from his father, a clergyman who emigrated from Germany before World War I.

During his twenty-one missions as co-

pilot, Manny Klette learned the B-17's systems, characteristics, and capabilities as few pilots knew them. That typical thoroughness paid off many times. On one mission while climbing through clouds at near stalling speed, Klette had to make a sharp turn to avoid another bomber. His plane went into a spin from which he recovered—the first B-17 pilot to pull out of a spin with a full bomb load.

Another time, he brought his bomber back across the Channel with its two right engines out. Over England, another engine had to be shut down. With supreme airmanship, Klette landed on one faltering engine and with a flat tire. That, too, had not been done before.

Flying as a copilot, he studied German fighter tactics and our own losses, concluding that two keys to survival were crew experience and holding extremely close formation. When he completed his twenty-five-mission tour, which included the bloody Schweinfurt raid of August 17, 1943, Klette was confident he could survive another tour. His group commander approved only five additional missions.

Klette's twenty-eighth mission on September 23 came close to being his last. With two engines knocked out by flak, a perforated fuel tank that wouldn't seal, and a leg wound, he was forced, after a third engine quit, to crash at night under instrument conditions in woods near an RAF base. All of the crew survived, but Klette spent five months in hospitals with fractures of the pelvis and upper legs. The doctors said he would never fly again, or even walk normally. Manny Klette didn't agree. He asked

for a ground assignment in the UK until he could return to operations. As a briefing officer in Gen. Tooeey Spaatz's USSTAF headquarters, he made a thorough study of Eighth Air Force operational strengths and weaknesses, German targets, Luftwaffe tactics, and an analysis of when and how the Germans changed their flak dispositions.

Klette finally won his battle with the flight surgeons. On July 30, 1944, he was given command of the 324th Squadron, 91st Bomb Group at Bassingbourn. During his next sixty-three missions to one of the toughest targets in Germany, Klette's work at USSTAF led to tactical innovations that improved bombing accuracy and saved the lives of many crews that he led.

On November 21, 1944, Klette led the entire Eighth Air Force—1,291 bombers and 954 fighters—in a raid on oil refineries at Merseburg-Leuna, the most heavily defended target in Germany. In rapidly deteriorating weather, he made an on-the-spot decision to take the bombers down from 27,000 feet to visual bombing weather at 17,000, resulting in the war's most destructive strike on the refineries. A recommendation that Klette be awarded the DSC for that mission was lost, not to surface until thirty-seven years later, after his retirement.

Why did Manny Klette continue to lead so frequently despite his group commander's objections? There was, of course, his impassioned belief that Nazism must be destroyed. Then, as Klette puts it, there was faith that God was his pilot, and he only a copilot. Finally, confidence, his and that of others, in his ability as one of the most experienced combat leaders of the war. In his early days at Bassingbourn, the 324th, led by a less seasoned officer, had lost three planes. After that, Klette resolved to lead the squadron on every difficult mission, and he did.

Nothing in Colonel Klette's unique combat career gives him more satisfaction than the fact that in thirty missions as either group, combat wing, division, task force, or Eighth Air Force lead, only two 91st Bomb Group aircraft were lost.

Manny Klette's war against the Third Reich is a study in both valor and combat leadership. His record merits more than these 800-odd words. It deserves a book. ■



This photo was taken at Bassingbourn, where, on July 30, 1944, Lt. Col. Manny Klette became commanding officer of the 91st Bomb Group's 324th Bomb Squadron.