

# Mission to Norway

Over the North Sea, all four engines of Lt. Rockford Griffith's B-24 quit, but the worst still lay ahead.

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ON NOVEMBER 18, 1943, the Eighth Air Force made one of its few visits of World War II to Norway. The target was Oslo-Kjeller airfield, where the Luftwaffe overhauled many of its aircraft. No fighter opposition was expected, but this wasn't exactly a milk run. From the 44th Bomb Group's base at Shipham in East Anglia to Oslo was about 650 miles—200 miles farther than Berlin—with most of the route over the cold, inhospitable waters of the North Sea.

Bad weather made takeoff and form-up something less than a textbook operation. Last off the runway was Lt. Rockford C. Griffith and his B-24J Liberator crew. It was their first combat mission. Griffith had to do some serious throttle bending to catch up with the bomber stream. Fuel might be a problem before the day was out.

The formation reached its target without incident, bombed from 12,000 feet, and headed for home. As they flew south along Oslofjorden, it became obvious to Griffith that fuel was a problem. He pulled out of formation to set up his automatic pilot in order to save gas.

Then, off the southern tip of Norway, the unexpected happened. Luftwaffe fighters hit the stream—fifteen Bf-109s and Ju-88s concentrating on the straggler, damaging three of Griffith's engines, tearing up one wing and rudder, and seriously wounding the belly gunner, Sgt. Bill Kuban.

Griffith pushed over in a dive for a

cloud bank at about 5,000 feet, taking all the evasive action the damaged bomber would allow. At one point, the controls momentarily locked. It looked as though the war was over for Lieutenant Griffith and his crew. But they had done something to even the score. Tail gunner Sgt. Forrest Clark shot down one fighter before the battered B-24 reached cloud cover. The radios, covered with gasoline, were shut off, and the ten-man crew was out of touch with the world.

As soon as he thought it safe to leave the clouds, Griffith nosed down to 3,000 feet, in the clear. While the crew threw out all unnecessary equipment, he and copilot Lt. L. G. Grone battled to keep the limping Liberator in the air. Three of the four engines were cutting out intermittently, and once all four quit simultaneously over icy water and 300 miles from a friendly shore. Then the good engine caught again, and the other three resumed their in-and-out performance. Three hours after the fighter attack and with the fuel gauges flickering, Griffith and the crew sighted the coast of England. Fifteen more minutes and they'd be rolling down the runway at Shipham.

Approaching the field, Griffith



Then-Col. Leon W. Johnson (left), at that time group commander, with Lt. Rockford C. Griffith.

called for gear-down, but only one wheel dropped. It would have to be "gear-up" and belly in on the sod. But when flight engineer Sgt. E. J. Parrish tried to raise the wheel, he found it was stuck in the "down" position.

Forrest Clark later described Rockford Griffith as a calm, steady man, a strong leader who did not panic under stress. In the next few seconds, Griffith displayed those characteristics. Since the wounded gunner could not use a parachute, Griffith would have to attempt a landing on one wheel with a damaged rudder and flaps and the only good engine running virtually on fumes.

At the same time, Griffith would not risk the entire crew against those odds. He ordered everyone to bail out except copilot Grone and Sergeant Kuban. Griffith and Grone then put the big bomber down gently on one wheel and held it there until a wing dropped and the Liberator slid to a stop in a cloud of smoke and dust. Before it was hauled to the boneyard, two unexploded 20-mm shells were found in the good engine.

A combination of skill, courage, and luck brought Lt. Rockford Griffith and his crew back from their first mission and earned him a Silver Star. Skill and courage were the constants in that formula. The variable was fickle Lady Luck.

Nineteen missions later, she was, at best, inattentive. With failing engines and not enough fuel to make it to England, Rocky Griffith landed his Liberator in Switzerland, saving the crew from probable capture or worse. That wasn't a bad day's work, either.

*Rockford Griffith was nominated for inclusion in the "Valor" series by Forrest Clark and the other members of Lieutenant (now retired Major) Griffith's crew.*