

The Quiet Hero

The Group soon found out that their new and untested commander had both brains and guts.

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IN background and temperament, Fred Castle was far from typical of World War II combat commanders in the Eighth Air Force. The son of a West Pointer, he graduated from the Military Academy in 1930, seventh in a class of 241. On completing pilot training, he flew pursuits at Selfridge Field, then was assigned duty with the Civilian Conservation Corps.

The financially starved Air Corps of Depression days seemed to offer little opportunity for either flying or advancement. In 1934, Lieutenant Castle resigned his Regular commission for one in the Reserve and went with industry as a statistician. Four years later, he joined Sperry Gyroscope and soon became assistant to the president. It was rumored that despite his youth, he was in line for the top job.

A month after Pearl Harbor, Fred Castle was called to active duty at the request of Brig. Gen. Ira Eaker, who had learned of Castle's managerial talent. Eaker was bound for the UK to set up what would become VIII Bomber Command. Castle was given the job of organizing the base and depot structure for the USAAF forces that would be coming soon. In a year he had been promoted to colonel and was the Command's Assistant Chief of Staff for Supply.

What Fred Castle really wanted was a combat assignment. In June 1943 it came. He was sent to com-

mand the newly committed 94th Bombardment Group, which had suffered heavy losses in its early missions. The new CO was not welcomed with enthusiasm. He was, among other things, a staff man—from supply, at that. In his first meeting with Group officers, he made it clear in a quiet but firm way that the term "officer and gentleman" implied proper dress and decorum, even at parties.

The next day, Colonel Castle flew his first of many missions with the Group. The pilot of his B-17 reported that the Colonel calmly took notes while under attack by enemy fighters. To the displeasure of crews, the new commander then began to schedule frequent practice missions to improve formation flying and air discipline. His collection and analysis of data on every Group activity rapidly began to pay off in greater efficiency. A particular concern was the welfare of the enlisted men.

When Castle had been in command for less than a month, VIII Bomber Command scheduled the 4th Wing for the deepest penetration of Germany to that date, July 28, against a FW-190 assembly plant at Oschersleben. It would be a hot mission. Colonel Castle led the 94th into bad weather and fighter attacks. Some elements of the bomber stream became disorganized and turned back, but Castle decided to go on to the target with his group and a few stragglers.

His judgment proved sound. A break in the clouds allowed Castle's force, followed by the 388th Group, to put their bombs on target with an estimated loss of a month's production of FW-190s. The 94th lost no B-17s that day, and Group morale soared. The Group decided that their slight, somewhat aloof commander had both brains and guts.

In April 1944, Castle was given command of the 4th Bombardment Wing. Ten months later he was pro-

moted to brigadier general. He continued to fly the tough missions and worked himself to the point of exhaustion carrying out an organizational experiment with the Wing. Then, in mid-December, the Germans launched their Ardennes offensive under cover of persistently bad weather.

On the evening of December 23, General Castle returned to his headquarters after visiting some of his groups and learned that a maximum effort against Luftwaffe fields and communications centers that could support the enemy drive had been laid on for the next day. His DCS/Operations, Colonel MacDonald, would lead the more than 2,000 heavy bombers, escorted by 1,000 fighters—the largest force ever assembled. But Fred Castle saw it as *his* duty to lead. He would fly with the 487th Group on this, his thirtieth combat mission.

The next morning, flying at 22,000 feet over Belgium, Castle's Fortress was hit by Me-109s and could no longer hold position. Two more attacks set the Number 3 and 4 engines afire, damaged the controls, and wounded two crew members. Castle ordered the crew to bail out of the barely controllable B-17. Six of them left the doomed bomber while the General took over the controls to give the pilot time to retrieve his parachute.

It was too late. The right wing tank exploded, and the big bomber spun in from 12,000 feet, killing Fred Castle and the pilot, Lieutenant Harriman.

Brig. Gen. Frederick W. Castle, for whom Castle AFB, Calif., is named, was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously for his valiant attempt to save his crew at the cost of his own life. This quiet, reserved man, so untypical of air combat commanders of his time, demonstrated by his life and in his death that there is no common mold for either leadership or heroism. ■