

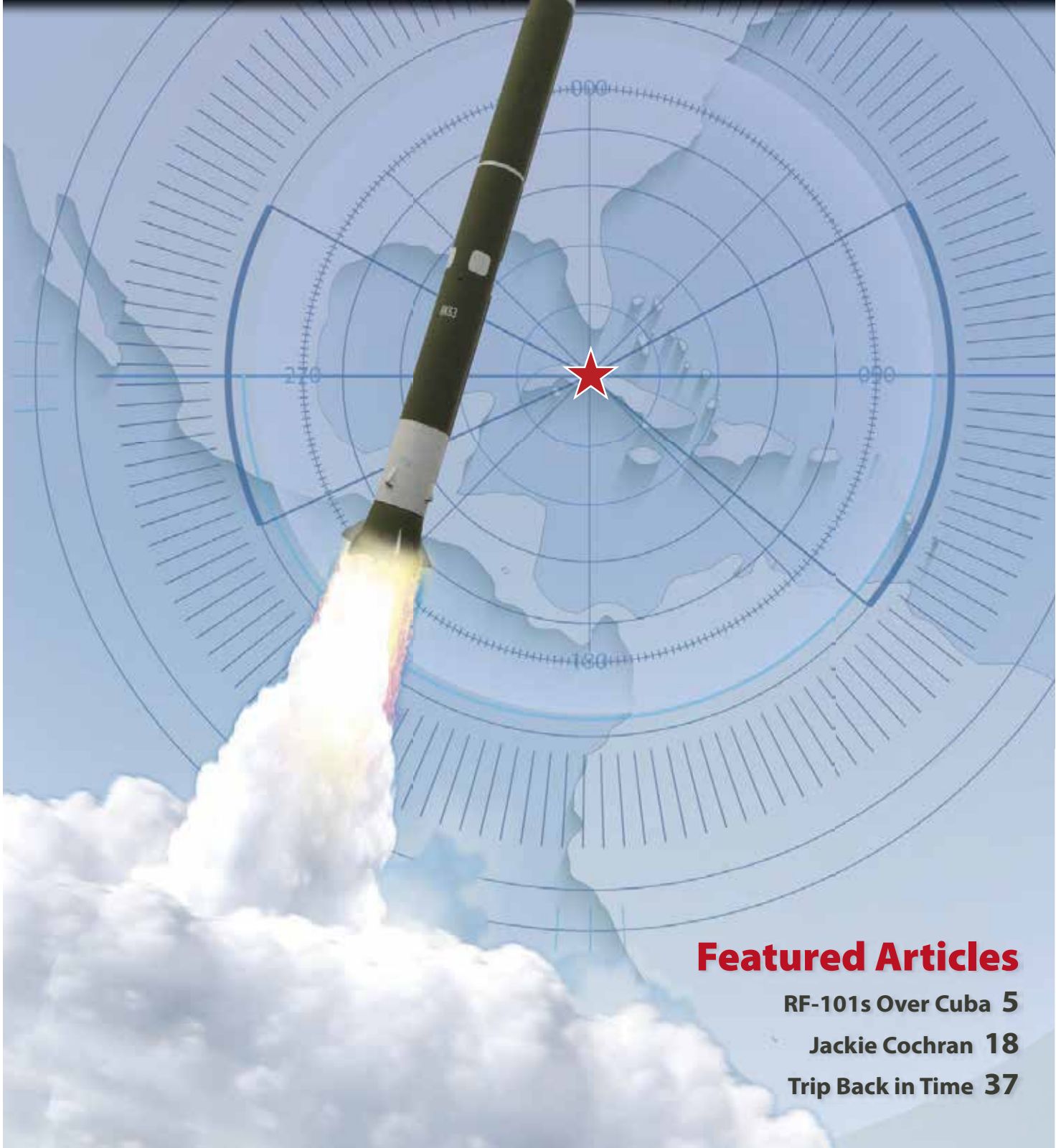
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A Trip Back in Time

by COL FRANK ALFTER, USAF (RET)

On November 8, 2014, my wife and I visited a quiet little village in France and met with an old friend and the family of the man who helped my father's crew when they crash-landed near the village on April 13, 1944. It was my third trip to Rambucourt and my wife, Carol's, second. I was fortunate to have met Cyriaque (Jimmy) Jamin in the summer of 1999, but he passed away later that same year. Carol and I visited Colette, Jimmy's wife, in September 2000, right before we returned to the States following a four-year tour of duty at Ramstein Air Base (AB), Germany.

It was so exciting to be back in Rambucourt once again, and I learned even more than before about what happened to the crew of *Big Stupe V*, a Boeing B-17G Flying Fortress piloted by 1st Lt Farris Heffley, on that fateful day in 1944.

The crew was awakened at 5:30 a.m. for a mission to Schweinfurt, Germany along with 22 other crews from the 384th Bomb Group (BG). They would be joining another six crews from their own 545th Bomb Squadron for this mission to strike at the ball bearing plants in Schweinfurt.

The Eighth Army Air Force launched a massive raid on the Reich that day with 415 B-17s, 211 Consolidated

B-24 Liberators, escorted by 134 Lockheed P-38 Lightnings and 504 Republic P-47 Thunderbolts. The 384th BG contributed 21 Fortresses (plus two airborne spares) from Grafton Underwood in East Anglia. They took off between 9:41 a.m. and 9:55 a.m., and assembled over the airfield at 10:19 a.m. at 8,000 feet.

After the two spares returned to base and with two more air aborts, 19 Fortresses from the 384th crossed the Channel and headed into enemy airspace. Of these 19, seven were 545th Squadron planes and took position in what was known as "coffin corner," the low squadron in the Group's formation.

The formation flew the course as briefed and between 1:20 p.m. and 1:50 p.m. the first enemy fighter opposition occurred. The 384th BG lead and one other aircraft were shot down over Traben-Trarbach, Germany. The formation deputy took lead and continued on to the IP (initial point for the bomb run), near Bensheim, Germany, where the second, far more devastating fighter attack took place. The 384th had P-47 escort all the way, but when the first wave of Messerschmitt Bf 109s (called Me 109s by bomber crews) attacked at the IP, the escorts went after them. As soon as the P-47s had been effectively drawn off the formation of



► MSgt Efland, line chief for the 545th bomb squadron, stands in front of *Big Stupe V* as it undergoes repairs.

Forts, a wave of Focke-Wulf Fw 190s attacked the low squadron and between 1:54 p.m. and 1:57 p.m., six of the seven 545th B-17s were shot out of formation.

Of those six 545th Fortresses, one, named *Big Stupe V*, was the one in which my father, SSgt Glen Alfter, was tail gunner. The initial attack took out two of her four engines (#2 and #4) and Lt Heffley turned out of formation, jettisoned the bomb load and headed west. The airplane was losing altitude and Heffley ordered the crew to throw out everything they didn't need to lighten the load. Flak vests, helmets, ammunition, and some guns were tossed. SSgt Alfter soon discovered they were being chased by two Bf 109s.

As they passed over Metz, France, flak took out one more engine and to further lighten the load the waist and ball turret gunners jettisoned the ball turret. With the plane now struggling mightily on only one engine, Heffley looked for a place to set the airplane down. They were way too low to bail out, and were still being chased and fired upon by the two Messerschmitts.

Heffley found gently rolling farmland near the village of Rambucourt, but not before receiving damage and injuries due to the 20 mm cannon fire they were taking from the rear. The enemy fighters had been flying slightly lower than *Big Stupe V* and firing up into her from the tail forward. Alfter managed to hit one of the Bf 109s, but he also took hits from the enemy that put shrapnel in his left temple and left shoulder. Another 20 mm shell came through under Heffley's seat, through his right leg, through the rudder pedal and exploded in the nose, wounding 2nd Lt Louis Carini, navigator. Heffley managed to maneuver the dying Fortress onto a plowed field, missing telephone wires, railroad tracks, and trees.

Once on the ground, the remaining Bf 109 began strafing the near intact B-17, and according to Mr. Jamin of the French Resistance, TSgt Samuel Deutsch, top turret gunner/flight engineer, spun his guns around and shot the enemy fighter. The German pilot left the scene smoking and Mr. Jamin was able to help the crew out of *Big Stupe V*.

FAST-FORWARD TO THE SUMMER OF 1999

I was stationed at Ramstein AB and had been corresponding with Sam Deutsch, who had returned to



▲ Standing L-R: Sam Deutsch, Glen Alfter, Bill Shade, Dangar, George Allen, Ralph Gatzman. Kneeling L-R: Fariss Heffley, Bash, Louis Carini, John Bettolotti.

Rambucourt in 1985 to thank the French for helping him evade capture. Sam told me I should visit Rambucourt and the Jamins in particular.

I met Jimmy and Colette Jamin at their house and they truly demonstrated the very best of hospitality... French hospitality. We ate and drank for hours and then Jimmy and another former-Resistance man named Rene Fourriere took us out to the field where *Big Stupe V* came to rest some five-plus decades earlier. Jimmy explained that he had been working on a friend's garage door at the east end of the village when he heard a straining sound and soon realized it was an American bomber in distress and just about to put down in his father's farm field.

He saw the Bf 109 strafing the bomber after it was on the ground and literally dodged 20 mm cannon fire to get to the crew before the Wehrmacht did. He saw Sam shoot the Messerschmitt and was able to get the crew and help some of them get away from danger. TSgt Bill Shade, radio operator, set off the thermite bombs in the forward part of the plane to destroy the equipment, such as the Norden bombsight. The bombardier, 2nd Lt John Bettolatti, broke through the plexiglass nose, tumbled, got up and kept on running. More on him later.



▲ Top left: SSgt Glen Alfter, tail gunner on the *Big Stupe V*, after being captured by German forces near Rambucourt, France. Top right: *Big Stupe V* after being shot down, showing destruction caused by thermite bombs.

Jimmy took five crewmen, 2nd Lt Walter Mabe, copilot; TSgt Deutsch; SSgt Alfter; SSgt George Allen, waist gunner; and SSgt Robert Bechtel, ball turret gunner, and led them across the field toward the village main road. They were headed south of the village to a forest where Jimmy would hide them until arrangements could be made with the French Resistance. On their way across the main road, Alfter realized he would only slow the others down, so he departed and headed west along a back road.

As Jimmy explained what he had seen on that day in 1944, he pointed out the exact spot across the field where the airplane came to rest and showed us where he took the five crewmen. He then took us to the building that my father was captured in. It was so surreal and so very moving to see all this and I truly wished my father had lived long enough to experience this trip back in time. But, my father passed away in 1982, and had never been back to Rambucourt.

Unfortunately, Jimmy passed away near the end of 1999, but before Carol and I left our Ramstein assignment I wanted to visit Colette one more time. We spent the day with her in September 2000. It was another display of French hospitality that kept us eating and drinking for hours. We were so full when we left that evening, and we were headed directly to our own farewell dinner in Germany!

Then, another fourteen years passed before Carol and I flew back to Germany with an invitation from Colette to visit her family on November 8, 2014. At Colette's home in Rambucourt, she, her son and daughter and their spouses welcomed us, and the eating and drinking began. It was a very cheerful reunion with Colette as we

exchanged gifts and photos and discussed the fate of my father's crew in April 1944.

It was on this trip that I learned more details of *Big Stupe V*'s shoot-down. Following our fabulous meal, all of us got into two cars and drove out to the field where the airplane came to a rest. This time we were standing at the edge of the field exactly where the plane was and Colette provided details I did not know from previous studies and trips to Rambucourt. While standing there, hearing all those details, I told Carol I must have something from this place. I picked up a rock about the size of my fist from the field and put it in my pocket.

Colette explained that Heffley and Carini were severely wounded and they knew they needed medical attention, so they only went as far as the nearest building on the west end of the field and hid there more or less hoping the Germans would find them soon and get them some medical help. They did and following medical treatment, both aviators ended up in Stalag Luft I in Barth, Germany.

I also learned that as the airplane was coming to a grinding halt the bombardier, Lt Betolatti, broke through the Plexiglas nose and he and waist gunner SSgt Ralph Gatzman ran through a narrow passageway under the railroad tracks and into the fields to the north. They both were soon captured by the Wehrmacht. What I didn't know until this visit to Rambucourt was that Betolatti managed to escape from his captors and made it all the way back to England. So, of the ten crewmen four made it back to England, and six became POWs.

My father, being one of the more severely wounded, left the others and hid out in a building the entire



village used to do their laundry. Dad was only there a couple of hours before the Germans figured out that someone was hiding there. Because of his bleeding and painful injuries to his head and shoulder, the Germans took him to a hospital in Nancy. He spent about two weeks there before being sent to Frankfurt for interrogation and subsequent transfer, via a 40/8 rail car (40 people or 8 horses) across Germany to Stalag Luft XVIIIB near Vienna, Austria.

Colette took us to the building my father was captured in, and again, it was a surreal event for me. I just stood there and stared at the steps that led down into the building and imagined my father rushing down those very steps to hide from the Germans and then imagined him being dragged back up those three steps with German soldiers on each arm. Although I had seen this building in 1999, this visit and all the details that came with it sent chills up my spine. I took many pictures of that building from all angles.



▲ The building SSgt Glen Alfter hid in after his plane went down.

Colette then took us about two and a half miles south into the woods to show us the hut the other airmen hid out in until the French Resistance could help them. I had not seen this building before and as we stood there with Colette explaining the situation of so many years ago, I could “see” Mabe, Deutsch, Bechtel and Allen hiding out there. They were there when a German patrol came through the woods and they scattered into the woods to hide until the Germans had passed. After the Germans were gone, all but Allen came back to the hut. It was learned later that Allen got lost and was captured, sent to Frankfurt for interrogation and on to Stalag XVIIIB.

▶ A piece of the control yoke from the *Big Stupe V*.



We all drove back to Colette's home and began our farewells. Carol and I had a two-hour drive back to Ramstein. As we were thanking Colette and her family for their very warm hospitality and putting our coats on, Colette went into another room and came out with something that really, really hit me emotionally. She presented me with a piece of the control yoke from *Big Stupe V*! I was so overwhelmed and all I could do was hug this wonderful, petite French lady. I only wished my French skills were adequate to thank her properly, but I think she understood what that piece of my father's airplane meant to me.

We cried, we hugged, and said our good-byes and promised that it would not be another fourteen years before we would visit Rambucourt again. ✪

Col Frank Alfter retired from active duty in 2002, after 33 years of service. He was enlisted for the first nine years, serving as a weapons technician before earning his commission as an aircraft maintenance/munitions officer in 1978. Following his military retirement, he served as a contractor for the Air Force, retiring a second time from the F-22 SPO at Wright-Patterson AFB in 2014. He is currently an active volunteer/docent at the NMUSAF, and also volunteers at the Champaign Aviation Museum where he is helping build a B-17.



▲ In Rambucourt, from L-R: Hans Odermatt, a family friend who translated for the Alfters; Carol Alfter, Frank Alfter, Colette Jamin, and Colette's son-in-law and son.