

## Twenty-Sixth Mission

It must have felt a little unfair. General Ira Eaker, the commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force had established 25 missions as a combat tour for the crews of his heavy bombers. But, just as Dick Osteen closed in on that magic number, the requirement was extended to 30 missions. It was a number Osteen would not reach.

Richard Thacker Osteen, Jr. graduated from Greenville's Parker High School in 1937 and enrolled that same year at Clemson. A textile chemistry major, Osteen was a member of Phi Psi and served as the assistant advertising manager for its *Bobbin and Beaker* magazine covering the textile industry from the students' perspective. Osteen was a member of the Greenville County Club and attended ROTC summer camp at Fort McClellan, Alabama. As America built up its military in anticipation of war, Osteen graduated with honors and was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the infantry in June 1941.



R. T. OSTEEEN

Osteen was initially assigned to the 13<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment at Fort Jackson. He transferred to the Army Air Force in January 1942 and received his pilot's wings at Waco, Texas in October of the following year. Osteen joined the 600<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron of the 398<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group then forming at Rapid City, South Dakota. In April 1944, the group deployed its B-17 Flying Fortress bombers to Nuthampstead, England, about 40 miles north of London. Osteen took part in the group's first combat mission on May 6.

Over the next three months, Osteen flew twenty-five combat missions, including at least two long, exhausting, tension-filled trips to Berlin. Most of the time, Osteen, now a first lieutenant, flew as the copilot for Captain John Baker's crew. On August 8, Osteen was alerted for Mission 531 to support a planned British and Canadian offensive to seize the French city of Falaise. Stubborn German resistance had prevented Field Marshal Montgomery's 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group from moving out of its D-Day lodgment area. The idea, utilizing a tactic which had earlier yielded success for General Omar Bradley's 12<sup>th</sup> Army Group, was to carpet bomb German positions directly in front of the Canadian troops. It was close air support using heavy strategic bombers. Like with the earlier missions in the American sector, Mission 531 would deliver mixed results.

Six hundred eighty-one B-17s were dispatched to bomb enemy troop concentrations south of Caen. Baker, Osteen and their crew were in the squadron's deputy lead B-17, just behind and to the right of the leader. Flying at 15,000 feet and lower, the B-17s were exposed to intense and accurate anti-aircraft fire as they neared the target area. Lieutenant Richard Benefiel, a crew member on one of the group's other B-17s, confided to his diary that the flak was the worst "I have ever seen and ever hope to see. I'll take Berlin any day rather than take another one like today."

Even before the formation reached the target area, things begin to go badly wrong. The formation leader's aircraft was hit by flak and caught fire. As the airplane turned to leave the formation, its bombs began to fall. The other bombers in the formation didn't know whether the release was intentional or due to the aircraft's damage. All of the other B-17s in the group released their bombs in imitation of the leader. Unfortunately for the Canadians below, the bombs had been released 20 miles short of the intended target area. Twenty-five Canadian soldiers were killed and 131 wounded.

Captain Baker and Lieutenant Osteen's bomber took several flak hits in quick succession. A burst struck near the number three engine causing the right wing to erupt in flame. Almost immediately, the wing buckled and the B-17 entered a spin. Flying at the lower altitude reduced the time available for the crew to bail out. Tech Sergeant Jerome Fields, the top turret gunner, and Lt. Selby Hereid, the bombardier, escaped the spiraling aircraft by jumping out of the open bomb bay. Fields last saw Osteen struggling to clip on his parachute, but the G-loads generated by the aircraft's spin prevented Osteen from escaping. The aircraft crashed near Cauvincourt.

Several of the airmen involved described the August 8<sup>th</sup> low-level mission as one of the most terrifying flak encounters of their World War II missions. Seven B-17s were shot down, 294 damaged, and four of these were beyond repair. The human cost was even greater: eight men killed, 15 wounded, and 35 missing. Eight of Osteen's crew would eventually be reclassified from the last category to the first.

The Anglo-Canadian ground offensive supported by the tactical air strikes gained nine miles, but was halted short of its objective, the city of Falaise.

First Lieutenant Richard Thacker Osteen, Jr. was awarded the Air Medal with three oak leaf clusters. He was survived by his wife Helen, his parents, a brother then serving in the Navy, and a sister. Richard Thacker Osteen III was born two months after his father's death.



*Lieutenant Osteen and Captain Baker*

