



## Office of Representative Michele Lepore-Hagan 58<sup>th</sup> Ohio House District

Good morning Chairman Baldrige, Vice Chair McClain, Ranking Member Sheehy and members of the Transportation and Public Safety Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to offer sponsor testimony on HB 330, a bill that would designate the bridge on State Route 46 over Interstate 80 located in Mahoning County as the "Air Force 2nd Lt. William Vaughan Memorial Bridge."

William Vaughan was a graduate of Austintown Fitch High School, class of 1938, and enlisted in the Army Air Force on November 13, 1941.

Mr. Vaughan was part of the highest decorated crew in Air Force History and received our Nation's second highest award, the Distinguished Service Cross for his extraordinary heroism in action while serving in a B-17 Bomber of the 65<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron, 43<sup>rd</sup> Bombardment Group, in action over Bougainville Island on June 16<sup>th</sup> 1943.

Lt. Vaughan was the Radio Operator of a volunteer bomber crew which undertook an important and dangerous photo-mapping mission over the heavily defended enemy Base of Buka in Papua New Guinea, where about 37,000 American troops were to land in a few months. Just before the photographing was completed, about 22 enemy fighters attacked the plane. The bomber was extensively damaged and five of the crew, including the Pilot were seriously wounded. Nevertheless, by skillful evasive flying and by expert gunnery on the part of the crew, successive enemy attacks were fought off. In this furious forty-five engagement, five enemy planes were destroyed and two damaged. Lt. Vaughan, with a bullet wound in his neck, continued to fight until the enemy had broken combat. He then estimated the medical aid required and reported to all Bases to gage where the plane might land. As the navigation instruments were disabled, he then remained at his post and received bearings for the return flight of 580 miles. He showed admirable skill and courage on this voluntary mission. He also received the Silver Star, Distinguished Flying Cross, two Purple Hearts, and is part of a special display located in the Museum of the Air Force at Wright Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio.

The Austintown Board of Trustees and the Austintown Veterans Service Committee have both, unanimously endorsed the naming of the memorial bridge in honor of Air Force 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. William Vaughan. This legislation will stand as a memorial to his service to our country. It should also serve as a reminder to us all that the freedoms we enjoy every day comes at a high price. I hope that because of the passage of HB330, our community will never forget Lt. William Vaughan's selfless courage to heed the call of duty, and that his legacy will be preserved and honored for generations to come.

Chairman Baldrige and members of the committee, thank you again for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on House Bill330 and I would be happy to address any question that you may have.

### 134<sup>th</sup> General Assembly Committee Assignments

Commerce and Labor, Ranking Member  
Health  
Transportation and Public Safety

### Contact Information

77 S. High Street  
Columbus, Ohio 43215  
Office: (614) 466-9435  
Fax: (614) 719-3960  
Email: rep58@ohiohouse.gov

# AUSTINTOWN TOWNSHIP

Mahoning County, Ohio

## TRUSTEES

JAMES C. DAVIS

KENNETH A. CARANO

STEVEN KENT



## FISCAL OFFICER

LAURA L. WOLFE

## ADMINISTRATOR

MICHAEL B. DOCKRY

January 31, 2021

Rep. Michele Lepore-Hagan  
77 S. High Street – 10<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Columbus, Ohio 43215

Dear Rep. Lepore-Hagan

Thank you for your support in naming the bridge at Rt. 46 that goes over Interstate 80, in the name of Air Force 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. William Vaughan who was a member of the Class of 1938 of Austintown Fitch High School and who became one of the highest decorated military persons in World War II.

Fitch Alum, Ken Jakubec, who was just honored as a Hall of Fame Inductee by the Ohio Department of Veteran Services, is the primary leader, researcher and advocate for the bridge naming. It is my pleasure to work with Ken on this issue as it has been throughout the past years on numerous activities.

For your information, the Austintown Board of Trustees and the Austintown Veterans Service Committee have both, unanimously, endorsed the naming.

Ken and I are available at any time to give more information or to meet to discuss any need towards the success of the naming.

I have included numerous material to show the many reasons to justify the naming of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. William Vaughan.

Once again, Ken and I thank you for your support and we are a phone call away for any assistance.

Sincerely,

KENNETH CARANO

Senator Rulli, State Representative Lepore-Hagan  
Austintown Trustee Ken Carano

William Vaughan a graduate of Fitch High School class of 1938 enlisted in the Army Air Force 13 November 1941 and was part of the highest decorated crew in Air Force History and a special display is located in the Museum of the Air Force at Wright Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio. Mr. Vaughan received the Nations Second highest award the Distinguished Service Cross along with the Silver Star, Distinguished Flying Cross, 2 Purple Hearts, Air Medal along with other awards. To our knowledge one other person has received the Navy Cross from Vietnam and is a equivalent Navy/ Marine award and a section of interstate 680 is named after him. But nobody has received the other awards like William Vaughan has. We are asking you to please have the Bridge on Rt 46 that goes over interstate 80 in Austintown named after him. No one is more deserving than this man. The flight crew on Old 666 Tail number B-17 41-2666, 43rd Bomb Group, 5th Air Force later named Lucy received 2 Congressional Medal of Honors, 7 Distinguished Service Crosses and countless other awards and along with the whole crew being the most decorated the Pilot then Captain Jay Zeamer is the highest decorated pilot in Air Force History. Both to this day. Please consider this request of a true hero of the Mahoning Valley and his hometown of Austintown. I have included his DD-214 and other information.

Respectfully

Ken Jakubec



U.S.M.C 1964-68

330-651-0329

1411 Wagon Train Drive SE  
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87123  
January 15, 2000

Dear Vi,

It was a total shock when I learned of Willy's passing.

I owe my life and the lives of our entire crew to Willy. I never forget how he came forward with his shirt covered with blood and saw that we had no navigators and all the navigation instruments were shot out of the panel and were hanging down on their wires and that all we had left was a magnetic compass. And he went back to his station and set up an old liaison radio, he liked to play with, because all his regular radios were shot out. Then, by Morse code, he contacted the radio station at Dobodura and had them take a radio bearing on us. And he came back up to the cockpit and handed me a small piece of paper that said simply "247°M". This enabled me, after a couple of hours, to get in sight of the runway at Dobodura just before I went blind and passed out from loss of blood.

Barbara and I both join you with our deepest sympathy and our prayers.

Fondly,  
Jay

JAY ZEAMER  
MERCY OF HONOR  
WINNER

# ENLISTED RECORD AND REPORT OF SEPARATION HONORABLE DISCHARGE

1. LAST NAME - FIRST NAME - MIDDLE INITIAL <b>Vaughan William</b>		3. ARMY SERIAL NO. <b>15 071 291</b>	4. GRADE <b>A/E</b>	5. BRANCH OF SERVICE <b>Air Corps</b>	6. COMPONENT <b>AUS</b>
2. ORGANIZATION <b>2619th AAF Base Unit (Bombard School)</b>		7. DATE OF SEPARATION <b>9 May 45</b>	8. PLACE OF SEPARATION <b>CAMP Carlisle New Mexico</b>		
9. HOME ADDRESS (Include ZIP Code) <b>3904 Hurky Rd Youngstown Ohio</b>		10. DATE OF BIRTH <b>14 Aug 20</b>	11. PLACE OF BIRTH <b>Youngstown Ohio</b>		
13. SEX <b>Male</b>		12. COLOR EYES <b>Brown</b>	14. COLOR HAIR <b>Brown</b>	15. HEIGHT <b>5' 8 1/2"</b>	16. WEIGHT <b>145 lbs</b>
17. MARITAL STATUS <b>Single</b>		18. CIVILIAN OCCUPATION AND NO <b>Parts Clerk Automobiles 345</b>			

### MILITARY HISTORY

22. DATE OF INDUCTION <b>13 Nov 41</b>	23. DATE OF ENLISTMENT <b>13 Nov 41</b>	24. PLACE OF ENTRY INTO SERVICE <b>Fort Hayes Ohio</b>
25. SERVICE STATUS <b>Active</b>		26. HOME ADDRESS AT TIME OF ENTRY INTO SERVICE <b>RFD#2 Hurky Rd Youngstown Ohio</b>
27. MILITARY OCCUPATIONAL SPECIALTY AND NO <b>Bombardier-Gunner 1035</b>		28. MILITARY ASSIGNMENT AND NO (If in inactive, deactivation and marksmanship and post etc.) <b>None</b>
29. BATTLES AND CAMPAIGNS <b>Asiatic-Pacific Theater of Operation per WD Circular 1/43</b>		
30. AWARDS AND CITATIONS <b>Distinguished Service Cross Distinguished Flying Cross</b>		<b>Silver Star Air Medal Purple Heart</b>

31. AWARDS RECEIVED IN CAMPAIGN <b>16 June 43 Asiatic-Pacific Theater Bullet Wound Neck</b>																							
32. SERVICE OFFICES CONTINENTAL U.S. AND ABROAD		33. SERVICE OFFICES OVERSEAS																					
<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <th>DESIGNATION</th> <th>TERMINAL</th> <th>RELEASE</th> <th>GRADE (Specialty)</th> <th>DATE OF DEPARTURE</th> <th>DESTINATION</th> <th>DATE OF ARRIVAL</th> </tr> <tr> <td><b>Oct 44</b></td> <td><b>Oct 44</b></td> <td><b>Oct 43</b></td> <td><b>Typos 30 Apr 45</b></td> <td><b>23 July 42</b></td> <td><b>Sydney Aust</b></td> <td><b>14 Aug 42</b></td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="4"></td> <td><b>24 Sept 43</b></td> <td><b>USA</b></td> <td><b>30 Sept 43</b></td> </tr> </table>	DESIGNATION	TERMINAL	RELEASE	GRADE (Specialty)	DATE OF DEPARTURE	DESTINATION	DATE OF ARRIVAL	<b>Oct 44</b>	<b>Oct 44</b>	<b>Oct 43</b>	<b>Typos 30 Apr 45</b>	<b>23 July 42</b>	<b>Sydney Aust</b>	<b>14 Aug 42</b>					<b>24 Sept 43</b>	<b>USA</b>	<b>30 Sept 43</b>	34. TOTAL LENGTH OF SERVICE <b>7/8yr</b>	
DESIGNATION	TERMINAL	RELEASE	GRADE (Specialty)	DATE OF DEPARTURE	DESTINATION	DATE OF ARRIVAL																	
<b>Oct 44</b>	<b>Oct 44</b>	<b>Oct 43</b>	<b>Typos 30 Apr 45</b>	<b>23 July 42</b>	<b>Sydney Aust</b>	<b>14 Aug 42</b>																	
				<b>24 Sept 43</b>	<b>USA</b>	<b>30 Sept 43</b>																	
35. PRIOR SERVICE <b>None</b>																							

36. REASON FOR SEPARATION <b>Convenience of the Government AR 615-105 to accept commission as 2d Lieutenant, AUS</b>		
37. SERVICE SCHOOLS ATTENDED <b>AAF Flexible Gunnery School HAAF Harlingen Texas</b>		
PAY DATA		

38. DEPOSIT FOR PAY CHECKS		39. PAY DATA		40. TOTAL AMOUNT, NAME OF DEPOSITING OFFICER	
NAME	NUMBER	DATE	TOTAL	THIS PAYMENT	None
			None	None	<b>\$61.6280</b>
INSURANCE NOTICE					
For G. F. TRUE, Major, FD					

41. SERVICE OFFICES (This block for completion of above items at entry of other items specified in W. O. Directives)					
No time lost under AW 107 Not entitled to Lapel Button					

42. SIGNATURE OF SEPARATEE <i>William Vaughan</i>		43. SIGNATURE OF OFFICER (Type name, grade and organization) <i>Wilbur J Givader</i>		44. SIGNATURE OF WITNESSES <b>WILBUR J GIVADER WOJ2 USA UFO 2619th AAF Base Unit</b>	
--	--	---	--	---	--



## SEPARATION QUALIFICATION RECORD

SAVE THIS FORM. IT WILL NOT BE REPLACED IF LOST

This record of job assignments and special training received in the Army is furnished to the soldier when he leaves the service. In its preparation, information is taken from available Army records and supplemented by personal interview. The information about civilian education and work experience is based on the individual's own statements. The veteran may present this document to former employers, prospective employers, representatives of schools or colleges, or use it in any other way that may prove beneficial to him.

1. LAST NAME—FIRST NAME—MIDDLE INITIAL				MILITARY OCCUPATIONAL ASSIGNMENTS		
VAUGHAN, WILLIAM (NMI)				10. MONTHS	11. GRADE	12. MILITARY OCCUPATIONAL SPECIALTY
2. ARMY SERIAL No.	3. GRADE	4. SOCIAL SECURITY No.		7	2d Lt.	Bombardier 1035
0-2 089 443	2D LT.			1½	2d Lt.	Public Relations Off. 5401
5. PERMANENT MAILING ADDRESS (Street, City, County, State)				2	2d Lt.	Intelligence Off. Staff 930
3904 Burky Rd., Youngstown, Mahoning, Ohio						
6. DATE OF ENTRY INTO ACTIVE SERVICE	7. DATE OF SEPARATION	8. DATE OF BIRTH				
10 May 45	16 Dec 45	14 Aug 20				
9. PLACE OF SEPARATION						
Camp Atterbury, Ind.						

### SUMMARY OF MILITARY OCCUPATIONS

13. TITLE—DESCRIPTION—RELATED CIVILIAN OCCUPATION

**BOMBARDIER:** Required to have a thorough knowledge of operation and maintenance of bombsights, all allied bombing equipment on bomber; was proficient in Pilotage, Dead Reckoning, radio navigation and had knowledge of meteorology. Instructed in flying school at Carlsbad, N.M.

**INTELLIGENCE OFFICER:** Served with Hdqs of 38th Bomb Group, 5th Air Force for 4 months

**AERIAL RADIO OPERATOR:** As a T/Sgt. flew 73 combat missions and 594 combat hours with 5th Air Force. Was overseas in Asiatic Pacific 24 months.

Served as EM and Cadet for 42 months. As an Officer for 7 months.

MILITARY EDUCATION

14. NAME OR TYPE OF SCHOOL—COURSE OR CURRICULUM—DURATION—DESCRIPTION

Scott Fld, Ill.	Radio Operator & Mechanic	26 weeks	Grad.
Harlingen, Tex.	Aerial Gunnery	6 "	"
Santa Ana, Calif.	Pre Flt. Bombardier	12 "	"
Carlsbad, N.M.	Advanced "	24 "	"
Townsville, Australia	Radar Operation	4 "	"
Coe College, Iowa	College Tng. Detachment	20 "	"

CIVILIAN EDUCATION

15. HIGHEST GRADE COMPLETED

12

16. DEGREES OR DIPLOMAS

- - -

17. YEAR LEFT SCHOOL

1938

OTHER TRAINING OR SCHOOLING

20. COURSE—NAME AND ADDRESS OF SCHOOL—DATE

21. DURATION

- - -

18. NAME AND ADDRESS OF LAST SCHOOL ATTENDED

Fitch High School, Austintown, Ohio.

19. MAJOR COURSES OF STUDY

Academic

CIVILIAN OCCUPATIONS

22. TITLE—NAME AND ADDRESS OF EMPLOYER—INCLUSIVE DATES—DESCRIPTION

PRODUCTION CLERK---Pittsburgh Plate Glass Co., Youngstown, Ohio---1941 (6 months).

PRODUCTION CLERK: Checked and recorded cost of materials sold. Estimated cost of construction work from blueprints. Sold materials wholesale. Figured estimated cost of company's desired contracts.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

23. REMARKS

24. SIGNATURE OF PERSON BEING SEPARATED

*William D. ...*

25. SIGNATURE OF SEPARATION CLASSIFICATION OFFICER

*L. W. List Jr.*

26. NAME OF OFFICER (Typed or Stamped)

L. W. LIST JR., LT. INF.



## William Vaughan

DATE OF BIRTH: August 14, 1920

PLACE OF BIRTH:

Youngstown, Ohio

HOME OF RECORD:

Youngstown, Ohio

Sergeant Vaughan was Radio Operator and a member of the most decorated air crew in history. On this volunteer mission Captain Jay Zeamer (pilot) and navigator Lieutenant Raymond Sarnoski received the Medal of Honor (Sarnoski posthumously.) All seven additional members of the crew were awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. These awards were in addition to several Purple Hearts and numerous other awards to Jay Zeamer's "Eager Beavers" both before this mission, and in subsequent actions.

### AWARDS BY DATE OF ACTION:



## Distinguished Service Cross

AWARDED FOR ACTIONS DURING World War II

Service: Army Air Forces

Battalion: 65th Bombardment Squadron

Division: 5th Air Force

GENERAL ORDERS:

Headquarters, U.S. Army Forces in the Far East, General Orders No. 66 (October 30, 1943)



### CITATION:

The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress July 9, 1918, takes pleasure in presenting the Distinguished Service Cross to Sergeant William Vaughan (ASN: 15071291), United States Army Air Forces, for extraordinary heroism in action while serving in a B-17 Bomber of the 65th Bombardment Squadron, 43d Bombardment Group (Heavy), FIFTH Air Force, in action over Bougainville Island on 16 June 1943. Sergeant Vaughan was Radio Operator of a volunteer bomber crew which undertook an important and dangerous photo-mapping mission over the heavily defended enemy Base at Buka. Just before the photographing was completed, about twenty enemy fighters attacked. The bomber was extensively damaged and five of the crew, including the Pilot, were seriously wounded. Nevertheless, by skillful evasive flying and by expert gunnery on the part of the crew, successive enemy attacks were fought off. In this furious forty-five minute engagement, five enemy planes were destroyed and two damaged. Sergeant Vaughan, with a bullet wound in his neck, continued to man his guns until the enemy had broken combat. He then estimated the medical aid required and reported to all Bases at which the



plane might land. As the navigation instruments were disabled, he then remained at his post and received bearings for the return flight of five hundred and eighty miles. Sergeant Vaughan showed admirable skill and courage on this voluntary mission, which secured information of great value in subsequent operations.

**[SEE MORE RECIPEPTS OF THIS AWARD](#)**



**[Back to Recipient List](#)**

[Distinguished Service Cross](#)

[Distinguished Service Cross](#)

[Contact](#) - [Terms](#) - [Privacy](#)

**WILLIAM VAUGHAN, 79**

**Bombardier, navigator in World War II**



Vaughan

Services will be at 10:30 a.m. Thursday at Higgins-Rear-don Funeral Home, Boardman-Canfield Chapel, and at 11 a.m. in St. Christine Church, Youngstown, for William Vaughan, 79, of 1330 Fox Run Court, formerly of Chaucer Lane in Austintown, who died of pancreatic cancer Monday evening at home.

Mr. Vaughan was born Aug. 14, 1920, in Youngstown, a son of Thomas and Sarah Booth Vaughan, and lived here most of his life.

He was employed for 30 years at Hy-Way Heat Systems and retired as its treasurer in 1986.

He was a member of the church, a 1938 graduate of Fitch High School, a member of Youngstown-Girard Elks Club 55 and enjoyed woodworking.

He served as a bombardier and navigator in the Army Air Corps during World War II, and was decorated with the Distinguished Service Cross with a Sil-

ver Star, the Distinguished Flying Cross, a Purple Heart and received a Presidential Citation for bravery during a covert reconnaissance mission over enemy territory in the South Pacific.

After the war, he served in the Air Force Reserve and was past commander of the Reserve Officer's Association.

His first wife, the former Peggy Lawlor, whom he married Feb. 12, 1949, died April 9, 1978.

He leaves his wife, the former Viola Polito Rodgers, whom he married May 10, 1980; a daughter, Ms. Mary L. Vaughan of Dallas; three sons, Thomas J. of Austin, Texas, Richard A. of Tucson, Ariz., and William R. of Canfield; five half brothers, Richard Davies of Youngstown, Douglas Davies of Colleyville, Texas, and Kenneth, James and William Davies, all of Canfield; and five grandchildren.

A sister, Mrs. Audrey Fountain, is deceased.

Friends may call from 3 to 8 p.m. Wednesday at the funeral home.

Contributions may be made to the Humility of Mary Hospice and St. Christine Church Memorial Fund.

12/28/99

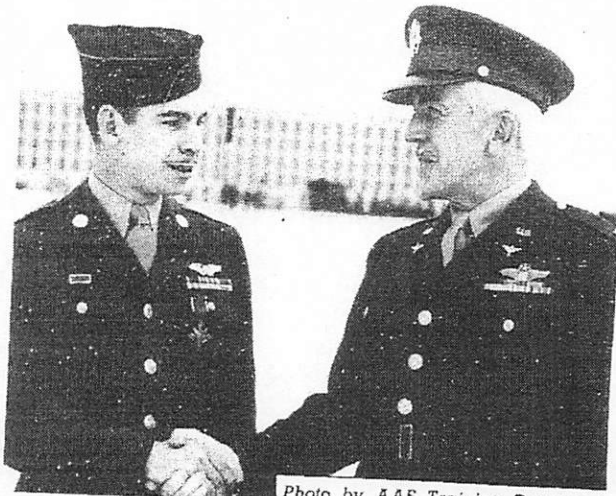


Photo by AAF Training Command

June 16, returned to action, and was wounded at Rabaul when his Flying Fortress engaged 10 Jap planes in battle before it was shot down.

This photo shows T-Sgt. William Vaughn, a member of the Fitch High graduating class of 1938, receiving the D. S. C. from Lt. Colonel Earl Sweeney of the Air Force. He received this decoration for a dangerous mapping mission over Bougainville. He has been wounded twice in combat and has been chosen the "outstanding young man of the year" by the Fraternal Order of Eagles.

Sergeant Vaughn strafed Jap searchlights in a raid on Wewak and received the Silver Star for "gallantry in action." He was wounded in action in the South Pacific last

## HONOR ROLL

Alberter, James Ex '44  
 Alders, Robert '41  
 Alders, William '37  
 Arn, John Ex '41  
 Athey, Robert '42  
 Avery, Frank Ex '37  
 Baird, Robert '40  
 Baker, Kenneth '41  
 Baker, Stanley '41  
 Baker, Thurman '36  
 Barber, James '40  
 Bartelmay, Edythe '38  
 Bartelmay, Norman '41  
 Berndt, Theodore '41  
 Bertolini, Dominic '31  
 Bertolini, Henry '39  
 Bertolini, Mario Ex '44  
 Betts, Richard '43  
 Betts, Robert (Killed)  
 Bishop, Jack '35  
 Bishop, Kenneth  
 Bishop, Robert '39  
 Blaire, Thomas,  
 (School Dentist)  
 Blake, Robert '37  
 Boggs, Ina '37  
 Bokesch, Arnold '34  
 Bokesch, Elmer '32  
 Bokesch, Frank Ex '38  
 Bokesch, Henry '35  
 Bokesch, Michael Ex '41  
 Bokesch, Michael Jr. '41  
 Bortmas, Alton '41  
 Bowser, William '35

Boyer, Warren Ex '39  
 Bradford, Douglas Ex '38  
 Bradford, Herbert Ex '41  
 Bradford, Raymond '37  
 Breckner, George '34  
 Brenner, Andrew Ex '41  
 Brenner, John '33  
 Brenner, Michael Ex '30  
 Brickley, Grant '42  
 Brickley, Ralph  
 Brobst, Harmon '39  
 Brobst, Howard '40  
 Brobst, Myron '38  
 Brown, Robert M. Ex '37  
 Brown, James '38 (Killed)  
 Brown, William '39  
 Brown, William M. '40  
 Buckner, C. R. Ex '41  
 Buckner, Donald Ex '38  
 Buckner, George '40  
 Bush, Willoughby '40  
 Carlisle, Waldo Ex '43  
 (Killed)  
 Casadidio, Elizabeth '42  
 Casadidio, Margaret '42  
 Casino, Ralph '39  
 Chapman, Richard '41  
 Charles, William '39  
 Chisholm, James '40  
 Clark, Harry '39  
 Clark, William '43  
 Connelly, Leo Ex '39  
 Connelly, Bernard (Killed)  
 Connors, G. L. Jr. '41  
 Cornell, Laird Ex '43

Cornell, Fred Jr. '41  
 Coitrell, Arthur Ex '41  
 Crawford, Thomas '37  
 Crooks, Wilfred '40  
 Crum, Warren '42  
 Davidson, Edward Ex '44  
 Davidson, Harry '41  
 Davidson, James '39  
 Davies, Kenney '40  
 Davis, Howard Ex '39  
 Davis, Paul '35  
 Davis, Christie '33  
 Davis, Ray '41  
 Davis, Richard Ex '44  
 DeHoff, Herbert '41  
 Denham, Gene '31  
 Dickson, Lewis '42  
 Dieter, LaVerne '36  
 Dodd, Robert '36  
 Dorman, David '42  
 Dorman, Edgar '35 (Killed)  
 Dorman, Paul Ex '41  
 Dorman, Robert '40  
 Dougherty, James Ex '38  
 Dravis, Charles '42  
 Duganne, Joseph Ex '38  
 Dykins, George '42  
 Eberth, Edward Ex '43  
 Eckels, Patrick Ex '42  
 Eckenrode, Donald Ex '38  
 Edwards, Frank Ex '41.  
 (Killed)

Emch, Carl Ex '42  
 Eppley, William '39  
 Erb, Clarence Ex '38  
 Esterly, Joseph '37

Faulkner, Albert Ex '43  
 Fear, Seymour '30  
 (Ex-teacher)  
 Fee, Edward Jr. Ex '42  
 Fifield, Rollin '35  
 Fink, Glendon '42  
 Fink, Robert '38  
 Fitch, William '43  
 Fitzgerald, Raymond '37  
 Fleet, Russell Ex '40  
 Forbush, Jack '39  
 Forbush, Ralph '40  
 Force, Elton '37  
 Foreman, James '32  
 Foreman, John (Killed)  
 Franklin, Virginia '41  
 Frederick, Julius Ex '43  
 Fritsch, Wilfred '41

Gamble, Warren '40  
 Gettmann, Bert '40  
 Goddard, Burl '41  
 Goehring, Henry Ex '43  
 Goehring, Randal '38  
 Good, Melvin '42  
 Good, Stanley '35  
 Gorgie, Frank '36  
 Grey, Cecil Jr. '38  
 Grey, Robert '38  
 Gurd, David Ex '41

# Old 666

**Old 666** (B-17E 41-2666) was a World War II B-17 Flying Fortress bomber which was assigned to the United States' 19th and 43rd Bomb Groups in 1942–43. It is notable for being the aircraft piloted by Lt. Col. (then Captain) Jay Zeamer on the 16 June 1943 mission that would earn him and 2d Lt. Joseph Sarnoski each a Medal of Honor, and all other members of the crew the Distinguished Service Cross.

## Contents

**History**

**Mapping mission**

**After the mission**

**References**

## History

B-17E #41-2666 was built in Seattle, Washington in March 1942. It arrived in Hawaii in May 1942 for delivery to Australia. That same month, it was assigned to the 19th Bombardment Group.<sup>[1]</sup> Sometime after it arrived in Australia, 41-2666 was equipped with a trimetrogon camera array used in high-altitude topographical mapping.<sup>[2]</sup>

During the summer and fall of 1942, the aircraft was flown primarily by the 8th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron (PRS), usually while attached to the 19th.<sup>[3]</sup> Late in the year it was transferred to the 43rd Bomb Group, where on a mission in December 1942 it was damaged severely enough to be grounded for a period of time.<sup>[2]</sup> Nothing more is currently known about the aircraft until the following April, when it was again being flown by the 8th PRS. In May 1943, having gained a reputation as a “Hard Luck Hattie” for its record of damage and odd accidents, 41-2666 was transferred to the 65th Bomb Squadron, 43rd Bomb Group, at Seven-Mile Airstrip, located at Port Moresby, New Guinea.<sup>[4]</sup>

It was in the 65th that then-Captain Jay Zeamer, serving as squadron executive officer, requisitioned the aircraft for his crew, known as the “Eager Beavers,” to customize for their use in photo-mapping and reconnaissance work.<sup>[5]</sup> Besides significantly reducing the overall weight and replacing the engines, the crew installed additional .50 caliber machine guns, including a .50 mounted to the bombardier's deck in the nose that Zeamer could fire himself.<sup>[6]</sup> While that and the sheer number of guns on '666 was remarkable—the common gun complement on a Pacific B-17E was thirteen—what made Zeamer's upgrade unique in the Pacific was the crew's installation of twin .50s in both waist positions.<sup>[2]</sup>

*Old 666*



Only known image of Old 666.

<b>Other name(s)</b>	<i>Lucy</i>
<b>Type</b>	Boeing B-17E Flying Fortress
<b>Manufacturer</b>	Boeing
<b>Construction number</b>	2487
<b>Manufactured</b>	March 1942
<b>Serial</b>	41-2666
<b>In service</b>	1942–1943
<b>Fate</b>	Scrapped, September 1945

As for a name, the regular crew referred to 41-2666 only as "666" or "the plane". The plane was indeed officially nicknamed "Lucy", but only shortly before the 16 June 1943 mission—not in time for the crew to begin referring to it as such.<sup>[5]</sup> Because of its specialized use for camera work, and despite their extensive work on the plane, Zeamer and his crew flew 41-2666 only five times, two of which were test hops. Bombing missions were flown in B-17s suited to that purpose, with their use of 41-2666 restricted to three photo-mapping missions.<sup>[7]</sup>

## Mapping mission

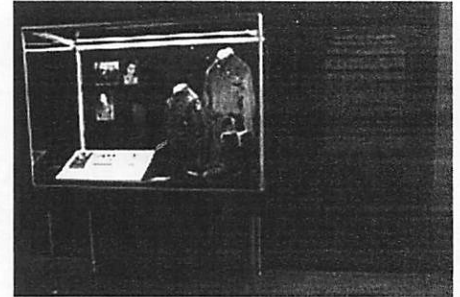
The last of these missions occurred on June 16, 1943. It called for a solo B-17 to map the west coast of Bougainville, almost six hundred miles over mostly open ocean from Seven-Mile, in support of a planned invasion of the island later that year. Such mapping demanded rigorously straight and level flight for the duration to avoid blurring of the photos, and this mission would require a 22-minute such run over hostile territory.

Zeamer had volunteered for the mission when it was first requested in April, but weather and other factors forced postponements until the June date.<sup>[8]</sup><sup>[5]</sup> Twice before taking off at 4:00 a.m., June 16, Zeamer rejected orders to add to the mission a reconnaissance of Buka airdrome, located off Bougainville's northern tip. The mapping would be hazardous enough, he felt, without adding extended contact with the enemy just prior.<sup>[8]</sup>

Early arrival to the initial mapping point meant a half-hour delay in starting the mapping run; the sun was not high enough for the light necessary for topographic relief.<sup>[9]</sup> The delay prompted Zeamer to ask the crew's opinion on the Buka recon. All supported going ahead with it, considering their proximity. As a result, Zeamer adjusted course northeast to take them over Buka airstrip before heading into the mapping run down Bougainville's west coast.

Contemporary accounts from the crew report counting around fifty aircraft on either side of the Buka airstrip, with seventeen or eighteen Japanese aircraft either taxiing or taking off from Buka airstrip as "Old 666" covered the island. These were Japanese Navy fighters, Model 22 Zeroes of Air Squadron 251, most of which were usually based at Rabaul, New Britain, but had moved to Buka the previous day for their planned June 16 attack on Guadalcanal.<sup>[5]</sup> Zeamer began the mapping run, hoping that it could be finished before the enemy aircraft could reach their mapping altitude of 25,000 feet. Shortly before its completion, ineffectual passes from below were followed by a handful of Zeros enclosing the B-17 in a coordinated attack from below, two approaching from the rear and three fanned across the front. The combination left Zeamer unable to execute his usual defensive tactic of turning inside the line of fire of enemy aircraft attacking from the front; such a maneuver in this case would expose the B-17's belly to the other Zeros attacking from the front. Aware of their position now over Empress Augusta Bay, the primary mapping objective, Zeamer held course, hoping to fight it out.<sup>[10]</sup>

This first attack proved fatal for bombardier Sarnoski, who was mortally wounded by a 20mm shell which also badly injured the navigator, 1st Lt. Ruby Johnston. Another 20mm struck the side of the cockpit behind the pilots, sending shrapnel into the legs of Sgt. Johnny Able, the assistant flight engineer substituting as top turret gunner that day. It also struck the oxygen and hydraulic lines behind the cockpit, starting a fire. A third 20mm entered through the Plexiglass nose, destroying Zeamer's rudder pedals and instrument panel and delivering grievous wounds to Zeamer's left leg and slicing his right wrist. Farther back, radio operator Sgt. William Vaughan was grazed badly in the neck by a bullet. Back



*Tenacity over Bougainville: Zeamer and the "Eager Beavers" display in the World War II Gallery at the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force*

in the nose, despite being blown to the floor with a horrible gash in his side and another in his neck, Sarnoski regained his gun in time to counter a twin-engine fighter—variously described by crew members as either a Mitsubishi Ki-46 "Dinah" or Kawasaki Ki-45 "Nick"—pressing a new attack on the nose. Sarnoski drove the attacker off before it could inflict any more damage and then collapsed from his wounds.<sup>[11][5]</sup>

Having finished the mapping run and now needing oxygen, Zeamer dove the plane from 25,000 feet to around 10,000 feet, estimating his altitude from a change in manifold pressure, since the altimeter had been destroyed. After the dive, both Johnston and Able extinguished the oxygen fire using only their hands and rags.<sup>[12]</sup>

Leveling out, Zeamer continued to pilot "Old 666" despite excruciating pain and continued blood loss. Correctly assuming its forward guns were now inoperable, the Japanese began lining up on both sides of the B-17 to circle around, one by one in turn, to strafe the aircraft from the front. Zeamer was now able to apply the technique he'd been unable to use against the coordinated first pass: banking hard inside the firing angle of each approaching Zero, Zeamer both avoided the enemy's fire and allowed his rear gunners unfettered access to the Zeros as they passed by the B-17. This continued until finally, low on ammunition and fuel, around forty minutes after the initial attack, the last of the remaining Zeros returned home. While the crew reported downing five fighters, Japanese records show none were actually shot down, with one ditching early in the engagement due to engine failure and only three being damaged by return fire.<sup>[13]</sup>

Once out of danger, Sgt. Able piloted "Old 666" on a dead reckoning return heading determined by Zeamer while the unscathed substitute copilot, Lt. J.T. Britton, took stock of the damage to the crew and plane. Zeamer, drifting in and out of unconsciousness, advised Able on keeping course and level. Radio operator Vaughan, while nursing his neck wound, calculated a heading for Dobodura, an Allied airstrip on the eastern coast of Papua New Guinea, for an emergency landing. It was not expected that Zeamer would survive a return flight over the Owen-Stanley mountains to Port Moresby. Britton, having returned to his seat for the balance of the flight, landed at Dobodura without flaps or brakes, requiring him to ground loop the bomber near the end of the six-thousand-foot runway.<sup>[5]</sup>

In all, four members of the crew were wounded and one killed. The aircraft suffered damage to the instrument panel from being struck by a 20mm gun, and the pilot's rudder pedals were destroyed. For the completion of their mission despite the certainty of attack and their respective sacrifices, Sarnoski and Zeamer each received the Medal of Honor, with the remainder of the crew receiving the Distinguished Service Cross, second only to the Medal of Honor in esteem. The mission remains the most highly decorated in American history, and the Eager Beavers, individual decorations all considered, remain the most highly decorated air crew in U.S. history.<sup>[14]</sup> This mission was featured on the History Channel show *Dogfights* in an episode titled "Long Odds".<sup>[15]</sup>

## After the mission

---

Seven of the eight Zero pilots who intercepted "Old 666" later participated in a strike on Allied shipping at Lunga Point that same day.<sup>[16]</sup> Two of them, Warrant Officer Yoshio Oki and Flight Petty Officer 2nd Class Suehiro Yamamoto, failed to return.<sup>[16][17]</sup>

By mid-1943, like most heavy bomb groups in the Pacific, the 43rd had mostly converted to the B-24.<sup>[18]</sup> The aging and much-abused Pacific Fortresses were increasingly difficult to maintain, and the longer range of the B-24 made it more practical anyway in a theater defined by the vast distances to targets.



## B-17E "Lucy" Serial Number 41-2666

USAAF  
 5th AF  
 6th PRG  
 8th PRS

Former Assignments  
 43rd BG  
 65th BS

19th BG  
 435th BS



### Aircraft History

Built by Boeing at [Seattle](#). Constructors Number 2477. Delivered to the U. S. Army. Ferried overseas via Hawaii to Australia.

### Wartime History

Assigned to the 5th Air Force, 19th Bombardment Group, 435th Bombardment Squadron. Nicknamed "Lucy". Also known as "Old 666" or "666" for the last three digits of the U.S. Army serial number.

During 1942 at [Townsville](#), this B-17 was modified with a metal plate installed at the center of the nose cone for reinforcement to mount a single .50 caliber machine gun.

On November 4, 1942 took off from [7-Mile Drome](#) near [Port Moresby](#), piloted by Lt. Melville Ehlers with co-pilot Lt. Bill Wilson in a bombing mission against [Lae](#). About 30 miles from the target at 15,000', one of the life rafts accidentally deployed, ripping off the radio aerial and wrapping around the port elevator, and the bomber descended to 9,300' and gunner Pfc Lowell Lee fired his machine gun at the raft to deflate it, but it remained wrapped around the elevator. Also aboard was navigator P/O John Edkins, RAAF. The crew attempted to continue the mission, but the life raft tore away part of the elevator, and they aborted the mission and managed to returned safely to [7-Mile Drome](#) with the raft still attached to the damaged elevator.

Next, assigned to the 43rd Bombardment Group, 65th Bombardment Squadron. On September 25, 1943 piloted by Harry Park.

On May 18, 1943 this B-17 took off from [7-Mile Drome](#) near [Port Moresby](#), piloted by [Captain Jay Zeamer, Jr.](#) on a test hop local flight to test the instruments then returned to [7-Mile Drome](#).

On May 28, 1943 this B-17 took off from [7-Mile Drome](#) near [Port Moresby](#), piloted by [Captain Jay Zeamer, Jr.](#) on a photographic reconnaissance and mapping mission over [New Ireland](#) making two runs over southeastern [New Ireland](#). During the flight, sighted a "new" airfield, likely [Namatanai Airfield](#) and observed a convoy of three enemy ships. Afterwards, returned to [7-Mile Drome](#).

On June 2, 1943 this B-17 took off from [7-Mile Drome](#) near [Port Moresby](#), piloted by [Captain Jay Zeamer, Jr.](#) on photographic reconnaissance and mapping mission from 20,000' over the [Admiralties](#), then proceeded eastward mapping the [Buka Passage](#) from 11,000' then returned to [7-Mile Drome](#).

During early June 1943, this B-17 was field modified with an additional six 50 caliber machine guns added for defensive firepower. On June 15, 1943 this B-17 took off from [7-Mile Drome](#) near [Port Moresby](#), piloted by [Captain Jay Zeamer, Jr.](#) on a local flight with ten aboard to test fire all sixteen 50 caliber machine guns and for a transition training flight before returning to [7-Mile Drome](#).

### Mission History

On [June 16, 1943](#) took off from [7-Mile Drome](#) near [Port Moresby](#), piloted by [Captain Jay Zeamer, Jr.](#) with co-pilot J. T. Britton. Proceeded on a solo mission to photograph Japanese installations on [Buka](#) and then map the western coast of [Bougainville](#) as far south as [Empress Augusta Bay](#) in preparation for the Allied landings scheduled for November 1 1943. It was hoped clear photos could be taken to prepare detailed charts for the invasion force.

Over [Buka Island](#), they observed approximately 22 enemy fighters taking off from [Buka Airfield](#) below. As this B-17 began its photographic run over Bougainville, it was attacked head on by Zero fighters. The head-on attack knocked out the B-17's oxygen and hydraulic systems and all flight instruments. During this initial attack, bombardier 2nd Lt Joseph R. Sarnoski, O-888520 was wounded when a 20mm cannon round exploded in the nose. Although wounded, he he continued to fire the nose machine gun and claimed two enemy fighters, until he died at his battle station.

Zeamer, with a broken leg and multiple deep lacerations, put the bomber into an almost vertical dive from 25,000 feet to about 10,000 feet. He could judge his altitude only by the increase in engine manifold pressure. As he leveled off, an estimated 17 enemy fighters resumed the attack from all quarters, staying with the B-17 for 45 minutes until they ran low on fuel. During the running battle in which Zeamer saved the B-17 by taking violent evasive action. The crew claimed two fighters shot down and probably downed another two.

Although weak from pain and loss of blood, Zeamer refused medical aid and remained at the controls until the enemy fighters had left. He assessed the condition of the bomber, decided it could not make it over the Owen Stanley Mountains back to Port Moresby, so directed his co-pilot to land at [Dobodura Airfield](#). With no brakes or flaps, the B-17 ground-looped to a stop with one dead and six wounded aboard.

On the ground, a total of 187 bullet holes from 7.7mm machine gun bullets and 5 cannon shells from 20mm shell



B-17



Photo Archive



CMOH Zeamer



CMOH Sarnoski

hits were noted on the bomber. Aboard, Five crew members including Zeamer were wounded during the combat. Sarnoski died during the engagement. Only the co-pilot and two gunners were unhurt. Afterwards, [Captain Jay Zeamer](#) and [2/Lt Joseph R. Sarnoski](#) both earned the Medal of Honor, while the remainder of the crew earned the Distinguished Service Cross for this mission.

Later, this B-17 was assigned to the 6th Photographic Reconnaissance Group (6th PRG), 8th Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron (8th PRS) and operated from [14 Mile Drome \(Schwimmer\)](#) near [Port Moresby](#).

During February 1944, flown back to the United States. During August 1945 scrapped at Albuquerque, NM.

#### Memorials

Sarnoski died the day of the mission. He was permanently buried at [Honolulu National Cemetery \(Punchbowl\)](#) at section A site 582.

Zeamer retired from the USAF with the rank of Lt. Colonel. He died on March 22, 2007. He is buried at [Arlington National Cemetery](#) at section 34 site 809-4.

#### References

[Captain Jay Zeamer Jr. Official Flight Log from April 22, 1944 to May 31, 1943, page 6](#)

May 18, 1943 "B-17E, AC 41-2666, R1820-65, P.M.-Local, 10 [crew], Test hop + instruments."

May 28, 1943 "B-17E, AC 41-2666, R1820-65, P.M.- New Ireland-P.M., 9 [crew], 2 mapping runs on S.E. New Ireland - 23,000 ft. Sighted new Jap Airdrome + 3 ship convoy."

[Captain Jay Zeamer Jr. Official Flight Log from June 1, 1943 to June 18, 1944, page 7](#)

June 2, 1943 "B-17E, AC 41-2666, R1820-65, P.M. - Admiralty Islands, Buka Passage - P.M., 9 [crew], Photo-mapped Admiralties-20,000', Recco Buka Passage - 11,000'."

June 15, 1943 "B-17E, AC 41-2666, R1820-65, P.M. - Local, 10 [crew], Test fired all 16-50 cal., test hop + transition"

June 16, 1943 "B-17E, AC 41-2666, R1820-65, P.M. - Buka Passage-Bougainville-Buka, 9 [crew], Recco + 'Photo mapping, 16 Jap fighters - shot down 5, 187 bullet holes & 5 cannon hits, Sarnoski killed - 5 wounded."

Note, it is often incorrectly reported that this B-17E was field modified with a nose mounted machine gun that the pilot could fire from the cockpit control column.

The Canberra Times "Exciting Trip For Fortress on Bombing Raid" November 6, 1942

New York Times "Swift Raid on Lae Described" November 6, 1942

[Los Angeles Times "Jay Zeamer, a Decorated Pilot in World War II, Dies at 88" March 26, 2007](#)

[Dogfights, Season 1, Volume 4 Long Odds](#) includes episode about this B-17 with interview footage of Zeamer, originally aired 2007 segment related to this B-17, audio interview with Zeamer, interview with Britton

[YouTube "OLD 666" Dogfights Season 1, Volume 4](#) segment related to this B-17, audio interview with Zeamer, interview with Britton

[Home of Heroes Jay Zeamer & Joe Sarnoski One Plane - Nine Heroes Two Medals of Honor](#)

[Peta Pixel "The Most Honored Photograph"](#) by Roger Cicala Oct 29, 2013 includes several mistakes and misconceptions often repeated about this aircraft and mission

Thanks to [Steve Birdsall](#), [Edward Rogers](#) and [Larry Hickey](#) for additional information

#### Contribute Information

Are you a relative or associated with any person mentioned?

Do you have photos or additional information to add?

#### Last Updated

November 20, 2020

[Discussion Forum](#) [Daily Updates](#) [Reviews](#) [Museums](#) [Interviews & Oral Histories](#)

Pacific Wrecks Inc. © 1995-2021 All rights reserved.







The "Eager Beavers" repeatedly volunteered for risky reconnaissance missions. **Front row:** William Vaughn, George Kendrick, Johnnie Able, Herbert Pugh. Back row: Bud Thues, Jay Zeamer, Hank Dyminski, Joe Sarnoski. Just prior to the June 16 mission, Forrest Dillman was added to the crew and John T. Britton and Ruby Johnston replaced Dyminski and Thues, who contracted malaria. (National Archives)

# SUICIDE RUN: The Final Flight of Old 666



The end of the last seconds of a 1945 film depicting the final flight of the only B-24 Liberator bomber of the 38th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron based in Morobe, New Guinea—the only known image of the ill-fated bomber.

CriticalPast

*Bob Drury and Tom Clavin*



The “Eager Beavers” repeatedly volunteered for risky reconnaissance missions. Front row: William Vaughn, George Kendrick, Johnnie Able, Herbert Pugh. Back row: Bud Thues, Jay Zeamer, Hank Dyminski, Joe Sarnoski. Just prior to the June 16 mission, Forrest Dillman was added to the crew and John T. Britton and Ruby Johnston replaced Dyminski and Thues, who contracted malaria. (National Archives)

**C**aptain Jay Zeamer Jr. was still awake when his phone rang at 10 p.m., just hours before he and his B-17 crew were to take off early on June 16, 1943, for a risky photomapping mission. It was an operations officer from V Bomber Command. Naval intelligence had received word of increased activity at the Japanese airfield on the small island of Buka, just north of Bougainville. Before surveying and photographing the hidden reefs of Bougainville’s Empress Augusta Bay—where American troops were to land in a few months—Zeamer was to swing *Old 666* north and reconnoiter Buka Airfield.

The request made perfect sense strategically. When the invasion of Bougainville commenced, the Japanese defenses would consist of aircraft from both islands. Still, this new proposal sat in Zeamer’s stomach like a broken bottle. He and navigator Ruby Johnston had already calculated that it would take 22 minutes to photograph the 127 miles of coast along the bay. All the while, it would be necessary to keep the B-17 straight and level at 25,000 feet to ensure the proper overlap of each photo frame that photographer and waist gunner George Kendrick would snap.

During the entire mapping run, the lone bomber would be a big, fat target. And now Group Operations wanted to widen that bull's-eye by adding a Buka recon? Why not just radio the Japanese their course and arrival time?

"Hell no," Zeamer barked at the operations officer. "I'm only going on the one mission and I'm not letting anyone fool with that."

Zeamer was still intent on ignoring the order when he set the Flying Fortress to head north-by-northeast shortly after 4 a.m. the next morning. It struck him, not for the first time, how difficult it was to target even familiar islands over dark stretches of the featureless Pacific Ocean. He and his crew had never before set course for Bougainville, and over such alien seas the water below took on the resemblance of a great, gray sinuous muscle, swelling and contracting with the rhythms of the planet. Every one of his crew recognized the importance of this mission as the next step to the Southwest Pacific campaign, and perhaps even to the entire war. Yet flying over so great an expanse made them feel lonely and small.

Three hours later, a thin sliver of sun appeared in the east just as Bougainville's coastline came into view, a parenthesis of land surrounded by glistening dark waters. Zeamer checked his instruments. One hundred fifty-five degrees east longitude. Then he looked at his watch. Thirty minutes ahead of schedule. It would still be another 30 to 45 minutes before the light would be strong enough to provide the proper exposure for the camera's infrared filters. That meant he faced a hard choice.

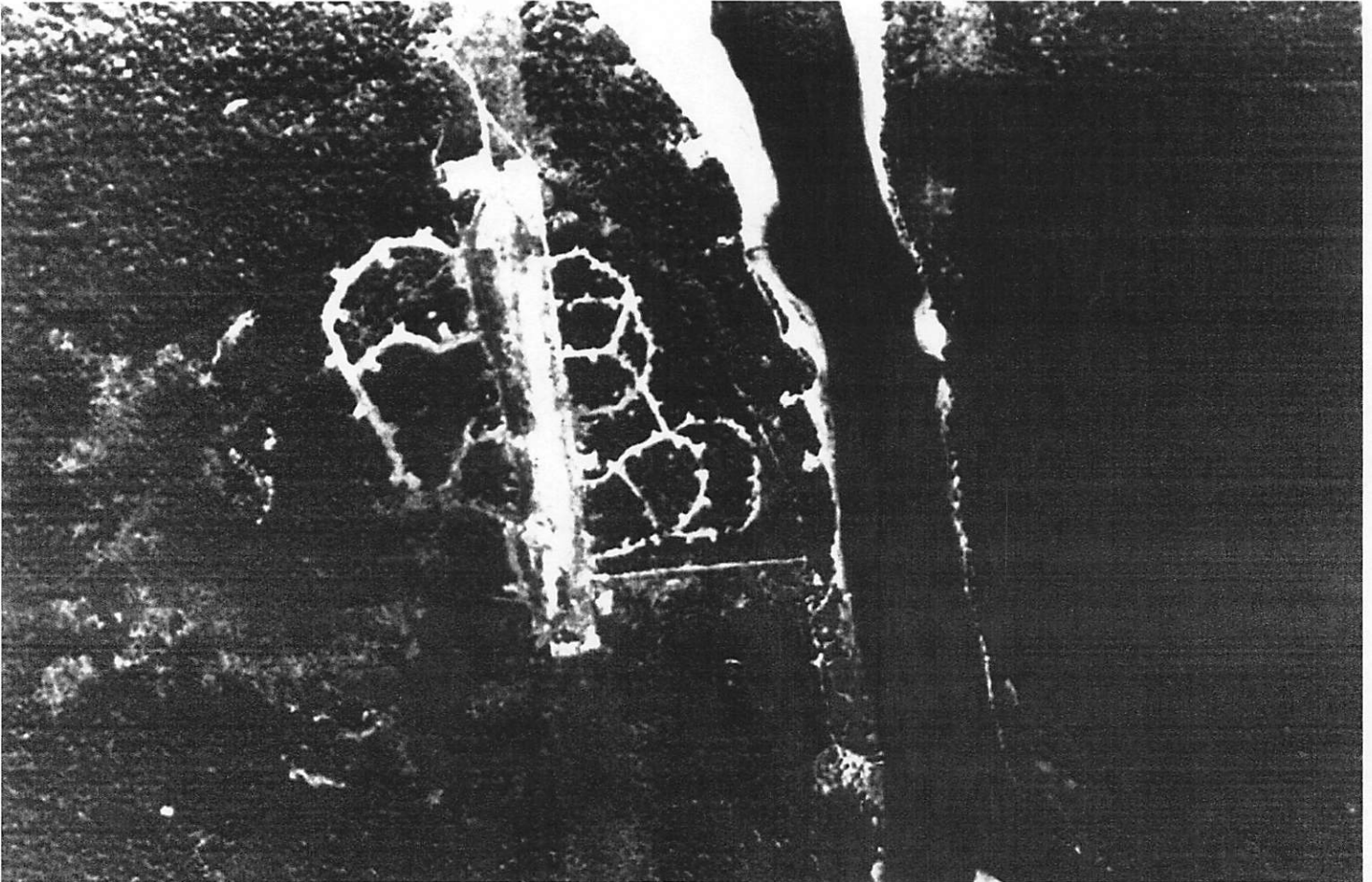
Zeamer reached for his interphone and laid out their options. He could turn *Old 666* northwest and kill extra time vectoring over the pale green waters of the Solomon Sea. Out of sight. Safe. Or he could set a course due north and arrive over Buka Passage just as the sun was high enough to photograph the Japanese airfield on the tiny island. He put the decision to the crew.

As top turret gunner Johnnie Able later explained, "We thought so much of Captain Zeamer and had such trust in him and his ability that we didn't give a damn where we went, just so long as he wanted to go there. Anything okay by him was okay by us."

Or, as Zeamer interpreted the collective response from his crew that morning: "Oh, what the hell. Let's take their GD reconnaissance photos. We've done it before."

At 25,000 feet the seahorse-shaped spit of sand looked like a dangling appendage of Bougainville, separated from the larger landmass by only a narrow passage of water. Streaks of pale sunlight illuminated the waves building over the serrated reefs and breaking on Buka's white-

sand beaches. Zeamer saw the airstrip running adjacent to the island's southeast coast, surrounded by a honeycomb of earthen revetments carved out of the jungle. From five miles above, the rutted roads connecting the aircraft hidey-holes lent the impression of a massive spiderweb encircling the crushed-coral runway that stretched for almost half a mile.



**A wartime reconnaissance shot shows the airfield on tiny Buka Island. Concerned by Japanese activity there, Allied planners tasked B-17 Old 666 with reconnoitering it before photographing adjacent Bougainville. (National Archives)**

Then, with *Old 666* nearly on top of the strip, belly gunner Forrest Dillman reported sighting more than 20 enemy fighters parked wingtip to wingtip, with what looked like perhaps another dozen protruding from their revetments. A peculiar shiver ran up Zeamer's spine as the risks of the mission suddenly increased exponentially. Had he made a deadly mistake? Why hadn't he trusted his first instinct? Seconds later, Dillman's voice again crackled over the interphone. Pilots on the ground were scrambling into their cockpits.

They had been spotted.

ZEAMER, 24, RANKLED COLLEAGUES at the 43rd Bomb Group with his knack for nonconformity. Aloof, they had called him. A screw-up. No respect for authority. When they would not give him a crew, he had recruited one with men like himself; at first they had called them misfits, but now each one was an airman with whom he would entrust his life.

When they would not give him a plane, he and his crew had foraged one—plucked from the boneyard at the rump end of the runway at their base at Port Moresby, New Guinea—and rebuilt it from the wheels up. *Old 666*, an “E” model, derived its name from its tail number: 41-2666. The crew also increased the aircraft’s defensive armament, replacing its .30-caliber nose guns with larger .50-caliber machine guns and specially fitting a nose gun connected to Zeamer’s cockpit controls. In addition, they added extra guns at the waist and radioman’s positions. With a total of 19 .50-caliber machine guns, *Old 666* bristled like a porcupine.

And when they would not give Zeamer assignments, he had volunteered for them—recon missions no one else wanted, missions they all had to be a little crazy to take on. Missions like this one.

No wonder Zeamer and his men had become known as the “Eager Beavers.”

Every man aboard *Old 666* recognized it was only a matter of time before the enemy fighters from Buka caught up with them. For a split second Zeamer considered turning and running, scrapping the Bougainville mission altogether. They had gotten the photos of the airfield, so the mission would not be a complete washout. But there were the 37,000 Marines and GIs preparing for the Bougainville invasion. He imagined LSTs snagged on the jagged reefs of Empress Augusta Bay. The Marines and GIs would be ducks in a pond for the machine guns and mortar tubes around the invasion site. He turned the bomber south. Bougainville lay before him like a green mirage on a sea of blue.

Back in the waist, Kendrick snapped photo after photo; down in the nose, bombardier Joe Sarnoski—at 28, the oldest and most experienced crew member—assisted Ruby Johnston with monitoring the aircraft’s drift, airspeed, and altitude. And up on the flight deck, Zeamer and copilot J. T. Britton watched as all cameras clicked like clockwork on the cockpit’s intervalometer, a device that triggered the cameras’ lens shutters for time-lapse exposures.

A minute that seemed like an eternity passed before tail gunner Herbert “Pudge” Pugh reported another Japanese fighter squadron lifting off from Bougainville’s Buin Airfield. He counted perhaps a dozen attackers. A lone B-17 could reasonably expect to hold its own against six

enemy bandits in a fight, maybe seven or eight on a good day. With all its extra guns, Zeamer was confident *Old 666* could even take on nine or 10 in a pinch. But 20? And with more likely to follow in their wake? Suicide.

Zeamer kept *Old 666* heading straight and true as Kendrick focused his cameras on the ribs of coral shimmering just below the bay's surface. After 10 minutes, Kendrick's voice broke the cockpit's droning hum. "Give me 45 more seconds." The words were barely out of the waist gunner's mouth when Zeamer spotted the first wave of Japanese fighters—four green A6M Zeros and a twin-engine fighter—climbing and circling around their plane.

Dillman and Pugh aimed bursts of fire at the fighters, forcing them to swerve, but they regrouped and circled to make a frontal attack, where the B-17's armament was normally weakest. Within seconds, the five aircraft covered Zeamer's Flying Fortress like a shroud. A Zero with vertical red stripes painted across its fuselage made its run at the precise moment Kendrick asked for another 15 seconds. Zeamer saw it approach from the 10 o'clock position and roll onto its back before firing. Down in the front compartment, just behind the B-17's Plexiglas nose, Sarnoski responded with a burst of fire, sending the Zero into a spin. The B-17 shuddered as the rest of the crew blasted the enemy swarm.

As Sarnoski took aim at another Zero, a Japanese 20mm cannon shell punched through the B-17's nose, exploding in the front compartment. The force blew Sarnoski back 15 feet. He landed facedown with a bone-jarring thud on the aluminum floor almost directly beneath the flight deck. The concussion also knocked Ruby Johnston off his feet, but he was able to recover and crawl on all fours toward Sarnoski. He rolled the bombardier over and flinched. The exploding shell had lacerated Sarnoski's neck and ripped a bowling ball-sized hole in his side.

Johnston ripped open packets of sulfa powder and doused the wounds. Sarnoski's eyelids fluttered, then flipped open. His eyes were red and beginning to swell from the Plexiglas dust they had absorbed when the nose shattered. "I'm all right," Sarnoski managed to say. "Don't worry about me." Gouts of blood spilled onto the floor as he spoke. Johnston poured more sulfa on the wounds. Frigid air, rushing in through the shattered nose, was starting to freeze the front compartment. The blood on Sarnoski's face and torso coagulated into a slushy sheen.

Sarnoski slowly crab-walked back to his shattered station like a snail leaving a trail of gore. He gripped a machine gun and pulled himself into a crouch, firing at the twin-engine fighter and setting it ablaze; it dove and disappeared from view. The wind streaming through the broken

Plexiglas slammed empty shell casings back into Sarnoski's face. Yet he continued to fire until he collapsed.

Up in the cockpit, Zeamer spotted a Zero coming straight at them. He adjusted his rudder pedals, got the bandit in his crosshairs, and pressed his thumb trigger to fire *Old 666's* nose gun. His eyes were on the Zero as it twirled toward the water when his cockpit erupted in an effulgence of colors—white, magenta, orange—a rainbow blast accompanied by a sudden wave of acute pain. A thick acrid smell filled his nostrils. “Is this it?” he wondered.

Machine-gun fire from the top turret just behind him refocused his thoughts, and he scanned the flight deck. Britton, the copilot, was slumped forward in the right seat, his eyes closed and his chin on his chest. The cannon shell had blown away the B-17's instrument panel and severed cables connecting the rudders and horizontal stabilizers. The windshield was still intact, but the force of the explosion had torn away the left cockpit window and peeled back the aircraft's aluminum skin next to Zeamer's seat. The cacophony of the roaring Wright Cyclone engines and the wild rush of the slipstream stunned him.

The shell had also torn a gaping hole in the lower bulkhead connecting the cockpit to the front nose compartment. Through the gap, Zeamer could see Johnston firing at his position. Beyond him, he saw Sarnoski slumped over his machine gun. As Zeamer wondered if Sarnoski was in much pain, his own shock wore off. The lower half of his body felt as if it were on fire. His flight clothes were shredded and his left leg was sliced from the calf to the thigh. Thick, ugly sheaves of blackened flesh, like rashers of seared Canadian bacon, dangled from his exposed shinbone. His left knee resembled a mound of raw hamburger meat.

Zeamer soon realized shrapnel had also ripped through his right leg and both arms. With each pump of his heart, a thin stream of pinkish liquid spurted from a nicked artery in his ruptured left wrist and pooled in his lap. With his right hand bleeding, Zeamer keyed the interphone and asked for a damage report. No response. The shell had destroyed the communications system. He cursed under his breath.

The only instruments still working were the manifold pressure gauge and the magnetic compass in the center of the charred dashboard. The extensive damage sharply diminished Zeamer's ability to maneuver the B-17. He wagered he could selectively slow the engines on each wing to steer the bomber this way and that—if he stayed conscious.

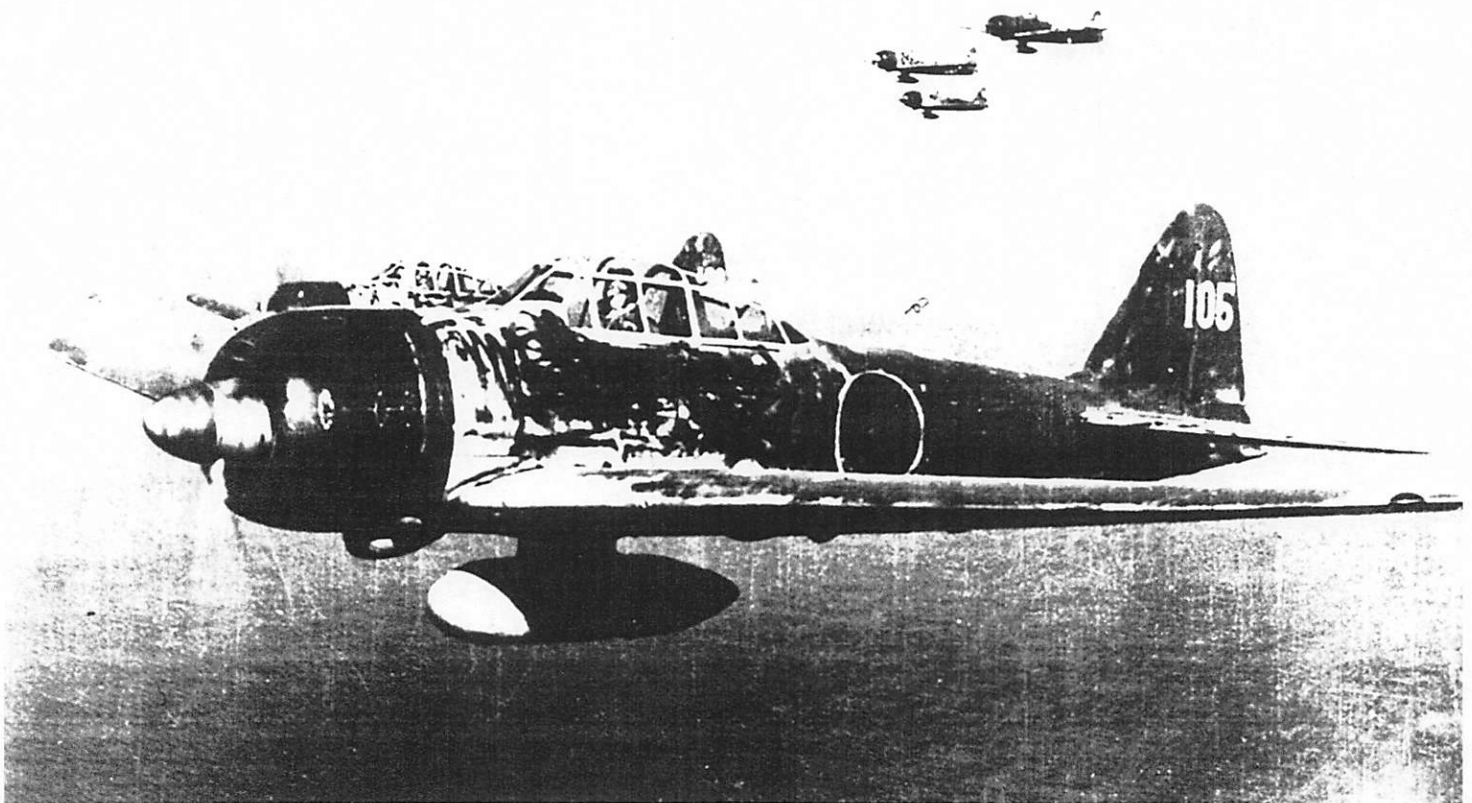


In the copilot's seat, Britton groaned and lifted his head; his eyes fluttered like a boxer coming to after the count. He patted himself down; he had a large contusion on the back of his head, but no other wounds. With the communications system destroyed, Britton left the cockpit to check on the other crew. He returned to inform Zeamer that Kendrick had stowed the camera film and was manning the waist guns. More critically, enemy bullets had destroyed the yellow, keg-like oxygen tanks behind the cockpit. That left the crew with only their small, personal bottles, which they would quickly deplete. Unless they descended to below 10,000 feet, the crew was in danger of passing out from hypoxia.

Using his ailerons and elevators—miraculously still functioning—Zeamer pushed *Old 666* into a steep dive. The plane's engines screamed and its fuselage groaned as it rapidly gained speed. With the altimeter hanging limply by its frayed wires, Zeamer estimated their altitude by the increases in the engines' manifold pressure. *Old 666*'s rivets were rattling when he calculated they had dropped to around 6,000 feet. He leveled off, removed his mask, and took a deep breath. His injured body contorted with pain as he forced air into his lungs, but at least his crew could breathe.

From the top turret, Able yelled that the Japanese fighters were chasing down after them—Kendrick counted 17 Zeros. Zeamer banked the bomber and saw the bandits go racing past for what he assumed would be another frontal assault. One more hit could finish off *Old 666*. Able knocked out one of the Zeros, which barely missed clipping their right wingtip as it spun toward the water, leaving a contrail of greasy black smoke. Moments later, Able dropped out of his swing-seat harness and crumpled to the ground, wounded in both legs.

Keeping the morning sun over his left shoulder, Zeamer set a southwesterly course. The Japanese fighters relentlessly circled *Old 666*, making head-on passes. Zeamer lost count—six, eight, a dozen attacks? It was as if the B-17 was flying through a vortex of iron rain, alternating between a light patter and a heavy, deadly downpour.



**Japanese A6M Zeros like these from the 251 Kokutai based on nearby Rabaul, swarmed Old 666, repeatedly making head-on passes against the B-17's weak frontal defenses. (National Archives)**

Furthermore, Zeamer realized he was bleeding out at an alarming rate. His legs were useless and both of his boots had filled with blood. The control wheel was slippery with gore from his wounded arms and he could grip it only with his fingertips. During one lull, he pulled off his belt and tried to tie a tourniquet around his left thigh. The effort proved too painful and time consuming. But there was a benefit to the icy wind whistling in past his legs: it helped staunch the bleeding.

Britton continued to tend to the wounded crew, periodically returning to the cockpit to plead with Zeamer to relinquish control of the aircraft and get patched up. Each time, Zeamer refused; he felt that only he could keep battered *Old 666* in the air. At least the pain was keeping him awake.

AFTER 40 MINUTES AND 100 MILES, the Japanese fighters—low on fuel and ammunition—at last began to peel away, unaware the B-17 gunners were down to their final few bullets. But with close to 500 miles of shark-infested waters left to cross before they reached New Guinea's northern coast, Zeamer knew their ordeal was far from over. There was a good chance he would have to ditch *Old 666*; he estimated their odds of surviving an ocean crash-landing at about 50

percent. Fortunately, the B-17 tended to stay afloat longer than most other American bombers. But ocean currents and strong winds could push a life raft dozens of miles a day in any direction. If downed airmen were not found within 24 hours, their chances of being rescued were almost none.

One paramount thought, however, overrode all Zeamer's calculations: they needed to bring back the photographs. Unless they returned to base with their film intact, the entire effort—and all the spilt blood—would be for naught. The Bougainville invasion would fail, and he refused to let another bomber crew go through the same hell they had endured. No, Zeamer decided. He would get this plane home.

Even without his altimeter Zeamer knew *Old 666* was steadily losing altitude. The B-17 was “mushing”—its tail dragging below the nose—and the lower it flew, the more fuel it would burn in the denser atmosphere. He could adjust the propeller pitch or change the engines' air-to-fuel ratio only so much to delay the engines from starving or running too hot. And even if the aircraft managed to remain aloft for the next four hours, it would never be able to clear the Owen Stanley mountain range and make it back home to Port Moresby. Given the amount of blood Zeamer was losing, he was beginning to doubt he would even live that long. Their only hope was to try to reach the 7,000-foot grass airstrip hacked out of the jungle at Dobodura, 90 miles east of Port Moresby. But where were they in relation to Dobodura?

Radio operator Willy Vaughan, his neck wound bandaged with a rag, lurched into the cockpit. He reported that an experimental navy-issue radio set he had picked up in Port Moresby was still working. Its voice mode was out, but he could transmit Morse code. Less than 30 minutes later, an American patrol vessel and Australian coastwatchers picked up Vaughan's transmission. They used the signal to triangulate a fix on *Old 666*'s position and relay it to Vaughan, who then plotted a course to Dobodura.

En route, and with the Japanese fighters long gone, Able kept the B-17 on course while Britton and Kendrick finally tended to Zeamer. Britton implored the pilot to move to the catwalk so they could better treat his wounds.

“I don't move,” Zeamer told them, “until the mission is ended.”

TAIL GUNNER PUDGE PUGH inched forward past the waist guns to the radio compartment. It was warmer in the center of the fuselage, and Pugh lingered to watch Kendrick and Dillman rebandage Willy Vaughn's neck. When Pugh saw that they had the task under control, he

continued forward to the crawlspace leading to the nose. There was blood everywhere. Britton was tending to a wound on Johnston's head and, further up, Pugh saw Sarnoski collapsed on one of his machine guns. Rivulets of frozen blood formed spidery lines that flowed from Sarnoski's body. His ammunition belts had all been fired off and one of the machine gun's barrels was burned out.

Pugh lifted Sarnoski away from the shattered glass and rolled him, face-up, into his lap. He was still alive. Pugh removed Sarnoski's ever-present rosary from his pocket and pressed it into his friend's bloody hand. He saw Sarnoski open his eyes once, lift the rosary to his lips, and kiss it. Then Sarnoski closed his eyes and breathed his last. Johnston crawled forward and asked how Sarnoski was doing. "He's all right," Pugh uttered. He didn't know what else to say.

With Zeamer's condition steadily deteriorating, Britton took over control of *Old 666*. The sun was almost directly overhead when they spotted the lush Dobodura coastline; Zeamer recognized the familiar outline of the American PT boat base at Oro Bay and the contours of Cape Endiaidere. The Dobodura airstrip was 25 miles beyond. Britton flew *Old 666* over the water, banked, and pointed the plane's nose inland. He could only guess at the wind direction as he throttled back and pulled the wheel into his gut.

The B-17 raced over the airstrip so fast that it looked as if the palm trees were shooting up at them. Zeamer saw the airfield's rickety control tower flash by on his right and then they hit the dirt hard, bouncing three times. With no functioning brakes, they were approaching the end of the runway much too fast. Britton spun the wheel with all his strength—the B-17's left wing dipped and dug into the dirt. Chunks of rocks and turf flew like sparks from a grindstone as the aircraft's skidding, circular movement gradually tightened. Finally, the bomber rolled to a stop at the end of the airstrip in a cloud of dust. The time was 12:15 p.m.

It had been more than eight hours since they had taken off from Port Moresby. When Britton switched off the engines, Zeamer took a deep breath and the world around him receded into nothingness. He came to some time later, unsure of where he was, but in no pain. His body felt numb from head to toe. He heard muffled voices and smelled sizzling oil and leaking fuel. Then another voice, closer and louder, said: "Get the pilot last. He's dead."

Zeamer wanted to shout but could not find the strength. Finally, two strong hands unbuckled his safety belt and lifted him by the shoulders. The pain returned, unbearable, and he passed out again. At Dobodura's small field hospital, doctors examined Zeamer and determined he had lost nearly half the blood in his body. Over the next 72 hours, they carefully removed nearly 150

pieces of shrapnel—including chunks of the plane's rudder pedals and its control cables—from Zeamer's legs, arms, and torso.



**Doctors removed nearly 150 pieces of shrapnel—including chunks of the plane's rudder pedals and its control cables—from Zeamer's legs, arms, and torso. For their valor in combat, Zeamer (pictured in the hospital) and bombardier Joe Sarnoski received the Medal of Honor. (National Archives)**

Fourteen days after *Old 666*'s mission, Allied forces began Operation Cartwheel, a two-pronged offensive to take Rabaul by pushing through New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. And in November, Marines and GIs stormed ashore on the west coast of Bougainville. Military planners gave much credit for the successful landings to the landing craft drivers who, using maps and charts developed from the photographs taken by *Old 666*, successfully avoided the deadly reefs lacing Empress Augusta Bay.

During its final flight, *Old 666* endured one of the longest sustained attacks by enemy fighters in history. For their valor, Jay Zeamer and Joe Sarnoski were awarded the Medal of Honor. The seven other crewmen—J.T. Britton, William Vaughan, Herbert Pugh, Forrest Dillman, Johnnie

Able, Ruby Johnston, and George Kendrick—were each awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, the nation's second-highest military commendation for heroism. This gave *Old 666*'s crew the distinction of becoming, and remaining, the most highly decorated combat aircrew in American military service.

Not bad for a bunch of screw-ups and misfits. ★

Copyright © 2016 by Bob Drury and Tom Clavin. From *LUCKY 666: The Impossible Mission* by Bob Drury and Tom Clavin published by Simon & Schuster, Inc. Printed by permission.