

UNION PACIFIC'S B-17 — *The Rest of the Story*

by Don Strack

Twenty-five years ago during a session of page-by-page research of *Railway Age*, I came across a photo of a World War II B-17 aircraft lettered "Spirit of the Union Pacific." (There was also a copy of the photo in *The Streamliner*, Volume 14, Number 3, issue that covered some aspects of Union Pacific's activities during World War II.) The details of the photo were unknown, but my interest was renewed after John Bromley posted a message to the Trainorders.com on-line discussion group which included

a copy of the B-17 photo.

When I asked him for additional information, John sent a copy of an article which stated that on August 3, 1943, a photo was taken of a Boeing B-17 heavy bomber, showing it lettered as "Spirit of the Union Pacific." The aircraft received the special lettering to acknowledge the contributions of the 65,000 employees of Union Pacific Railroad who had raised an extra \$379,000 in war bond purchases. The photo was included as part of a brief news item in the September 11, 1943 is-

sue of *Railway Age*. The same photo was also used for a postcard that was handed out by Union Pacific to its employees.

Bromley, Director of Historic Programs at the Union Pacific Railroad Museum in Council Bluffs, Iowa, added that "apparently this is not the plane originally intended to be the UP plane. The Army didn't want to wait on the plane for a ceremony so this was a second plane that was lettered. In the haste to get it painted they omitted the word "employees. According to Army and Treasury Depart-



This photo with the following caption was circulated among employees as a postcard. "Spirit of the Union Pacific" Goes To War. Proudly a committee of Union Pacific employes went to Seattle recently to see "our" Flying Fortress off to the wars. Attending the dedication (pictured left to right) were: H. O. West, Executive Vice Pres., Boeing Aircraft Co.; Walter Wilson, chairman Union Pacific War Bond Committee; F. W. Madden, representing Brotherhood Railway Clerks; John D. Beard, Brotherhood Maintenance of Way; L. A. Collins, Supt. Oregon Division; D. W. Hood, Brotherhood Railway Trainmen; and A. A. Murphy, Assistant to President of Union Pacific. To the Employees of the Union Pacific goes the distinction, according to the Treasury Department, of being the first railroad group in the Nation to be honored with a "named" heavy bomber for voluntarily increasing their payroll deductions for War Bonds by more than \$379,000 during May and June. "You have certainly done a grand job on the Union Pacific Bomber Bond Campaign," wrote James L. Houghteling, Director, National Organizations Division, Treasury Dept., War Savings Staff. —*Union Pacific Historical Collection*

ment instructions on naming bombers, they were supposed to be named for employees of organizations. They didn't want to delay delivery of this plane so it went out as shown. This was recorded as the first named heavy bomber recognizing a railroad group."

The status of the B-17 was updated in the February 1945 issue of the monthly *Union Pacific Bulletin*, at times known as the "Pink Bulletin" because of the pink

FATE OF U. P. BOMBER NOW REVEALED

Omaha, Nebr.—With the war over, Union Pacific employes now can know the story of the B-17 bomber named in their honor—"The Spirit of Union Pacific."



Back in 1943, the 65,000 employes of the railroad during May and June voluntarily increased their war bond purchases by an extra \$379,000, in appreciation were given the privilege of christening a Flying Fortress.

According to information recently released by the War Department "The Spirit of Union Pacific" was on her fifth mission when shot down October 10, 1943, in a raid on enemy installations at Munster, Germany.

Most of the crew were taken prisoner, including the pilot, Capt. Robert B. Short of Los Angeles, a West Point graduate and former native of Norfolk, Neb. Others who parachuted to safety were Lt. Bud H. Hinckley of Rigby, Idaho, the co-pilot; Lt. Stoliar, the bombardier; and Sgts. William M. Esseltine, Syracuse, N. Y.; Donald Armstrong, Binghamton, N. Y.; Frank Beckay, Cleveland, O.; and Eugene A. Runser, Erie, Pa. The navigator, Lt. Hal K. Hughes of Dallas, Tex., and Sgts. Donald Lowrie, Hazelton, Pa., and Richard Grace, Glassport, Pa., were reported killed.

paper it was printed on.

Through an on-line discussion group that focuses on the heavy bombers of the Army Air Forces during World War II, I located the Missing Air Crew Report for Captain Robert B. Short. The report verified all of the same dates and names as the 1945 *Bulletin* article, but including the serial number of the B-17 itself, 42-30826. A search of the various on-line databases of B-17 aircraft revealed that 42-30826 was also named "Short Stuff," which makes sense because of the aircraft commander's name. Through this report and other we are able to piece together the fate of the "Spirit of Union Pacific."

The Rest of the Story

Aircraft 42-30826 ("Short Stuff") was a Boeing B-17F. It was accepted by United States Army Air Force on July 30, 1943. On August 3, 1943, it was photographed by a Union Pacific photographer at the Boeing plant in Seattle, Washington lettered as "Spirit of the Union Pacific." The following day it arrived at the Lockheed Modification Center, Dallas, Texas, where it was modified for service, including addition of armaments. On August 5, 1943, Short Stuff arrived at Gore Army Air Field, Great Falls, Montana. On August 8th it was again back in Dallas at Love Army Air Field. On August 17, 1943, it arrived at Dalhart Army Air Field, Dalhart, Texas, for air crew training. On September 3, 1943, Short Stuff was moved to Grand Island Army Air Field, Grand Island, Nebraska, and from there was forwarded to the 8th Air Force in England where it arrived on

Left: In February 1945 the *Union Pacific Bulletin* reported that the The Spirit of the Union Pacific was on her fifth mission when shot down October 10, 1943, at Munster, Germany. The fate of her crew was outlined: Most of the crew were taken prisoner, including the pilot, Capt. Robert B. Short of Los Angeles, a West Point graduate and former native of Norfolk, Neb. Others who parachuted to safety were Lt. Bud H. Hinckley of Rigby, Idaho, the co-pilot; Lt. Stoliar, the bombardier; and Sgts. William M. Esseltine, Syracuse, N. Y.; Donald Armstrong, Binghamton, N. Y.; Frank Becay, Cleveland, Ohio; and Eugene A. Runser, Erie, Pa. The navigator, Lt. Hal K. Hughes of Dallas, Tex., and Sgts. Donald Lowrie, Hazelton, Pa., and Richard Grace, Glassport, Pa., were reported killed. —*Union Pacific Historical Collection*

September 9, 1943.

It flew as part of the 571st Bomber Squadron (Heavy), one of four squadrons that made up the 390th Bomber Group (Heavy), which itself was part of the 8th Air Force. The 571st flew out of Framingham, England, along with the other four squadrons of the 390th, which combined flew a total of 300 missions, with 144 aircraft being lost. The tail code for the 390th Bomber Group was "Square J" (3rd Air Division was "Square", 390th group was "J"), and the aircraft code for 42-30826 was DI-R (Squadron Code DI, Aircraft Letter R).

On October 10, 1943, the crew and aircraft "Short Stuff" were flying at approximate 25,000 feet, just before "turning on target" over Munster, Germany, an important rail and waterway center. At approximately 1:00 p.m., the number 3 engine was struck by a flak burst. The crew attempted to control the resulting fire, but within very few minutes the damage got worse and the captain ordered the crew to abandon the aircraft.

The crew of "Short Stuff" consisted of the normal compliment of 10 men, plus a photographer that was accompanying the flight. By telegram, the Germans reported that six crew members of aircraft 42-30826 had been captured and were being held as prisoners of war. An after-action report by Oberfeldwebel (equivalent to a Master Sergeant) Leo-Lothar Barann stated that he shot 42-30826 down using the Bf-109G-6 he was flying. The aircraft itself crashed on a farm near Ostbrevern, about five miles northeast of Munster. Two crew members reported that the aircraft exploded after they had all bailed out.

It appears that October 10, 1943, was one of the worst days for the loss of B-17 airplanes and crews, all during what has become known as "Black Week," which included the October 14th raid on the ball bearing factories at Schweinfurt. During "Black Week" at least 141 B-17s were lost over the continent by the 8th Air Force causing the USAAF to end daytime bombing missions over Germany. ■

—For an expanded version of this article, including more information about what happened to the crew go to: <http://utahrails.net/up/up-b-17.php>