

1945 February 26-March 4

Flying a Fortress

James Hartley, Onalaska Pilot, Earns DFC At Base In England

AN 8TH AIR FORCE BOMBER STATION, England—Capt. James R. Hartley, 24, of Onalaska, Wis., pilot of a B-17 Flying Fortress, stood at rigid attention as Major General Earle E. Partridge, commanding general of the 3rd air division, pinned on the distinguished flying cross.

Capt. Hartley was honored for "extraordinary achievement while serving as lead pilot of squadron formations on heavy bombardment missions against the enemy." He led formations on successful attacks against Tournan En Brie, France; Fallersleben, Germany; and Orleans Saran, France, despite adverse weather conditions and intense anti-aircraft fire.

The captain also holds the air medal with four oak leaf clusters for "meritorious achievement while participating in the air offensive against the enemy over continental Europe."

He has taken part in aerial assaults on a variety of objectives, ranging from enemy airfields and aircraft plants to oil refineries, railroad yards, and front line positions. Among the well known targets which Capt. Hartley has had a part in bombing are the oil dumps at Misburg, Hanover and Merseburg, and railroad yards at Cologne.

Capt. Hartley is the son of W. T. Hartley, R. 1, Onalaska. Before entering the AAF he was a student



CAPT. JAMES HARTLEY

at the La Crosse State Teachers college. He is a graduate of Onalaska high school.

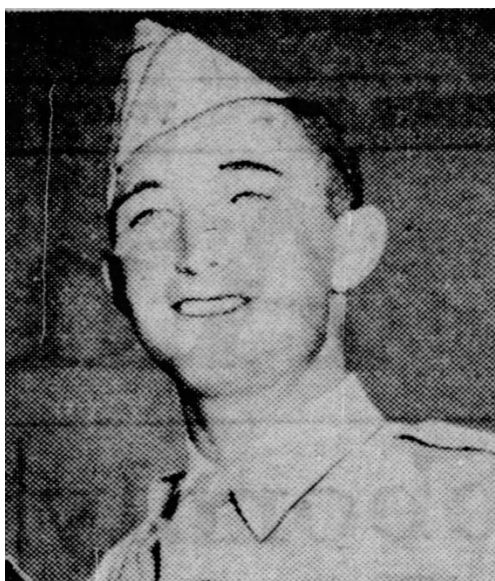
The captain is a member of the 34th Bomb. Group, a unit of the 3rd Air Division, the division cited by the president for its now historic England-Africa shuttle bombing of Messerschmitt plants at Regensburg, Germany.

La Crosse Tribune, 1945 February 28, page 8

James R. Hartley of Onalaska, winner of the Distinguished Flying Cross in 1945, had been at war since the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.



Distinguished Flying Cross
(U.S. Air Force)



James R. Hartley
(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1942 August 30, page 2)

Descended from a pioneer family of La Crosse County, James Hartley grew up on his parent's farm near Onalaska. William T. Hartley and his wife, Sadie, were noted breeders of Shorthorn cattle, and they were the third generation of their family who had lived in the same house.¹

Leaving the farm on North Salem Road, James Hartley attended La Crosse State Teachers college.²

James Hartley enlisted in the Army Air Corps on November 1, 1940. After several training posts, he was sent to the Hawaiian Islands in June 1941. He was there during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.³ Wheeler Field, where Sgt. Hartley was stationed, was one of the targets attacked by Japanese aircraft on December 7, 1941. Hartley decided to become a pilot, and he entered flying school in California in early 1942.⁴ Hartley then went to Luke Field in Arizona as an aviation cadet, where he earned his pilot's wings and commission as a 2nd Lieutenant at the end of September 1942.⁵

In May 1944, Hartley was sent to England to join the 8th Air Force. There he was promoted to the rank of captain and was flying bombing missions.⁶

James R. Hartley was a pilot in one of the iconic aircraft of World War II. When most people think about the bombing campaign during World War II, especially in Europe, the image that comes to mind is the Boeing B-17 "Flying Fortress." The United States had several other bombers that were part of the aerial arsenal during the war, but the B-17 is the most remembered.⁷

Boeing started working on the B-17 four-engine bomber in 1934. The first prototype flew one year later.⁸

By the beginning of World War II, B-17Cs were in use. Their seven machine guns proved inadequate to defend the aircraft from attacking fighters.⁹

The next significant version was the B-17E that added a top turret and a ball turret underneath for more defensive machine guns.¹⁰ This increased its defensive armament to eleven .50-caliber machine guns. Five hundred twelve B-17Es were built.¹¹ Another major change was a significant increase in the size of the tail to provide more stability for high-altitude flight.¹² These were flying in the Pacific Theater starting in 1942.¹³

Hundreds of changes were made in the B-17F, including an extended Plexiglas nose, new fuel tanks, and more armor.¹⁴ There were 3,400 B-17Fs built starting in 1942.¹⁵

The most numerous model was the B-17G, with 8,685 built, that featured a remotely-controlled chin turret. These were used almost exclusively in the European Theater.¹⁶ The chin turret was added to counter the frequent German tactic of attacking a bomber head-on. The chin turret was operated by the bombardier, and its addition supplied the B-17G with thirteen .50-caliber machine guns.¹⁷



A B-17 bomber in 1940; note the size compared to the cars and people
(Wayne State University)

The B-17 was a big airplane with a lot of capability. A B-17E was almost 74 feet long, just over 19 feet high, and had a wingspan of close to 104 feet. It weighed 53,000 pounds (loaded), had a maximum speed of 317 miles per hour at 25,000 feet and could fly up to 36,000 feet.¹⁸ Its four engines put out 1,200 horsepower. The normal cruising speed of a B-17 was 165 to 185 miles per hour depending on the fuel and bomb load.¹⁹ The fuel tanks held 2,490 gallons of fuel for a flying range of 3,700 miles.²⁰

A B-17 could carry 6,000 pounds of bombs for 2,000 miles or as much as 10,800 pounds of bombs for shorter missions. A crew of ten or eleven men was required: pilot, co-pilot, navigator, bombardier, radio operator, flight engineer, and four or five gunners.²¹



Distinctive large tail of later B-17 models; tail gunner position in lower left
B-17G "Nine-O-Nine"
(Jeff Rand, 1992 June 30)



Ball turret gun position on the underside of the plane
B-17G "Nine-O-Nine"
(Jeff Rand, 1992 June 30)



Left: Ball turret; Right: one of two waist gunner positions
B17G "Yankee Lady"
(Jeff Rand, 2000 June 17)



Top turret gun position
B-17G "Nine-O-Nine"

(Jeff Rand, 1992 June 30)



Bombardier station and chin turret, plus two cheek guns
B-17G "Nine-O-Nine"
(Jeff Rand, 1992 June 30)

Early in the war when the United States was still building its combat strength, the B-17 Flying Fortresses was one of the few offensive weapons that was attacking the enemy daily. Air strategists thought the heavily-armed bombers flying in tight formations for mutual support, much like the wagon trains of the Old West, could penetrate enemy airspace without fighter escort and bomb Germany into submission. This was a miscalculation, and it is fortunate for the crewmen that the B-17 was such a sturdy aircraft that it could take a lot of punishment and bring them back to their airbases alive.²² The public was impressed by the courage of the glamorous flyboys who flew over occupied Europe with just the machine guns on their plane for protection.

The B-17s became known as airplanes that handled well and could still fly with significant battle damage.²³ Pilots characterized it as a stable, predictable, and reliable aircraft.²⁴ Even so, about 8,000 B-17s out of the 11,500 sent to the European and Mediterranean theaters were destroyed in combat or accidents.²⁵

Twelve B-17Es conducted the first American bombing raid in Europe on August 17, 1942. They bombed railroad yards in France and returned without losing any planes.²⁶ The frequency and size of bombing raids by the 8th Air Force increased greatly during the rest of the war.

German resistance with fighter aircraft and anti-aircraft artillery also increased, especially when bombing raids started venturing into Germany. A bomber crew had to complete 25 missions before being pulled out of combat, and it was June 1943 before any American bomber crew survived their full combat tour.²⁷



B-17G in flight
(Grand Valley State University)

On August 17, 1943, nearly every B-17 in the 8th Air Force took off to bomb ball bearing factories in Schweinfurt, Germany and an aircraft factory in Regensburg, Germany. By the end of the day, sixty out of the 361 bombers had been lost and eleven more were so badly damaged they never flew again. Over 550 men were killed or missing. These losses were equal to those the 8th Air Force had suffered over the whole span of the previous six months.²⁸ This was the wake-up call for the higher command, who now realized that air superiority had to be achieved to stem the unsustainable losses of bombers and aircrew²⁹. Every wagon train needed a cavalry escort.

Heavy losses continued until the long-range P-51 Mustang fighter plane appeared in late 1943.³⁰ With a fighter escort all the way from England to targets in Germany and back, bomber losses decreased incrementally as the P-51 Mustang helped the Allies achieve air superiority. By early 1945, when Captain Hartley received his Distinguished Flying Cross, hundreds and even thousands of Allied bombers were pounding Germany day and night.

Captain James Hartley returned to the United States in August 1945 on the ocean liner Queen Elizabeth.³¹ He remained in the Army Air Corps, later reestablished as the United States Air Force, after World War II. His captain's rank was temporary during the war, so he reverted back to First Lieutenant in 1947.³² By 1958, he had attained the rank of Major and was stationed in the Azores.³³ Lt. Colonel James Hartley was living in Mt. Holly, New Jersey in 1963.³⁴ After that, the trail of his life goes cold.

After the war, B-17s were reconditioned and became part of the Strategic Air Command for several years. But jet aircraft were the wave of the future, so B-17s were all phased out by July 1948.³⁵

Out of 12,731 B-17s manufactured, only 47 still exist. Most of the others were sold for scrap metal after the war. Forty of the surviving planes are in the United States, and nine of those still fly.³⁶

At least three B-17s have visited the La Crosse airport in past years.



B-17G "Nine O Nine"³⁷
(Jeff Rand, 1992 June 30)



B-17G "Sentimental Journey"
(Jeff Rand, 1993 July 11)



B-17G "Yankee Lady"
(Jeff Rand, 2001 June 17)

Historians have debated the effectiveness and morality of the Allied strategic bombing campaign ever since the end of World War II. Regardless of those considerations, nothing can diminish the bravery of the thousands of men like James R. Hartley who did what their country asked them to do in a time of war.

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Sources & Notes:

¹ "W. T. Hartley, County Cattle Breeder, Dies," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1960 December 10, page 1.

² "Locals," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1942 March 15, page 12.

³ "James Hartley, Pearl Harbor Vet, To Receive Air Corps Commission," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1942 August 30, page 2. See also: "Is Army Aviator," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1941 December 10, page 13.

⁴ "Locals," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1942 March 15, page 12.

⁵ "James Hartley, Pearl Harbor Vet, To Receive Air Corps Commission," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1942 August 30, page 2. Two other veterans of the Pearl Harbor attack were his aviation cadet classmates.

⁶ "James Hartley Is Promoted," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 August 6, page 8. This article states that he was the pilot of a B-24 Liberator. The article about his Distinguished Flying Cross states that he was the pilot of a B-17. He may have switched airplanes; the author proceeds on the assumption that it was a B-17 in early 1945.

⁷ Hollywood may be partly responsible for this because most movies and television shows about World War II bomber crews have featured the B-17 Flying Fortress.

⁸ Enzo Angelucci, *The Rand McNally Encyclopedia of Military Aircraft: 1914-1980* (New York: The Military Press, 1981), 288.

⁹ Donald Nijboer, *Gunner: An Illustrated History of World War II Aircraft Turrets and Gun Positions* (Erin, Ontario, Canada: Boston Mills Press, 2001), 44.

¹⁰ Donald Nijboer, *Gunner*, 44.

¹¹ Enzo Angelucci, *The Rand McNally Encyclopedia of Military Aircraft*, 288.

¹² Anthony Robinson, ed., *In the Cockpit: Flying the World's Great Aircraft* (London: Orbis Publishing, 1979), 202.

¹³ Enzo Angelucci, *The Rand McNally Encyclopedia of Military Aircraft*, 288.

¹⁴ Donald Nijboer, *Gunner*, 44.

¹⁵ Enzo Angelucci, *The Rand McNally Encyclopedia of Military Aircraft*, 288.

¹⁶ Enzo Angelucci, *The Rand McNally Encyclopedia of Military Aircraft*, 288.

¹⁷ Donald Nijboer, *Gunner*, 44.

¹⁸ Enzo Angelucci, *The Rand McNally Encyclopedia of Military Aircraft*, 265.

¹⁹ Anthony Robinson, ed., *In the Cockpit: Flying the World's Great Aircraft* (London: Orbis Publishing, 1979), 205.

²⁰ Andrew W. Waters, *All The U.S. Air Force Airplanes, 1907-1983* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1983), 90.

²¹ Andrew W. Waters, *All The U.S. Air Force Airplanes*, 90.

²² Anthony Robinson, ed., *In the Cockpit*, 201.

²³ Anthony Robinson, ed., *In the Cockpit*, 206.

²⁴ Anthony Robinson, ed., *In the Cockpit*, 212.

²⁵ Ron Dick, *American Eagles: A History of the United States Air Force Featuring the Collection of the U.S. Air Force Museum* (Charlottesville, Virginia: Howell Press, 1997), 155.

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- ²⁶ Ron Dick, *American Eagles*, 158. For a video of the first mission, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OolZoKeh0Bw>
- ²⁷ Ron Dick, *American Eagles*, 163. This was Captain Bob Morgan's "Memphis Belle," which was sent to the United States for a celebratory publicity tour. Due to combat losses, the number of missions needed to complete a combat tour was later increased.
- ²⁸ Ron Dick, *American Eagles*, 165-166.
- ²⁹ Anthony Robinson, ed., *Aerial Warfare: An Illustrated History* (New York: A & W Publishers, 1982), 343.
- ³⁰ Ron Dick, *American Eagles*, 171-172.
- ³¹ "Queen Elizabeth To Dock With Five Local Men Next Saturday," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 August 9, page 2.
- ³² "La Crosse Area Men Nominated For Regular Army Commissions," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1947 May 31, page 1.
- ³³ "Hartley 50th," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1958 December 9, page 7.
- ³⁴ William A. Hartley obituary, *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1963 October 18, page 10.
- ³⁵ Andrew, W. Waters, *All the U.S. Air Force Airplanes*, 102.
- ³⁶ "B-17 Flying Fortress Surviving Aircraft," *Airplanes of the Past.com*, accessed 2020 March 2, <https://www.airplanesofthepast.com/b17-flying-fortress-surviving-aircraft.htm>.
- ³⁷ B-17 "Nine-O-Nine" crashed on October 2, 2019, in Connecticut, killing seven people and injuring several more. See: "[NTSB Factual Report B-17G Crash 'Nine-O-Nine' 16 Dec 2020](#)"

See also:

- Target for Today* (1943) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HwIVH5KcWSs> (War Department documentary, 1.5 hours long)
- B-17 Flying Fortress* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LTFy9mzjI0o>
- B-17 The Legend* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbpcwyWAv28>
- B-17 battle damage* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TealLv1W1hE>
- Flying Fortress crash landing* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3fHPFQffwmY> (silent film of a B-17 landing with just one wheel)
- Color footage of B-17* <https://www.military.com/video/aircraft/attack-and-fighter-aircraft/b-17-flying-fortress-bombing-mission/3147362368001>
- The Memphis Belle* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rH9_UIQ8S8 (War Department documentary)
- 92nd Bomb Group over Germany in 1944* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnkVPtyGaVA>
- Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress flight with cockpit view* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AsO8GTXgGAI> (amateur video of a flight in a restored B-17)