

Building the **FLYING FORTRESS**

B-17 PRODUCTION PHASES OUT IN FAVOR OF THE B-17G — THE ULTIMATE FORTRESS VARIANT — PART SEVEN

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Shortly after it was completed at Burbank, B-17G-40-VE 42-97991 went aloft with a Lockheed Ventura for a series of photographs that captured the gleaming Fort in all its glory. At Boeing, Lockheed Vega, and Douglas the changeover from the B-17F to B-17G went extremely smoothly and the last B-17Fs looked a great deal like the new G. By the time the last B-17F rolled off the lines, it was a very different aircraft than the first B-17F. Modifications had been incorporated into the airframe to boost performance, increase efficiency, and add armament. After 42-97991 was accepted by the USAAF, it was flown to Dallas for combat upgrades on 26 April 1944 and then began the long slog to Britain (note that the unstaggered side gun positions have been sealed for the flight) where it was assigned to the 366th Bomb Squadron, 305th Bomb Group, at Chelveston on 9 August 1944. On 24 August 1944, the 8th AF launched Mission 568 that saw some 451 Forts from numerous Groups dispersed to various targets. Some 185 were sent to the Merseburg oil refinery, another 129 went to Kollada airfield, while 37 were to hit airfields at targets of opportunity at Goslar, Nordhausen (eleven bombers), Stade (two), Leipzig (ten) and seven others. The formation of which 42-97991 was part missed the bombing point and had to turn back and begin the run again. At this point, the aircraft was hit by anti-aircraft fire and then savaged by Me 262 jet fighters. On fire, the Fort went down near Balgstadt, Germany, with two of the crew killed and the other seven all wounded as they took to their parachutes. The survivors were soon made POWs. Some 16 B-17s were lost on that mission, two damaged beyond repair, and 189 damaged.



Fleets of new B-17Gs spelled doom for Nazi Germany. This Boeing-built example has the cover in place over the secret Norden bombsight, even though the Germans must have had hundreds of examples from shot-down Forts. Stenciling on the front of the chin turret reads: "Caution: Do not install boot or wrap guns closer than 4-in from slot closure." The photo shows the zippered canvas covers on the gun openings to advantage. The forward fuselage of the first production G-models looked very similar to the B-17F, but one of the distinguishing features soon added to the production line were the bowed nose windows, which housed a .50-caliber weapon apiece. This installation meant the gunner could get a much better angle of fire — quite a few of these bowed installations were added at combat modification depots rather than on the production line. The cheek installations did not become standard on the production line until the Boeing B-17G-60 blocks of aircraft, Lockheed Vega G-35, and Douglas G-25. Each chin gun had 365 rounds of ammunition.