

How Liberty Belle Was Lost

Robert C. Smith, the pilot of 42-30096, *Liberty Belle*, said, "We climbed through a thick cloud layer and broke out on top at about 19,000 feet. There were several aircraft in the area so I directed Sgt. Litt to fire a red flare as a signal for them to form up on me. A few moments later, I heard an explosion in the airplane, and as I turned to the right to look back, a flare hit me right between the eyes. The flare bounced off me and ricocheted around the cockpit. I was dazed and probably in shock at the moment, but I did realize that the entire top turret area was in flames. I began to make split-second decisions, remembering the Great Ashfield disaster, the North Sea fiasco, and all the rest. I knew without doubt that there was no way that we could put this fire out, and with a load of fused 500-pounders and bundles of fire bombs, the airplane could blow up at any minute. I engaged the autopilot on an easterly heading (I knew by the beacon we were near Colchester and the coast) and was reaching to switch the radio to interphone when Mac, my copilot, pulled back the throttles. I took the throttles away from him and leveled off, but precious seconds were ticking away. My vision was blurred from the burns around my eyes and face and my right hand was badly burned. I reached the bailout bell and held it for a long time. The alarm was heard by my crew and they knew what it meant because we had discussed it many times. I yelled at Mac to go and pointed to the hatch, but he wouldn't budge. I couldn't lift him and decided to lead the way and get him to follow. (I learned later that Mac had a phobia about parachuting from an airplane which may explain his failure to respond.) By this time flames filled the cockpit. I rolled out the escape hatch and passed out. I don't know when I regained consciousness but I do recall falling through a snowstorm on the long descent. I landed very hard and heard my leg snap with a sound like a breaking board. Without the use of my right hand and with a broken leg, I had trouble collapsing the chute, and the wind dragged me for some distance before I got untangled. By the time I got out of my parachute harness, I was definitely in shock. Doc Kuhn had given me two morphine styrettes and I was squeezing one in my arm when an English farmer reached me. I heard him say, "Oh my God!" and that is the last I remembered until I was put aboard an ambulance with a doctor who found the other styrette and gave it to me. I was hospitalized for six months and convalesced for another year.

Eyewitnesses reported that "*Liberty Belle*" blew up, one wing folded, and she crashed in an open field near Chapell Penham Hall at Wake's Colne, England.



All that remained of f *"Liberty Belle"*