The smile was the same, but his fans saw silver threads among the black when he docked in New York last summer.
ACME

# Jimmy Stewart's Finest Performance

**By COL. BEIRNE LAY, JR.**

II

THE buzz of curiosity which always accompanied Jimmy Stewart's arrival at a new station died down quickly in England. To everyone, preoccupied with the life-and-death business of laying on heavy-bomber missions, the presence in their midst of a screen star was interesting but unimpressive. The only talents likely to impress the air crews and staff officers of Brig. Gen. Ted Timberlake's 2nd Combat Bomb Wing would be Stewart's ability to work, learn, fly a B-24, conduct briefings and run his outfit.

A swarm of sharpshooters from wing headquarters descended on the freshman 445th Bomb Group at Tibenham for the double purpose of prying into every nook and cranny of the group's readiness for operations and of orientating its personnel on the latest wrinkles of combat technique peculiar to the European theater. The boys listened attentively for the most part to the lectures they received from battle-wise pilots, bombardiers, navigators, radio-communications officers and operations officers. One man listened to the experts so hard, so long and so well that in spite of his passion for anonymity, he was conspicuous. Jimmy Stewart became a dry sponge at this new fountain of knowledge. The wing communications officer recalls how Stewart was the only man who sat twice through his talk on radio aids. What's more, Stewart bled him for more information afterward.

**The general said: "I don't worry much when Stewart's leading," thus voicing what others in England thought of the movie star who had a way of hitting the target, bringing his crews back alive.**

Within ten days, probably a record for a newly arrived group, the 445th put up a twelve-ship formation on a mission at 27,000 feet against Kiel, Germany, with no losses. Captain Stewart led the high squadron. On all the subsequent eighteen missions which he flew during sixteen months of the mortal climax of the air fighting over Europe, he was to bear the responsibility of leading either a group—thirty-six airplanes—a wing—three groups—an air division—three or four wings—or the 8th Air Force—the whole works.

Like the star who is no better than his last picture, an air commander in the 8th was no better than his last mission.

On his first two missions—Bremen came next—Stewart turned in a workmanlike job. He made no mistakes, but neither was he faced with any difficult decisions by which Colonel Terrill and General Timberlake could assess the judgment of the green commander of the 703d Bombardment Squadron. They learned that he was thorough, deliberate, unspectacular and conscientious—important as far as it went, but not conclusive.

And then came Stewart's third mission, a strike against Ludwigshafen, Germany, which resulted a few days later in a letter from the commander of another group—a commander who didn't have any time to waste on chatty letters:

*Headquarters, 389th Bomb Group (H)*
13 January, 1944.

COL. ROBERT TERRILL,
COMMANDING OFFICER,
445TH BOMB GROUP (H)

*Dear Bob:* Please allow me to express the admiration of the personnel of the 389th as well as my personal admiration for

*(Continued on Page 117)*

# JIMMY STEWART'S FINEST PERFORMANCE

*(Continued from Page 20)*

the splendid display of superb air discipline of the 445th on the mission of 7 January, 1944.

The good judgment of Captain Stewart, your Group leader, in maintaining an excellent group formation yet making every attempt to hold his position in the Combat Wing formation is to be commended.

Congratulations to you and the 445th,

Sincerely,

(Signed) MILTON W. ARNOLD,
Colonel, Air Corps,
Commanding.

*1st Indorsement*

CAPT. JAMES M. STEWART,
C.O., 703D BOMBARDMENT SQUADRON (H)

1. It is extremely gratifying to me to receive letters of this nature. You are hereby commended for your good judgment and leadership ability as displayed on 7 January, 1944. 2. A copy of this letter will be filed in your 201 File and with your next regular efficiency report.

(Signed) ROBERT H. TERRILL,
Colonel, Air Corps,
Commanding.

Scrutiny of the circumstances under which Captain Stewart had exercised "good judgment" and "air discipline" discloses a degree of professional understatement in the above commendation. After leaving the target area in a two-group wing formation, Stewart, in command of the 445th Group, discovered with alarm that the group he was following was thirty degrees off course. He immediately called its leader on VHF and pointed out the error in navigation. The latter insisted that Stewart was mistaken.

Two alternatives were open to Stewart, both of them bad. He saw another formation leaving Ludwigshafen on course, and knew that he could easily switch over and tack on behind it, thus insuring the safety of his own group. But this would have meant abandoning to its lonely fate the group which was blundering away from the main procession—an easy prey for the fighters which were sure to single it out on the way home. And yet if he continued, for the sake of wing integrity, to follow a leader who was heading for disaster, he must accept the certainty of sharing concentrated fighter attacks and extensive flak damage. Wandering even a mile or two from the briefed course often meant that, instead of coming home without a flak hole, you arrived all shot up and minus six or seven good crews.

It is easy to sit in comfortable chairs around a blackboard after a mission and say what a leader should or should not have done when faced with so awful a dilemma as confronted Stewart—a situation, incidentally, which illustrates perfectly the kind of decisions our air commanders had to face every day.

With a hollow feeling in his stomach and a heavy heart, Stewart called the other group. "Padlock Red leader to Padlock Green leader. We're sticking with you."

Fighter controllers of the Luftwaffe, eagerly plotting the track of the two groups that had become separated from the main force, vectored several fighter *Staffeln* toward the kill. Twenty-eight miles south of Paris, sixty Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs drove head-on attacks into the lead group. Jimmy Stewart grimly closed the 445th in for support.

Paying for a navigational error with his life, the leader of the other group was the first to go down under a fusillade of 20-mm, cannon shells. Other B-24's of the lead group met the same fate. But the Focke-Wulfs which turned their attention to Stewart's compact formation didn't score any kills. Jimmy brought all his boys safely back to Tibenham.

At least one consideration which must have entered into Stewart's promotion to major later in January was the fact that he had already made a solid contribution on the Ludwigshafen mission to the sense of unity, hence combat efficiency, of the three groups in Timberlake's wing. By risking his neck to protect an erring teammate, he had probably saved the 389th from annihilation. More important was the factor of air discipline. He had served notice that he possessed a cardinal virtue of the soldier: Persuade your leader of his mistake, if you can, but follow him, right or wrong.

New confidence rode in the cockpit with Jimmy when he led the group to Bonnières, France, on January twenty-first, and the wing to Frankfurt, deep in Germany, on January twenty-ninth. There was also a rising confidence in the men who flew behind him. Things seemed to go all right when Stewart was up front. He made free use of the radio, like an aerial quarterback, to advise and encourage the other boys during a mission, and here his experience in films gave him a novel advantage. Because of his precise enunciation, people could understand him. It sounds like a little thing, but clear, quick communication between formations was of extraordinary importance.

During the month of February, 1944, in which the 8th Air Force smacked the German aircraft industry with haymakers from which it never recovered, Major Stewart was in the thick of it. He led the group to Nuremberg and the wing to Frankfurt, Galze Rigen and Brunswick. His reputation as an air commander steadily grew, receiving official recognition in the following citation for his work on the Brunswick mission:

AWARD OF THE DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS . . . *Major James Maitland Stewart*, O-433210, Army Air Forces, United States Army. For extraordinary achievement, while serving as Deputy Leader of a Combat Wing formation on a bombing mission over Germany, 20 February, 1944. Having been briefed for instrument bombing with condition that should visual bombing be possible the deputy leader would assume command, the formation proceeded to the target, meeting heavy enemy fighter opposition. When the target was reached, it became apparent that visual bombing was possible and *Major Stewart* smoothly assumed the lead position.

In spite of aggressive fighter attacks and later heavy, accurate antiaircraft fire, he was able to hold the formation together and direct a bombing run over the target in such a manner that the planes following his were able to release their bombs with great accuracy. The courage, leadership and skillful airmanship displayed by *Major Stewart* were in a large measure responsible for the success of this mission. Entered military service from California.

By command of
Lieutenant General Doolittle.

Fear is part of a normal man's make-up, but the fear that haunted Stewart and most other air commanders was the fear of failure—of messing up a mission by a bad decision. Only once during that month of February does he recall having experienced a more intimate fear, the fear of death.

He sat in the half-empty combat mess one night, eating alone, the tension within him mounting painfully. The mess was half empty because thirteen crews had failed to return from the day's mission to Gotha, Germany, during which 109's and 190's had knocked the hell out of the B-24's in a desperately fought two-and-one-half-hour air battle. The survivors pecked at their food without appetite, with bowed heads and with fatigue-bleared eyes, trying to forget their recent ordeal.

Jimmy knew that he was scheduled to lead the group to Nuremberg, over the same bloody route, the next day, if the weather held. Equally violent or increased fighter opposition could be expected on the morrow's deep penetration. He fought off the premonition that his number was up, that this time a guy named James Stewart wouldn't come back alive to Tibenham.

At 8:00 P.M. the phone rang. Tibenham was alerted for the Nuremberg mission. Jimmy laid down his fork, climbed into his jeep and drove down to the blacked-out operations block to begin the all-night task of engraving on his brain every scrap of information in the field order that now began to feed out of the teletype machine.

The following afternoon, Gen. Ted Timberlake was waiting out on the airdrome at Stewart's hard-stand, as the B-24's returning from Nuremberg circled overhead. His face relaxed when he counted the same number that had taken off. Stewart taxied up and climbed wearily out of the bomb bay, eyes haggard and cheeks creased from long hours spent in the grip of an oxygen mask.

"How did you make out at the target?" asked Timberlake.

Jimmy managed a grin. "We clobbered it," he said.

Two weeks later, General Hodges was discussing the next day's strike against Brunswick with Ted Timberlake at air-division headquarters. It

was going to be a big show and Jimmy Doolittle had called for a maximum effort.

"Who've you got leading tomorrow?" asked Hodges.

"Stewart," said Timberlake.

Hodges nodded approval. "I've got so I don't worry much when Stewart's leading," he said. "We always have a pretty good day."

Foul weather over England made a melee of the assembly on the following morning when 1000 heavies, with Jimmy in the lead, struggled up through swirling mists and set course for the enemy coast. Stewart found himself leading exactly two airplanes, one on each wing tip. The air was loaded with calls from squadrons that couldn't find their groups, and groups separated from their wings. Some wing commanders told Stewart that they had formed their wings in the clear, but were several thousand feet above the briefed altitude, while others admitted that they were still fumbling around in the soup.

Jimmy strove doggedly to organize the long column, but terrible visibility and impenetrable wraiths of vapor trails rendered the task impossible. Near the hostile coast, with signal flares and throat muscles exhausted, he advised the other leaders that he was aborting the mission. A few minutes later, en route back to base, he heard the code word broadcast from headquarters recalling the entire task force on account of weather. Jimmy, his judgment officially vindicated, breathed easier.

The weather was better for the next thrust at Brunswick, on March fifteenth, but as Stewart approached the target he was confronted with another one of those agonizingly tough decisions. His orders were to bomb the primary target visually. If the primary was obscured, he was to bomb a secondary target in the center of town, using radar. Because of a heavy undercast, he had been forced to the latter choice.

On the bomb run, he got the uneasy feeling that he was coming in slightly off course. Heavy flak was bursting on his level at 23,000 feet and about 400 yards off to the left. Those bursts were aimed at a group which had just passed over the target, so Jimmy figured that that was where he ought to be. Furthermore, the navigator was reporting that the radar scope was acting up and could they please make another run, since no enemy fighters were in the vicinity.

Question: Should he let the bombs go, probably missing the target by half a mile, and get out of there, or should he execute a complete circle and try a fresh run right into the warmed-up barrage of the dense and notoriously accurate flak batteries down below surrounding Brunswick? Would the radar scope quit misbehaving on a second run? Wasn't it almost axiomatic that a second run over a heavily defended target was suicidal?

He had only a few seconds to chew on this bitter wad of mental gum. He ordered a second run.

During the next few minutes—and it takes almost eight minutes to lead three heavy bomb groups around in a full 360-degree circle—he had ample opportunity to experience that familiar, rueful conviction of having done the wrong thing that you feel, once the die has been cast. What would they say back in England if twenty bombers went down in the bursting fragments of the 88-mm. flak shells already hurtling skyward on their twenty-three-second trajectory from the ground? Would he ever see England again to find out what they thought? Stewart prayed.

The navigator reported good returns from the scope as they squared away for the target. The procession of three groups figuratively put down their heads and bored through the cloud of black smoke and sudden death that enveloped them as their bombs left the bays and showered down through the undercast toward the aiming point in Brunswick. Battered with flak damage, but still intact, the three groups reformed at the rally point and set course for home.

During March, April and May—and in April alone the 8th lost nearly 400 bombers—Stewart led missions to Berlin, Oberhofenhofen, Siracourt and Troyes without getting into serious trouble. But on the Troyes mission he finally messed one up. At least according to him. Between the initial point and the target, a railway marshaling yard, Stewart noticed that they were ten degrees off the briefed heading. He called his bombardier and navigator, but they were sure they were heading right for the target. While Stewart was busy talking to the navigator on the interphone, his deputy leader tried to contact him on VHF and tell him he was going for the wrong target—a marshaling yard a few miles from the assigned target at Troyes, surrounded by misleadingly similar terrain features. But Jimmy, busy on the interphone, didn't switch back to his VHF channel in time to hear him. His bombs erased the wrong target that day.

At a subsequent wing critique, during which commanders were called upon to review the missions they had led, Stewart took all the blame for the turkey at Troyes. No mission that Stewart ever flew did more to win the respect of his colleagues than the one mission on which he missed the target and refused to alibi about it.

Jimmy was now group operations officer of the 453d Group, to which he was transferred in March after the 453d sustained such heavy losses in experienced personnel that Timberlake was compelled to bolster it with strong reinforcements from the two other groups in the wing. The lion's share of the actual work of rebuilding the shattered 453d went to Stewart, for Col. Ramsey D. Potts, its commander, believed that the group operations officer should be the main bearing of his organization. Jimmy had to see that new crews were properly trained, and supervise or personally plan and lay on each mission.

At briefing crews, of paramount importance in the success of any mission, he excelled. He talked clearly. A professional showman, he knew how to rivet the attention of every man in the room and hold it. But there were no dramatics in the message he put across—the concise, detailed facts about the coming mission. Even on D Day, when every briefing room in England was the scene of tense, unforgettable emotion, with many group commanders unable to control the urge for heroic pep talks to crews who cheered with unprecedented abandon, Stewart conducted three matter-of-fact, unemotional briefings.

Gradually the 453d got back on its feet, but its group operations officer had come near to the point of complete exhaustion. Yet somehow Jimmy stayed on his feet.

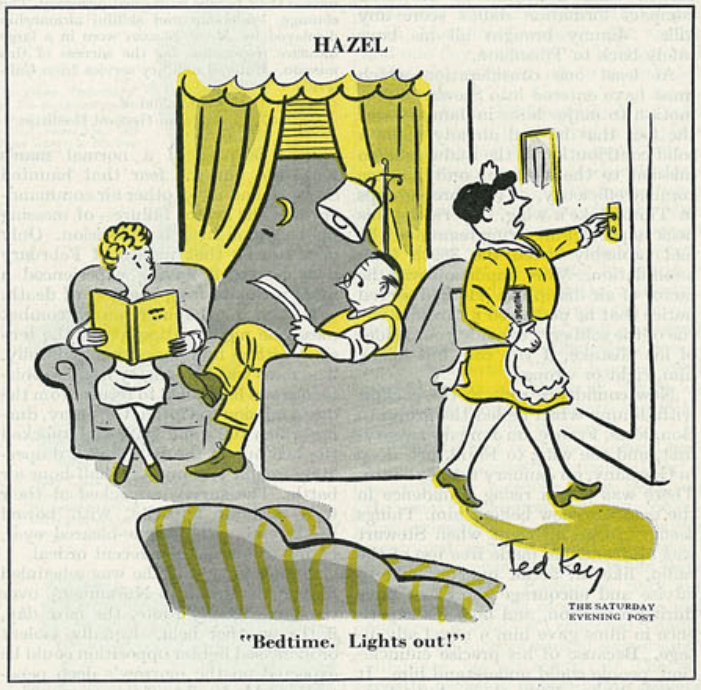
Shortly after a hard-earned promotion to lieutenant-colonel in June, he received an Oak Leaf Cluster to his D.F.C.

In July came the promotion to full colonel that had little to do with rank, but everything to do with accomplishment.

He was assigned as chief of staff of the 2nd Combat Bomb Wing, in which capacity he became Ted Timberlake's right-hand man. The fact that so crucially responsible a job did not go to a West Point graduate, a regular Air Corps officer or even an Air Corps reserve officer—and there were many of each available—is evidence that Stewart had learned his tactical operations cold.

Timberlake explains his choice briefly.

"Stewart was the best man available," he says.




"Bedtime. Lights out!"

Two blots on Stewart's record should not escape mention. When it came to driving a jeep, he was the worst navigator in England. Once he got lost driving from Tibenham to wing headquarters, a distance of five miles. On a more ambitious effort, from London to Norwich, he finally pulled up in Birmingham.

The other blot concerns his technique in a Cub airplane, used by the wing staff to hop short distances from base to base, and known as Fearless Fosdick. Jimmy was paying a visit to one of his stations and attempted to land the tiny ship in a twenty-five-mile-per-hour breeze, but Fearless Fosdick wouldn't adhere to the ground in a twenty-five-mile wind. Stewart finally succeeded in making the airplane stay put by flipping it over on its back, from which inverted position he was extricated by several willing and untactful pilots. He was lucky then, but it wasn't dumb luck that Stewart flew nineteen combat missions without injury to himself or to any member of the crews who occupied his airplane.

On May 10, 1945, Stewart assumed command of the wing in which he had served so long. It was somewhat of a nominal honor, since his chief function was to dispatch crews to the United States instead of Germany. Nevertheless, he was filling a vacancy which called for the rank of brigadier general.

His job in England finished, he returned with little or no fanfare to America last September, with a sprinkling of white hair to show for the most eventful months of his thirty-seven years.

A terse factual evaluation of Stewart's services in the 8th is contained in a letter he received from Timberlake's successor:

HEADQUARTERS, 2ND COMBAT BOMB WING (H)
8 May, 1945.

SUBJECT: Commendation.
TO : Colonel James M. Stewart.

1. From July, 1944, to December, 1944, and from February, 1945, to May, 1945, you were assigned to the 2d Combat Bomb Wing (H) of the 8th Air Force as Chief of Staff. In this capacity, as in the other positions in this Command which you held, including squadron commander of the 703d Bombardment Squadron from August, 1943, to March, 1944, Group Operations Officer of the 453d Bomb Group (H) from March, 1944, to July, 1944, and Operations Officer of this Wing from December, 1944, to February, 1945, your performance of duty was outstanding.

You were responsible for the administrative organization and the efficiency of the many component parts of this Command and their co-ordination into one of the greatest striking forces of the entire Air Force. Throughout the period of your incumbency as Chief of Staff of this Command the bombing efficiency of this Wing, according to figures published and released by ORS, 8th Air Force, and the figures prepared separately and released by 2nd Air Division, improved until for the period from August, 1944, to May, 1945, the 2d Combat Bomb Wing was first of all Wings in the 2nd Air Division in the 1000 and 2000 foot circles. This in itself is a direct reflection on your work and efforts as Chief of Staff.

Throughout the time you have been associated with this Command you have displayed the most intense loyalty and patriotism as evidenced by your own participation on 19 important combat missions and encounters with the enemy in addition to your staff work. Your initiative, sound judgment, personality and sincere devotion to duty has contributed immeasurably to the smooth operation of this Headquarters and the morale and efficiency of the men of this entire Command. Your keen interest and unselfish devotion to duty has been exceptional, and I desire to take this opportunity to commend you for an outstanding performance of duty. It has been a sincere pleasure to serve with you and to be associated with you.

(Signed) MILTON W. ARNOLD,
Colonel, Air Corps,
Commanding.

Editors' Note—This is the second of two articles by Colonel Lay.