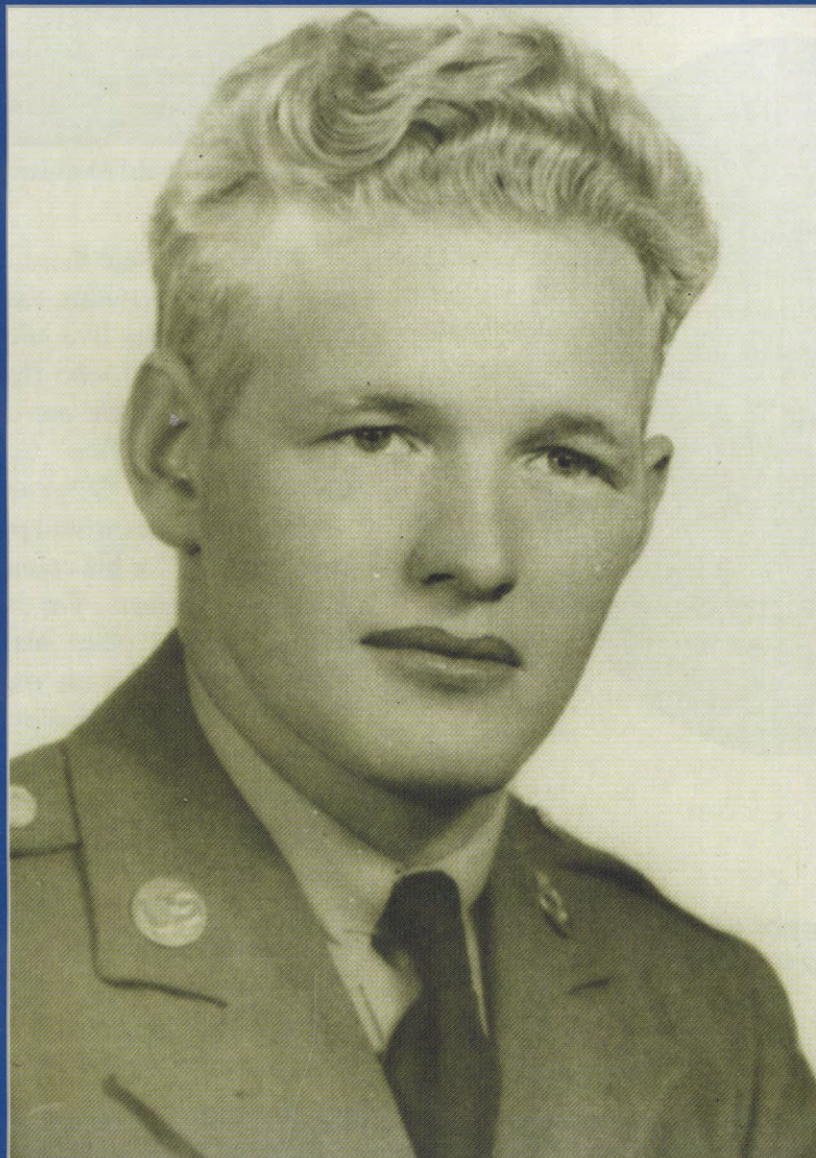




The Airmen Heritage Series

The Airmen Memorial Museum

SSgt ARCHIBALD MATHIES



GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN..."



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SSgt ARCHIBALD MATHIES

"GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN..."



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Airmen Memorial Museum



SSgt Archibald Mathies. Photo courtesy of AMM.

It has been said there is no greater display of man's love for another than that he lay down his life so others may live. For the men of the Army Air Force (AAF) who flew combat missions in World War II, there are countless tales of such heroism and sacrifice. On a February 20, 1944, mission, Staff Sergeant (SSgt) Archibald "Archie" Mathies would prove his love and devotion, not only for his country, but also for his fellow crew members. On that cold and fateful day, Mathies would place his crew members' lives above concern for his own life. This decision resulted in the SSgt making the ultimate sacrifice.

Archie Mathies was born in Stonehouse, Lankshire, Scotland, on June 3, 1918. When Archie was just 3-years-old, his parents immigrated to the United States and settled in the western Pennsylvania town of Finleyville. Upon graduating from high school, Archie went to work with his father in the coal mines. After four years of mining, and with war clouds on the horizon, Archie answered the call to duty by enlisting in the Army on December 30, 1940.

Mathies spent his first three years in the Army moving from base to base as he learned a variety of skills while attached to the AAF. By the time he graduated from Airplane Mechanic School

(October 1941) and Aerial Gunnery School (March 1943), Mathies had attained the rank of sergeant (Sgt). In September 1943 Mathies arrived at Alexandria Army Air Base (later known as England AFB), Louisiana, where the 25-year-old sergeant became part of the 796th Bombardment Squadron, and was subsequently assigned to a B-17 Flying Fortress crew as a ball turret gunner and flight engineer.

On November 30, 1943, Mathies and his aircrew departed Louisiana aboard a B-17. After several stops, they arrived on December 18 at Polebrook Airfield, which is 70 miles north of London, England. There, the crew became members of the 8th Air Force's 351st Bomb Group. While the 10 men waited to have an aircraft assigned to them, Sgt Mathies flew his first mission. He did this in the first days of February when he filled in as a flight engineer with a crew that needed a replacement.

Finally, on February 6, Sgt Mathies and his fellow aircrew members got their first assignment; their mission was to bomb an airfield in France. However, only nine of the crew members would make the trip. Flight Officer Ronald E. Bartley, the 22-year-old copilot, was not on the mission because standard procedures called for new crews to fly with an experienced pilot. For this reason, their regular pilot, Lieutenant (Lt) C.R. "Dick" Nelson Jr., flew as the copilot with a more experienced pilot at the controls. Waist gunner Sgt Thomas R. Sowell recalled the crew's first mission. "Our first mission was a 'milk run,'" declared Sowell. "There wasn't nothing to it." They saw no enemy fighters and encountered only limited flak on the way back to Polebrook. After this mission, poor weather kept much of the 8th Air Force grounded over the next couple weeks. Their second mission would be one the crew and many others in the 8th Air Force would never forget.

When the weather finally cleared on February 20, 1944, it marked the beginning of a six-day reign of terror over the German skies that would come to be known as the "Big Week." This air assault was a series of coordinated 8th and 15th Air Force raids against the German heartland. Day one of the "Big Week" saw Mathies, who

had been promoted to staff sergeant on February 17, and his fellow crew members fly their second mission together. Their targets were the airplane factories in Leipzig, Germany, some 80 miles south of Berlin. Mathies and his fellow crew members would be aboard a B-17 named Ten Horace Power.

Just before 10 a.m., the last bomber, Ten Horace Power, lifted off from Polebrook and headed toward Leipzig. Around noon, as the planes were crossing over the coast of Holland, the initial attack by fighters of Germany's vaunted Luftwaffe began. Ten Horace Power was quickly singled out by two Messerschmitt Me-109s and the German airmen's fire was both accurate and fatal for the men aboard. Flight Officer Bartley, the copilot from North Dakota, was killed instantly when he was decapitated by .20mm cannon fire. Lt Nelson, the 24-year-old pilot, was hit in the face by shell fragments. The Illinois native slumped forward at the controls and the plane immediately began to lose altitude.



Sgt Mathies with his nephews and a neighbor girl, circa 1943. AMM Photo/Enlisted Heritage Hall Collection.



The crew of the Leipzig mission in an October 1943 photo. Standing L-R: Mathies, Rex, Moore, Robinson, Sowell and Hagbo. Squatting L-R: Nelson, Bartley, Truemper and Martin. AMM Photo/Enlisted Heritage Hall Collection.

This rapid descent caused Lt Joseph R. Martin, the bombardier, to come up from his position to investigate. The blood bath he found in the cockpit caused the 24-year-old from New Jersey to believe both pilots were dead. Martin used the intercom and ordered everyone to bail out; shortly after making his announcement, Martin parachuted out of the bomber. He landed in German-occupied territory, was captured and remained a prisoner of war for the next two years.

By now, Ten Horace Power was in a steep dive and plummeting toward the earth. The centrifugal force of the nosedive pinned most of the aircrew to the floor of the aircraft. The exception was Sgt Carl W. Moore, the top turret gunner. Upon entering the cockpit, the 25-year-old Pennsylvanian ignored the bloody chaos and sprang into action. With Bartley and Nelson's lifeless (Nelson was unconscious) bodies in their seats, Moore, from a standing position, grabbed the yoke. He eased it back towards himself and pulled the aircraft out of

its death spiral, which by now had descended 15,000 feet, down to an elevation of 5,000 feet. For his courageous action, Moore later became a recipient of the Distinguished Service Cross.

The aircraft leveled off, and as the crew began to come forward into the cockpit, Mathies came upon the radio operator, Sgt Joseph F. Rex. Sgt Rex, a 21-year-old Ohio native, was the youngest man aboard and appeared to be the most rattled by the attack. Despite the fact the plane had leveled off, Rex had planned to bail out through the bomb bay. "I was going to bail out,"

remarked Rex. "Archie grabbed me and pointed over to the corner, to where my parachute was. In the confusion I'd forgotten to put it on. I almost jumped without it." This was not the last life SSgt Archie Mathies would save that day.

As the only conscious officer left aboard the bomber, Lt Walter E. Truemper, the 24-year-old navigator from Illinois, was now in charge of the plane. While Sgt Moore was at the controls, the rest of the crew evaluated the situation. With all four engines functioning, the crew determined that their plane was still airworthy. They decided to try and make it back to England – despite the fact none of them were qualified to fly the aircraft. Lt Truemper directed SSgt Mathies to relieve Sgt Moore at the controls. Then, Truemper went back to his station to plot a course home.

Shortly thereafter, Mathies was relieved at the controls by Moore because Mathies was needed to help remove Bartley's decapitated body from

the copilot's seat. This gruesome task took four men and left many of them smeared with Bartley's blood, which quickly froze on their flight suits. As if the crew didn't have enough to worry about, the Luftwaffe showed up again. Sgts Russell Robinson, a waist gunner from Colorado, and Joe Rex manned their guns while the rest of the crew were busy in the cockpit. Rex was hit in the hand and arm by gunfire from a Focke-Wulf FW-190 immediately before he managed to shoot down the attacking German. Although wounded, Rex remained at his post after receiving a shot of morphine from one of his crew mates. Sgt Rex was later awarded the Silver Star for his marksmanship and dedication to duty.

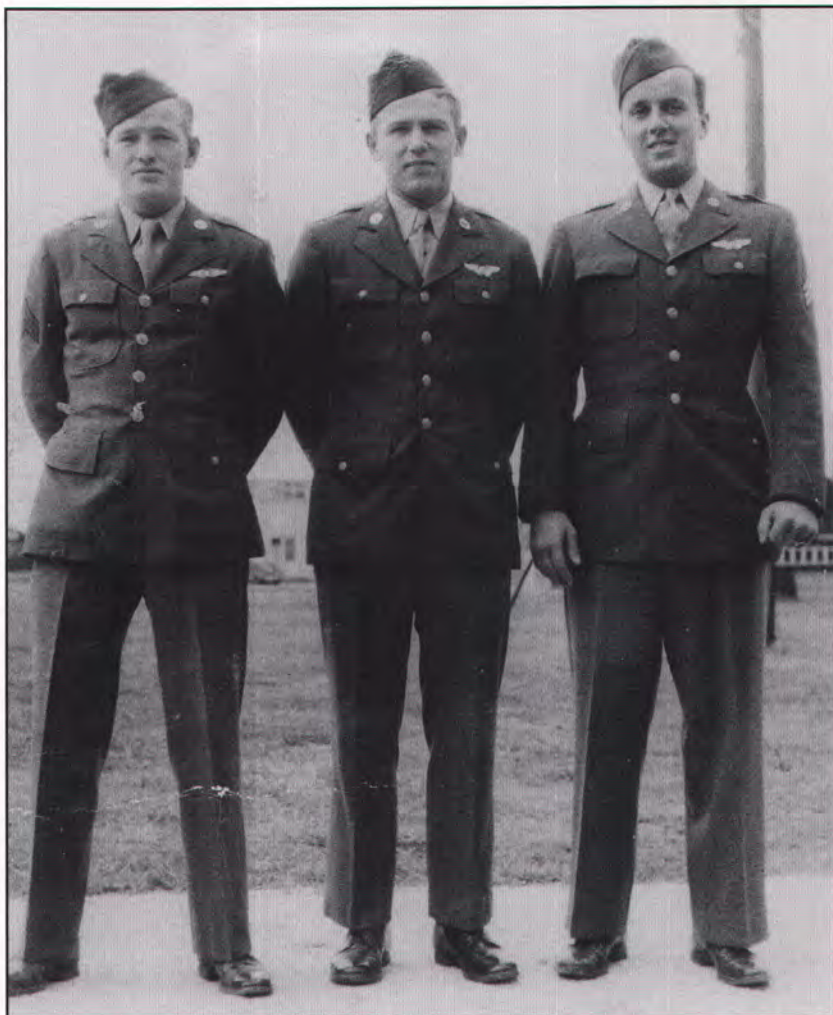
After this attack, the men re-assessed their situation. The men piloting the plane could only stay at the controls for a few minutes at a time due to the gaping flak holes in the aircraft's "skin." These holes were so large that winds blowing into the bomber brought the temperature in the cockpit down to well below freezing. Although they determined that there was little to do to help the wounded pilot, they didn't want to cause further injury by moving him, so they left him in his seat.

Eventually, Truemper sent Moore back to the top turret guns and the navigator took over the flight controls. Truemper spent a couple of hours at the controls before turning them back over to Mathies. By this time the navigator had severe frostbite on his face and hands. When the crew finally spotted the English coast, SSgt Mathies was still at the controls. Just before 4 p.m., the crew radioed the Polebrook tower to request a heading for the airfield. The determined and courageous crew had made it back over English soil and were bringing their battered B-17 home. Truemper and Mathies decided that Mathies had the better chance of landing the plane. The responsibility now landed solely on the shoulders of the

Scottish airman.

On his first landing attempt, Mathies was coming in too fast. He had to pull back on the controls and climb back into the English sky. After watching the landing attempt from the radio tower, Colonel (Col) Eugene Romig, the base commander, ordered Mathies to circle the field so all aboard except Truemper, Mathies and Nelson could bail out.

After climbing to 1,600 feet, the crew began to bail out. The wounded Rex was first. Robinson, who at 27 was the oldest man aboard the plane, followed Rex; Sergeant Magnus "Mac" Hagbo, the tail gunner from Washington state, followed Robinson; then Sowell and Moore. Before jumping, Moore, who hours earlier had saved the plane from its dive by seizing the controls, shook hands with the flight engineer



L-R: Sgts Mathies, Rex and Moore. All three of these men would receive decorations for their heroic actions on the February 20, 1944, mission. AMM Photo/Enlisted Heritage Hall Collection.



July 23, 1944: SSgt Mathies' mother, Mary, receiving his Medal of Honor from General H. A. Craig during a ceremony in Finleyville, Pennsylvania. AMM Photo/D. Mathies Collection.

and navigator. Moments later, as Moore stared forward from his bomb bay jump position, both Mathies and Truemper turned to watch him jump. Truemper flashed him a smile, and Mathies gave him a thumbs-up. All five of the parachutists survived their jumps. However, Rex and Sowell had problems controlling their chutes and suffered leg fractures upon landing.

Twenty minutes after his first landing attempt, Mathies, with Truemper and Nelson still aboard, attempted another landing. He almost touched the plane down but realized he was going too fast and again pulled the aircraft back into the sky. Col Romig decided the runway at nearby Molesworth Field, just south of Polebrook, might be an easier place to land so he ordered Mathies to head southward. The third landing attempt, as the first two, was too fast. Once again, Mathies pulled back on the controls at the last minute and the bomber crept back into the darkening sky.

Col Romig was becoming increasingly worried because the other 351st bombers would soon be returning from Leipzig. This additional air traffic would only complicate matters. He radioed Ten Horace Power to set a course for the North Sea, turn on the auto pilot and for Mathies and Truemper to bail out. After a short discussion, Truemper radioed Romig that they would do this ONLY if ordered to. They wanted to attempt another landing because they had no intention of leaving the unconscious Nelson behind. Romig granted permission for a fourth landing attempt, this one back at Polebrook.

Around 5 p.m., and over an open field about a mile from Molesworth, Mathies began his final approach to Polebrook. Col Romig, who had taken off in a B-17 in an attempt to guide Mathies down, was now flying nearby. He described the landing attempt: "The aircraft hit at a speed of 200 MPH at a nose-down altitude. It skidded for 50 yards, then hit a mound of dirt and cart-wheeled and broke into pieces."

Whether Mathies lost control due to exhaustion or the big bomber had run out of fuel is unknown. The fact the plane didn't explode upon impact indicates little fuel was left in the tanks. What is known is that the rapid disintegration of the plane upon striking the ground killed

Truemper and Mathies almost instantly. Amazingly, Lt Nelson was still alive when he was found in the wreckage but died several hours later. For their dedication to their fellow man and courage in the face of insurmountable odds, Lt Truemper and SSgt Mathies were posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. Mathies was initially buried in England's Cambridge Military Cemetery but, in 1948, was brought "home" to a Finleyville, Pennsylvania, cemetery.

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*Although the plane is often referred to as Ten Horsepower, the actual name on the plane was Ten Horace Power



AIRMEN MEMORIAL MUSEUM

Founded in 1986, the Airmen Memorial Museum stands as a tribute to enlisted airmen who have served in the U.S. Air Force, the Army Air Corps and the U.S. Army Air Forces.

Located in the Airmen Memorial Building, just eight miles from Washington, D.C., this museum is a showcase of accomplishments. It is also designed to function as a research and reference center that documents and preserves the contributions of men and women who served honorably but, until now, without a memorial or museum they could call their own.

The museum is open 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. weekdays and during specially scheduled events. For more information about the museum and its research projects, contact the Airmen Memorial Museum, toll-free, at 1-800-638-0594 or 301-899-3500.



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