

Two Generations Search for Answers



S/Sgt. Eugene A. LaScotte was a nose gunner on a B-24 with the 828th Bomb Squadron. His crew was one of the original crews in the 485th Bomb Group. The crew and two other crews were shot down on the June 28, 1944 mission to the Titan Oil Refinery in Bucharest, Romania. All members of the crew, except for the pilot, were captured and became POWs in Bulgaria. The pilot, John “Dud” Crouchley, maintained control of the plane, allowing the others to safely exit and was killed when his plane crashed into the mountains of Bulgaria. The following is a story submitted by Mark LaScotte, Eugene’s son, which candidly reveals the search for answers by two families and two generations, many years after the event occurred.

Eugene LaScotte (1921-2001)

In the fall of 1988, John F. Wilson, Jr. wrote a letter to my father, Eugene A. LaScotte, and to any other members of that crew he could find, requesting information regarding his own father Lt. John F. Wilson, Sr. His father was the fill-in Navigator the day they were shot down over Bulgaria. John’s dad had recently passed on, and now John had a few questions that his father never really answered for him. After receiving John’s letter, my father chose not to reply. I believe he was not ready to relive the part of his life again that he was still trying to forget. After receiving a second letter from John that contained the now de-classified mission reports and MACRs, my father decided to answer John’s request. This is a re-typed copy of the handwritten letter that my father wrote back to John F. Wilson, Jr. in April of 1989, several months after receiving the first letter. My father is writing about the portion of the flight following the main air attack, when the aircraft was severely damaged and now alone, out of formation.

Mark LaScotte

April 10, 1989

Dear John –Thanks for sending me the declassified mission reports. Every time I go over them I learn something new. For instance, when people ask me what time we took off to go on missions, I always said “About 7AM.” Actually, we took off at 5:18 AM in some cases.

You are right about the number of missions. I had credit for 24 missions though I actually flew over the target about 18 times. In the 8th Air Force (England) you only had to go over the target 25 times and you would be eligible to go home. Sometimes their crews could get credit for a

mission just by bombing the coast of France. Down in the 15th Air Force (Italy) they made us do 50 missions. If the target wasn't too bad they'd give us credit for 1 mission. If it was tough (like Vienna-Neustadt; Ploesti Oil Fields, etc.) we would get credit for 2 missions.

I suddenly realized something about our last bombing mission that I probably should have known all along. I believe I told you how violently the plane was pitching and rolling due to one engine on fire and one run-away engine. Well, the pilot managed to get the fire out, and he cut off and feathered the run-away engine, and then the plane was fairly stable. It still rolled, but not so violently.

All the Messerschmitt 109s left except for one. He was on our port side about 8 o' clock level. I couldn't get my guns back that far so I just sat there and waited for him to slowly crawl into my reticle. The two waist gunners were wounded by shrapnel (20mm) and the lower ball gunner (Johnson) had a .30 cal. slug go thru his side. The tail gunner was out of ammo, so the only guns working were mine and the upper turret.

Finally, the nose of his plane pierced the red ring and I fired a burst –only to be staring at the sun. The plane had pitched again, pulling my guns into the air. The pilot, Lt. Crouchley, said “What the hell are you doing Scotty? That's a P-51.”

The Messerschmitt went into a shallow dive pulled up and chandelled onto our tail. His wing tips lit up with red-yellow and blue flashes as he fired on us. I told the Lt. that “It might be a P-51 but he's shooting the hell out of us!” He said, “Well, get him then!” He dove past our right side. I had laid my guns over there and gave him a short burst as he went by, but I don't think I damaged him. At this point he turned off and went home.

NOW! Here's the amazing part of the story. I didn't realize until last week that Lt. Crouchley must have pulled the left wing up to get my guns off the Messerschmitt! As I think about it now, it seems obvious, and I can't imagine why it never dawned on me during the last 45 years I've been telling the story. He was a sitting duck; about 200 yards away and he had slowed down his plane to match our speed (200 MPH). I had two caliber .50s on him and they can knock down a fighter from 600 yards. Maybe if I'd have got him it would have changed the whole history of our battle. Maybe we wouldn't have had to jump. Perhaps we ran out of gas because he cut our gas lines on his last pass. Maybe the old boy would still be alive and I would be a hero!

Well, on the other hand, maybe he was tired of the fight and wanted to go home. Perhaps he was waiting for us to drop our wheels (in surrender), and was going to take us to his air field. And when I fired he got as mad as hell.

Sincerely,

Gene LaScotte