

FO Harold James Wilson

Flight Officer Harold James Wilson - 416th Pilot #T-190787

Harold Wilson, born 1920, enlisted in the Air Corps on October 20, 1941 at Fort Thomas, Newport, Kentucky. He had completed only 3 years of high school. He was given the serial number 15068291. Pilots were needed badly. He was tested and was chosen for the dangerous job. His serial number changed to T-190787 when he was made flight officer.

After much training he was assigned to the 416th Bomb Group in December of 1944 as a replacement pilot. Three other new pilots and their gunners were also assigned to the 671st in December, 1944. They and FO Harold James Wilson awaited transition training in the A-26.

FO Wilson first took to enemy sky on December 23 to take part in the first major blow against the German counter-drive. He rode in observer compacity aboard the ship #43-22313, piloted by Lt. A. Remiszewski. The morning bombing destination was the Saar River Highway Bridge between Merzig and Trier. The bridge was completely destroyed by 1,000 bombs. For the first time, he saw first-hand the total destruction of war.

Jan 14, 1945

Taking off on snow-capped runways, 24 aircraft of the 416th Bomb Group lifted from the airbase to hit the communication center of Schleideti, six miles east of the Monschau Forest where Germans launched their winter offensive. Tragedy struck the group. The first A-26 to take off mshed in just a short distance from the end of the runway and the bombs exploded upon crashing. The crew from the 669th Squadron was killed instantly.

FO Wilson had more to contend with than he expected in flying his first operational mission. Due to icing, his engines were cutting out after take-off and he was unable to keep up with the formation. His plane finally shaped up and he tagged in with the 409th Bomb Group, which headed toward Bitburg.

FO Eckard bombed this town with the 409th BG and saw plenty of flak. He broke away from the formation when it reached the vicinity of his own airbase, but could not locate A-55. He picked up A-48 at LeBourget in Paris where Lindbergh had landed after the first transatlantic flight. Lindbergh had landed safely and perfectly 18 years earlier, but FO Wilson was not so lucky.

The indicators showed the wheels to be down and locked, but just a few seconds after hitting the runway, the gear folded up and the plane skidded off the runway into a snow bank. FO Wilson received a fractured leg and was hospitalized in The American Hospital of Paris under the banner of the Red Cross for a few days, but returned to the Squadron on the 19th. His gunner, Cpl. Stypenski, was uninjured and returned the day after the accident.

FO Wilson, who had crash-landed on his first combat mission just a little more than a week ago, made quite a name for himself. He lost the formation after take-off, but went on in to the target area by himself. He spotted a railroad junction near Blankenheimerdorf and dropped his load of 20x260 lb. frags. He then peeled off from 3000 feet and strafed the concentration of vehicles. His record was one large truck set on fire and three others severely damaged. His ship received considerable flak damage, but he landed it safely at Juvincourt.

On Jan. 23, 1945, six crew members of the 671st participated in a strafing raid of the German lines. The weather was adverse and the planes had difficulty joining up. Flight Officer Wilson saw that the formation was broken up over enemy territory, so he bombed the town of Prun, then went down and strafed Schlieden.

In the second flight, FO Wilson was unable to join up and went in to attack alone behind the 410th Bomb Group. He said, "I missed the formation but rather than turn back I continued on course to the target. When I got to the target, there were A-20s strafing the road, so I circled about until they pulled away, then peeled off, dropped frags at 500 feet, and went down on the deck." Spotting four trucks on the highway, FO Wilson roared down on them with guns blazing. "One truck veered off the road and piled into a ditch with black smoke pouring from it."

Ground fire damaged the right wing and put a hole in the oil line of his left engine, but did not injure the crew. He then returned safely to an emergency airfield. Gen. Anderson personally commended FO Wilson and Capt. Nielson also of the 416th for achieving extraordinary results.

"FO Wilson had made quite a reputation for himself since joining the Squadron a short time ago. He won praise for his strafe/bombing attack on the vehicle concentration retreating from the Bulge on January 23rd. He crash landed away from base on his first mission and had several other trying experiences ranging down to a forced landing in the Cub." *671 Record*

Feb. 16, 1945

One of the first missions to take off from the new field A-69 near Laon, France proved to be one of the most costly for the squadron. While attacking an ordnance depot at Cenna, Germany, the Group encountered intense accurate flak which damaged at least twenty three aircraft of the formation. Flight Officer Harold Wilson was on his 7th mission after facing several rough missions in his short career as 416th pilot. He did not return from this mission, and observers reported that FO Wilson and his gunner, Sgt. Berkes were seen going into a cloud at 6,000 after bombs away. The plane did not return and the crew was listed as missing in action. No one had any knowledge as to where or when he may have been hit or how seriously the aircraft serial number 41-39321 may have been damaged.

Sadly FO Wilson was killed. Gunner Berkes was able to parachute from the plane and was taken POW. It was not until his release that more specifics of the day were known.

According to Berkes, "About one minute prior to flak burst, Berkes spoke to pilot Wilson over the innerphone. After the burst, the ship acted as if FO Wilson had been hit and had slumped over the wheel. The ship nosed down. Berkes could not see or get to pilot from where he was due to configuration of the A-26. Believing Wilson was unconscious of possibly KIA, he jumped from the ship.

German farmers from the ground heard and saw what happened. According to their comments, FO Wilson was hit by flak and killed and then the plane crashed. The plane went down on the estate of a German Farmer named Potenk.

A German farmer captured gunner Sgt Earl F. Berks and held him until German patrols arrived. He was questioned and escorted to a POW Camp. Earl's capture was first reported to the International Committee of the Red Cross on February 16, 1945.

671 History by Gordon Russell, via Jim Kerns