



The Zodiac Squadron and the Two Virgos

Mack Parkhill

As my computer screen displayed a stream of photos arriving from a mountain crash site 2,000 miles away, it was obvious what huge strides technology had made since I was a kid living near the site where the crash occurred. My brother and his grandson had climbed to the location of a tragic World War II training accident to retrieve some pieces of “skin” (as the flat metal pieces of a crashed aircraft are referred to), one of which would eventually become a nose art reproduction of a famous B-24 squadron aircraft. They were fortunate to have enough cell phone signal strength to speak to me, as well as send photos of various pieces of wreckage remaining at the site. Based on their transmissions, I was able to determine the possibility of their use for the intended project, almost as if I was with them on the mountain.

The lesser-known tale of a military aircraft accident which occurred within the 48 states during the war is part of the larger story of the Zodiac Squadron.

VIRGO I

In September 1943, U.S. Army Air Forces pilot Maj J. Charles (Charlie) Macgill was assigned as a pilot to the 834th Bomb Squadron (BS) of the 486th Bomb Group (BG) as they began their crew training at Davis Monthan Army Air Base near Tucson, Arizona. It was there that the 834th Squadron began their several months of notoriety, of which Charlie and his crew were a part.

Among the non-flying personnel of the 486th was Cpl Phil Brinkman, who in civilian life was a talented commercial mural artist. While still at Davis Monthan, Brinkman’s artistic talent was discovered and he was asked to create nose art on some of the B-24 Liberator bombers in the group. Phil Brinkman took his artistic talents to a new level for the remainder of the war, while avoiding K.P. [kitchen patrol] and similar less challenging duties of an enlisted man.

The commander of the 834th BS, Maj Winfred (Jip) Howell, wanted to highlight his squadron’s aircraft and requested that Corporal Brinkman paint 12 of the squadron’s Liberators, each with a different sign of the

Zodiac. This would result in the 12 Zodiac signs being displayed and set his aircraft apart from other squadrons. Corporal Brinkman embraced Major Howell’s idea and went to work.

In March 1944 the 486th BG transferred to their permanent Eighth Air Force base near Sudbury, Suffolk, England, becoming part of the Third Air Division (AD) that included Bomb Groups flying both the B-24 Liberator and the B-17 Flying Fortress. Most of the 834th BS Liberators acquired their Zodiac logos soon after arriving at Sudbury.

One of the Zodiac signs, Taurus the Bull, was never completed. Each time Brinkman started painting his version of Taurus, that particular aircraft did not return to its base. After three starts and three non-returns he gave up, concluding that Taurus was a jinxed sign. The remaining 11 aircraft completed all their combat missions without a loss while assigned to the 834th.

Charlie Macgill’s aircraft was selected to be graced with the sign of Virgo, the maiden, on their B-24H #42-



VIRGO’s nose art, painted by Phil Brinkman on Charlie Macgill’s B-24.



Phil Brinkman working on one of the Zodiac Squadron's B-24 aircraft nicknamed *Aires*.

52532. To depict Virgo, Brinkman created a typical (for the times) scantily clad beauty. She, along with similar and appropriate Zodiac renderings on 10 other squadron Liberators, achieved Major Howell's goal, as the 834th achieved notoriety among other Eighth Air Force groups, proudly assuming the nickname, the Zodiac Squadron.

VIRGO's first mission was to Liege, France on May 7, 1944. This was followed by at least 11 more. In late June the 3rd Air Division brass determined that combining their B-24s and B-17s on the same mission routes was unwieldy. They then directed the five Liberator groups in the 3rd AD, including the 486th, to transfer their aircraft to the 2nd Air Division (an all-B-24 Division) and immediately transition into B-17s. The crews had less than three weeks to learn the idiosyncrasies of their new mounts and begin flying missions. *VIRGO*'s last mission with Charlie Macgill's crew was on July 5 to Eindhoven, Holland. Following its transfer to the 2nd AD, *VIRGO* was again transferred, this time to the Fifteenth Air Force, flying out of Italy where it remained until its return to the United States after VE Day. On July 8, 1945, she was declared as salvage at Albuquerque, New Mexico and likely ended her existence in an aluminum smelter, as did most surplus World War II aircraft.

Charlie Macgill flew a total of 28 combat missions in *VIRGO*, as well

as various B-17s with the 834th BS before returning to the States in November, 1944. "Extreme gallantry in combat" reads part of his award of the Distinguished Flying Cross for heroic action during one of those missions. He was discharged in 1945, reentered the Air Force in 1947, retiring in 1965. Charlie's "final flight" at age 88 occurred on October 22, 2009, followed by his internment with full honors at Arlington National Cemetery. My wife and I were honored to be invited to his moving service.

VIRGO II — The rest of the story

During the later years when Charlie served as commander of the 486th Bomb Group Association, a friendship developed with the well-known Canadian World War II historian and nose art expert, Clarence Simonsen. Mr. Simonsen is blessed with notable artistic talent, much of which has resulted in the reproduction of more than 500 pieces of World War II aircraft nose art. He has published numerous articles and two significant nose art books, one of which he co-authored with the late Jeff Ethell that became a benchmark of the subject. In 2004 Clarence was invited to preside over a nose art presentation at the Smithsonian Air & Space Museum in Washington, D.C. Until 2013 however, he had not created nose art on the "skin" of a B-24 Liberator.

On August 19, 1944, B-24J #42-78579 arrived at Walla Walla Army Air Force Base in Walla Walla, Washington to serve as a crew transition aircraft. Following their crew training at this base, the normal procedure was for the personnel to move on into a war zone with their aircraft. Six weeks later, on Saturday, September 30, the six-member flight crew #22 from Squadron

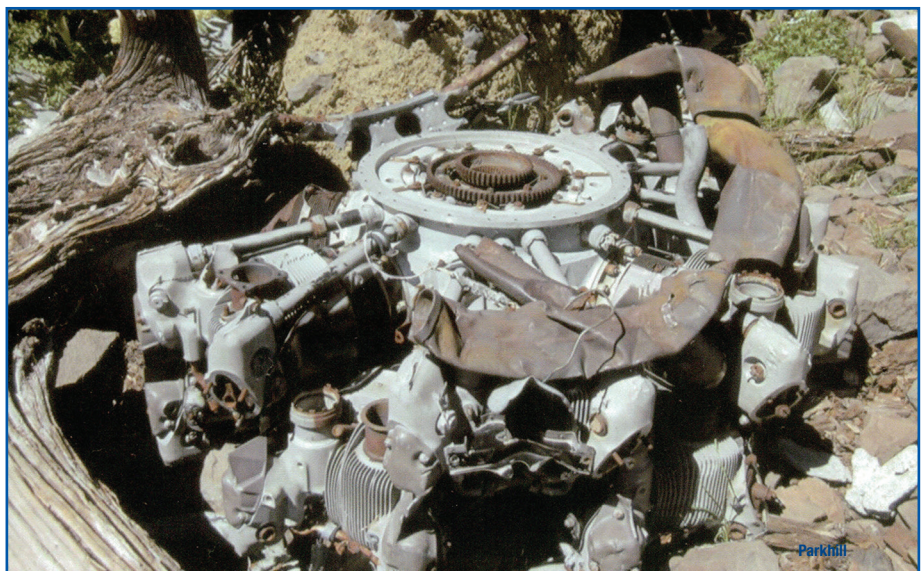


Photo of one of the R-1830 engines from B-24 serial number 42-78579 that crashed near Wenatchee, Washington on September 30, 1944.



T-2 departed Walla Walla in #78579 on a night cross-country navigation flight. The weather deteriorated into heavy rain and clouds, and the crew became disoriented. At approximately 8:00 p.m., their aircraft was heard flying above a U.S. Forest Service lookout tower near Wenatchee, Washington. Shortly afterward, a bright light and explosion was detected on 6,000-foot Mission Ridge. The following day the wreckage of #78579 was found, revealing that all six crew members had perished as the plane flew into the ridge 500 feet below the summit.

For many years the wreckage site was occasionally visited by the curious and collectors, after a strenuous climb up the mountain to the ridge area. This area later became an expanded part of the Mission Ridge Ski Resort. A memorial to the members of Flight Crew #22 is now located near the crash site close to one of the ski runs.

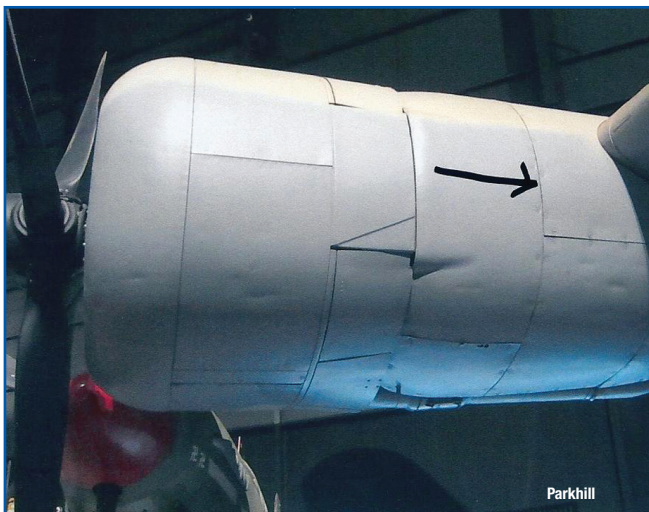


Reproduction of the the *VIRGO* nose art painted by Clarence Simonsen for Charlie Macgill.

killed during training. The members of flight crew #22 are among those losses. They were: 2nd Lt J. D. Hunt (pilot) of Louisville, Kentucky; 2nd Lt Ted R. Lewis (copilot) of Tulsa, Oklahoma; Flight Officer Robert J. Hennekes (navigator) of Cincinnati, Ohio; 2nd Lt Francis W. LeQuier Jr. (bombardier) of Duluth, Minnesota; Cpl Calvin D. Flaming of Capulin, New Mexico; and Cpl James R. Manthei (radio operator) of Marshfield, Wisconsin.

We must never forget these and the other members of the “Greatest Generation” who have “slipped the surly bonds of Earth,” and made sacrifices to insure our freedom. 🌟

Mack Parkhill is a former U.S. Air Force pilot and radar control officer serving with the Air Defense Command. He also served for 16 years as a docent at the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force. He and his wife Colleen reside in Dublin, Ohio.



Location of the oil cooler access panel salvaged from B-24 #42-78579 to be the background for the *VIRGO* nose art for Charlie Macgill.

As stated at the beginning of this story, in July 2013, my brother and his grandson hiked to the site and brought out pieces of that B-24. Two of these were sent to Charlie Macgill’s friend, Clarence Simonsen in Alberta. One of the pieces from that Mission Ridge Liberator crash was identified as an engine oil cooler access panel with its dzus fasteners still attached. It is upon this panel that, nearly 69 years after that tragic crash, Clarence painted a perfect reproduction of Charlie Macgill’s *VIRGO*, dedicating what I now call *VIRGO II* to Charlie’s memory.

I also dedicate *VIRGO II* to the six crew members whose lives were lost on that dreary September night while I was safely at home in nearby Wenatchee. Military historian Jon Guttman reports that “By war’s end there were 52,650 training accidents: an average of 1,170 per month. Almost 15,000 pilots, crew or passengers were



Charlie Macgill and the author Mack Parkhill.