



THE BIG SKI NOSE MEETS THE BIG TAIL BIRD

Bob Hope did more than entertain the troops during World War II. He claimed he brought good luck to some of them.

Hope walked into Colonel Gordon H. Austin's tent at Djedeida airfield near Tunis, French North Africa, on August 10, 1943, and announced he was ready to put on a show for the 319th Bomb Group already assembled on the tarmac. He told Austin, the CO (Commanding Officer), he brought good luck to airmen. There were two instances after he had arrived at air bases when the missions that day had no losses. Colonel Austin told Hope the 319th had no mission scheduled for the day, but the group could sure use a lot of luck. Ted Rammelkamp and his crew later claimed to be the recipients of that luck. Before the entertainers left, their picture was made in front of Rammelkamp's Martin B-26C (#134938) Marauder airplane, the "Big Tail Bird" (approximate name).

Hope was at the peak of his career in 1942. His radio comedy show, sponsored by the Pepsodent Company, was the number one radio program, even exceeding the Jack Benny and Fred Allen shows. The program received a significant boost in ratings when he began broadcasting from military bases after his first venture at March Field, California, on May 6, 1941. From that day on most of his broadcasts were from military bases in the states and from Alaska on a couple of brief stints. Franklin Delano Roosevelt took note of his efforts and those of other entertainers who entertained the troops

on their own and decided they were an important adjunct to the war effort. Roosevelt established the U.S.O. (United Service Organizations) to provide local and overseas recreation and entertainment for members of the armed forces. The U.S.O. became the service man's home away from home.



In the meantime, Rammelkamp thought he was the unluckiest pilot in the Army Air Corps. He left the states with the 319th's first flight echelon in late September 1942 and flew his crew to England in his new B-26 Marauder via the "northern route." That route was a tortuous one - from Baer Field, Indiana - Presque Isle, Maine - Goose Bay, Labrador - Bluie West #1, Greenland - Reykjavik, Iceland - Prestwick, Scotland - and to Attlebridge, England. Rammelkamp cleared Goose Bay on October 4. He flew in rain and snow all the way, and up through the fjord to Bluie West 1. The weather was awful. He shouted over the intercom, "Can't land! Radio out! I'm turning back to Goose Bay, and reducing air speed to save gas. Dump everything not nailed down." The crew acknowledged and jettisoned all loose items in the plane before they finally landed. The red lights showed empty fuel tanks. They later flew on through similar weather the rest of the way, and eventually arrived at Attlebridge on November 5.

The 319th left Attlebridge on November 12 to support Operation Torch (the invasion of North Africa). Rammelkamp was stuck in England, because a higher-ranking officer (one of Doolittle's raiders) took his airplane and flew it on to North Africa. He finally got another B-26 Marauder January 26, 1943, with orders to lead a flight of P-38s to Africa. More bad luck! He was told to fly west over the Bay of Biscay to avoid German interceptors. Weather was poor with a heavy overcast. He climbed up and finally broke out.

"Where the hell are those P-38s," he grumbled.

He circled at least thirty minutes and then resumed course without them. He later heard they landed at Lisbon, Portugal, and were interned for the duration. Rammelkamp had to land at Gibraltar because he had used too much fuel.

He finally arrived in Africa in late February just in time to join the 319th as they were ordered from combat (because of heavy losses) to regroup at Rabat-Sale airfield in French Morocco. He was disappointed, but somewhat compensated when he was reunited with his crew and assigned the new Martin B-26C (#134938) Marauder. The mail, that included a letter from his wife, Jeanne, had caught up with him too. The letter enclosed a photograph, which he admired and also noted how well endowed she looked fore and aft. That was it! He would name the plane "Big Ass Bird" a fateful name eventually to be that of a plane of fame and glory for its exploits in the METO (Mediterranean Theater of Operations). The plane's original combat crew was: Ted Rammelkamp, pilot, Bill Brown, copilot, Paul Reals, bombardier, Delas Cummings, radio, Hugh Davis, engineer, and Joe Conarton, tail gunner. Wesley Johnston was the plane's crew chief.

Hope was anxious to carry his troupe overseas after he had learned of the U.S.O. and its sponsorship. The trip was set for the summer of 1943. It would be a nine-week trip beginning in late June. They would fly directly to England and conduct shows there for about five weeks, and then fly on to North Africa and do shows near the combat zones for another four weeks. He had contacted vocalist Frances Langford and guitarist Tony Romano and they agreed to go as scheduled. Hope was eager to take Jerry Colonna, but Colonna was booked. He then contacted an old vaudeville crony, Jack Pepper, who had recently been drafted. Pepper was a pretty good song and dance man in his old act called "Salt and Pepper." Hope requested Pepper for his U.S.O. show.

By the time Hope's troupe arrived in Tunis, the 319th had returned to combat and Rammelkamp and his crew had completed sixteen missions. His crew chief once asked him if he thought his luck had changed, now that he had lived through sixteen missions.

Rammelkamp said, "I may be lucky to be alive, but I'm still plagued by bad luck. Just look at the missions I've drawn: Bo Rizzo airdrome, Sicily; Olbia harbor, Sardinia; and Gerbini Satellite, Sicily. These occurred within a span of three weeks, and on each one we ran into intense flak and at least 50 fighters. We lost six planes in all - a terrible loss that included then CO Colonel Wilbur Aring, group navigator Captain Thomas Griffin (a Tokyo raider), and 36 additional men. We hit our targets and destroyed some 57 enemy aircraft, but that is little consolation. Seems like I'm a magnet for enemy fighters and flak."

Bob Hope's troupe put on a great show that August 10, afternoon. He started out with the quip,

"It's wonderful being here in Africa. Ah, Africa. That's Texas with Arabs ---Of course, you can get out of Texas."

The crowd roared. Romano accompanied Jack Pepper as he did his song and dance routine, while Hope hassled them with more one liners. Frances Langford came on stage and the troops went wild. They whistled and yelled as she sang a lot of the familiar songs from the dance band era. Her last song, an old favorite, "I'll be Seeing You," brought tears to a lot of tough airmen. It was a sweet touch from home for all of them. The show was over in about an hour, and for the airmen it was back to the routine of winning a war.



Bob Hope show for 319th Bomb Group, North Africa, Aug. 10, 1943
(Tony Romano, Frances Langford, Bob Hope and Jack Pepper behind Hope)
Hope's first USO overseas trip.

The Hope troupe was delayed for a while at the air base, so it was a great opportunity to introduce them to the 319th "night clubs." There were four of them - made of discarded bomb boxes, tin linings etc. Each one was named for a different New York nightclub: Copacabana, "21", El Morocco, and the Stork Club. Hope and his troupe enjoyed socializing with the airmen at the clubs. This gave him a chance to try out some new jokes and quip about his show being a good luck charm. For the airmen, it was a chance to personally meet the stars and have something to write home about.

Hope said to Austin, "How about taking me on your mission tomorrow in "Big Ass Bird. You know, the plane you took our picture by?"

The Colonel said, "Are you joking? That one could be rough."

Hope clamored to go. Austin excused himself and made a phone call. When he returned, he patted Hope on the back and said, "You'd better get some sleep."

But Hope said. "Who needs sleep? I saw Dawn Patrol and I know how to act"

Then Austin said, "General Doolittle told us to put down those glasses and go to bed."

Hope later wrote in his book, *I Never Left Home*, "That mission over Italy sure would have been wonderful to tell my kids about it. Now I'm really sore they didn't take me. It was a milk run, and I'm fond of milk."



Some time after Hope left our base, Rammelkamp began to believe there was something to the Hope lucky charm thing. He had flown 15 more missions in the "Bird" by October 1943, and had not seen any enemy fighters. The flak had only been light to moderate too.

He snickered, "The real test will soon come if I'm able to go home at 40 missions (recently rumored), because I've only nine more to go."

Something happened on one of those remaining missions that truly convinced him of the Hope lucky charm. The 319th received a hurried call to bomb Alife, a small square shaped Italian town. The town was a German Headquarters and communication center (multiple road junctions) that funneled supplies and men to the newly formed front. The entire lower boot of Italy was now in Allied hands. The front stretched from the Volturno River and Fifth Army on the west-coast to Termoli and the British Eighth Army on the east-coast.

Rammelkamp was the leader of a fleet of 23 aircraft on October 13 against the center, which was heavily defended by dual purpose (88 millimeter) guns. The cloud formations had thickened and obscured the planned approach as they neared the target. Rammelkamp immediately swung the formation around to a new direction on an unbriefed bombing run to successfully complete the

mission, although his plane was damaged by accurate flak. The center was obliterated by the 1,000-pound bombs that all fell within the target area.

Rammelkamp said afterwards, "You could literally see a square column of smoke rising as the planes broke away from the target."

He and his bombardier, Paul Reals, were both awarded Distinguished Flying Crosses for their leadership and bombing accuracy. Additionally, the participants in the raid received commendations from General James H. Doolittle and Air Marshall Arthur Tedder.

**Big Ass Bird, B-26 Marauder, 145 missions:
319th BG's most famous plane in the Medeterranean Theater of Operations.**



The luck of the "Big Ass Bird" and her pilot held up. Rammelkamp, didn't go home right away, but at the completion of 40 missions he was assigned to Telergma, Algeria, to train French pilots to fly the B-26. The assignment was a short one and he was soon on his way to the states by December, 1943. He had set his beloved "Big Ass Bird" on a path to become one of the most famous planes in the Mediterranean. The "Bird" proved it was a sturdy plane, because it survived a crash landing and such missions as the Anzio Beachhead, Abbe di Monte Cassino, Rome, Florence, Po River bridges, Toulon Harbor, the invasion of Southern France and many more. She flew a total of 145 missions, and was listed in the Air Force Times Planes Hall of Fame in North Africa and the ETO (European Theater of Operations). The "Big Ass Bird" survived a long and glorious combat life that may be likened to the long and glorious real life of the famous "Old Ski Nose."