

The Legend of The Memphis Belle

By Kenneth Moore (not the actor)

I'm sure we've all seen the movie, but Kenneth has done much more. He has visited in person and actually owns a piece of it-so who is better placed to tell us the story behind this historic aircraft?

It all began with a romance. Its handsome, charismatic captain, Robert Morgan, fell deeply and passionately in love with Margaret Polk, herself quite famous for being the descendant of a former president. They were the A- Listers of their day and their story was used to publicise The Memphis Belle and its new mission, to sell war bonds.

The name came from watching the film "Lady of the Night," where The Memphis Belle was a floating gambling boat. Margaret was from Memphis, so an ideal choice. George Petty did the famous design of the glamorous lady on the nose, but Captain Morgan insisted she should be fully clothed: It was associated with *his* lady, after all! The director of the propaganda film was William Wyler, of *Ben Hur* and *Wuthering Heights* fame. They were pulling out all the stops!

Casualties were horrendous for B19s as well as our Spitfires and Lancasters. 72 to 75% of British crewmen were killed, wounded or imprisoned. American losses were fewer, but still significant. After they had completed 25 missions, American crews could stand down, as with the Belle. It was actually the crew of Hot Stuff who were originally chosen, but tragically they crashed whilst transporting Lt General Frank Andrews to the US, the man originally tasked with leading D- Day.

The Belle had a busy schedule, 31 cities in 3 months. Robert and Margaret were not so lucky, being forbidden to marry to keep the romance alive for the publicity. Soon the relationship ended, however, as Margaret suspected, with some justification, that Robert was a bit of a player! The Belle finished its last tour of duty in August 1943, and after the war ended up in one of the "Boneyards", scattered around the States-such an ignominious end for this lovely craft.

Fortunately it was rescued by the city of Memphis and finally by the US government, securing a place of honour in the USAF Museum at Dayton, Ohio. Fully restored, it looks magnificent, parts having been donated from all over the world. It is once again open to the public, and Kenneth celebrated a Big Birthday with his visit there.

Sadly, Margaret Polk struggled with alcoholism and died fairly young. Robert got married to one of his several wives next to his beloved Belle and died at a ripe old age. There is a statue to Margaret and The Belle in Overton Park, Memphis. Thank you, Kenneth, for bringing these historic times to vivid life with your humorous asides and excellent illustrations.

Kenneth finished with a lovely CGI video of the Belle in flight, the soundtrack being the famous poem by John Gillespie Magee, who died aged 19 in a Spitfire accident:

And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod

The high, untrespassed sanctity of space,

Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

A beautiful reminder of those courageous men who died to give us the freedom we now enjoy.

Barbara Pearce

