



**SSgt Robert Butler Gills, Jr.**

Flight Engineer/Top Turret Gunner

64<sup>th</sup> Squadron, 43<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Group (H)

MIA/KIA 21 May, 1943

Robert Butler Gills. Jr was born in Hopewell, Virginia on April 16, 1918 to Robert B. Gills, Sr and Bertie H. Gills. He had one older half sister as well as three younger brothers and a sister. Robert grew up in Alexandria, Virginia in the community of Del Ray and attended George Washington High School. He worked for the U.S Census Bureau, sold furniture and was a volunteer firefighter prior to being drafted.

He joined the Army in January of 1942 and was sent to mechanics school at Ft. Keesler in Biloxi, MS. He was trained on B-25 Mitchell bombers and I believe he did some coastal patrols as his duty stations were Columbia, SC - Ft. Myers, FL - Hamilton Field, CA. With Hamilton being his point of embarkation on his way to the Southwest Pacific area. We're not sure exactly when Robert arrived in New Guinea but I feel sure it was probably around February of 1943. Below is an account of his final mission:

During the afternoon of May 20, this B-17 took off from 7-Mile (Jackson Drome) near Port Moresby, flying northward to stage from Dobodura Airfield where a bomb load of 300lbs bombs and 20lbs fragmentation cluster bomb were loaded for a night mission over Rabaul.

At 1:00am, this B-17 was one of five that took off from Dobodura Airfield to bomb Vunakanau Airfield and Rapopo Airfield then return to base at Port Moresby. Two members of the crew volunteered for the mission: Heller, a B-24 pilot from the 380<sup>th</sup> BG gaining experience in B-17s and Pfc Smith.

At 3:48am, this B-17 arrived at the initial point over the Warangoi River to begin its bombing run against Vunakanau Airfield. They were tracked by a J1N1 Irving (Gekko) night fighter piloted by CPO Shigetoshi Kudo. He maneuvered below the B-17 and opened fire with the planes obliquely mounted 20mm cannons.

The B-17 was hit from below in the No. 3 and No. 4 engines. A few seconds later, the No. 1 and No. 2 engines were hit and the bombs ignited. Pilot Williams turned the stricken B-17 to the southeast and headed for the St. Georges Channel and ordered the crew to bail out. It is believed that Rippy, Curry and Manuel were able to parachute out, the rest of the crew perished when the B-17 crashed into the sea and exploded on impact, ripping off the tail and wing. According to Manuel, the night fighter circled the crash site and strafed. This bomber was the first victory of a Japanese night fighter using oblique cannons. The same Irving next shot down B-17E 41-9011 and landed at Lakunai Airfield at 5:35am, having expended only 178 rounds. The shoot down was also observed by a Japanese IJN submarine (RO-101) that was patrolling the area at the time. This was the log entry for the sub - *West of Cape St. George. Around 0340, returning RO-101 sights a four-engine bomber, going down in flames. Two parachutes originating from the same plane are likewise observed. Returns to Rabaul on that same day.*

MSgt. Gordon Manuel parachuted out first and landed in the sea. He made it to shore north of Induna Island near the mouth of the Kambubu River and Matala Plantation and was able to evade capture and survived behind enemy lines in the Put Put area, with the help of local people. Later, he joined a group of Australian coastwatchers and other downed aviators. On February 5, 1944 he was rescued by USS Gato from Open Bay and returned to duty.

2nd Lt John S. Rippy parachuted out second and landed in the sea. He made it to shore south of Induna Island and north of Talilis Plantation. It is believed he was immediately captured by the Japanese, and executed on the spot.

Originally, it wasn't known that Sgt. Curry had made it to shore but after the war in 1946, a Catholic priest, Father Joseph Lamarre, wrote to Curry's father saying that he had been in a Japanese POW camp with his son. Apparently he had been captured and transported to Rabaul where he was imprisoned at the Japanese Navy POW camp. On November 25, 1943 he was executed along with four crew members of B-17E 41-9011.

My family did not know much of what had happened to Robert or the plane but we did know there was one survivor. An uncle told me once that a family friend ran into Gordon Manuel (after his rescue) and so they had a rough idea of the story. I had heard that my Grandmother worried about Robert being captured because they had heard what the Japanese did to prisoners on the Bataan death march. After the war a book (70,000 to 1) was written recounting the mission and Gordon Manuel's survival. My Grandmother wrote in her copy of the book that it was her most cherished possession. She had heard that Manuel was going to come and see her but that never happened. The family didn't know that Manuel had passed away in 1950. I have enclosed a family copy of the book.



Above is a photo of Robert Gills (far left) with some unidentified buddies in Jackson Square in front of the Café Du Monde in New Orleans, LA (1942).



An early version of the 43<sup>rd</sup> BG patch



64<sup>th</sup> squadron patch



This is a photo of B-17E Honi Kuu Okole serial #41-9244. This picture was reportedly taken on May 20<sup>th</sup>, 1943, just prior to its fatal mission.





Two more photos of the B-17E Honi Kuu Okole (Hawaiian for Kiss My Ass). The plane was shot down on May 21st with ultimately only one survivor.





Above is a government photo of Vunakanau which was the intended target for B-17E #41-9244 on the night of 21 May, 1943. If you look closely near the top of the picture you can see a Japanese plane in one of the revetments.

### Crew Roster

**Pilot** Major Paul I. "P. I." Williams, O-418154 (MIA/KIA) OK  
**Co-Pilot** 2nd Lt John S. Rippy, O-730964 (believed shot after reaching shore) CA  
**Bombardier** MSgt Gordon R. Manuel (survived) ME  
**Navigator** 2nd Lt. Richard U. Aguirre, O-733398 (MIA/KIA) ID  
**Engineer** SSgt Robert B. Gills, Jr., 33122679 (MIA/KIA) VA  
**Radio** Sgt Edward Driscoll, 36047422 (MIA/KIA) IL  
**Asst Radio / Waist Gunner** Sgt Lawrence L. Rexroat, 18004066 (MIA/KIA) OK  
**Waist Gunner** Sgt Robert A. Curry, 11007351 (POW, executed November 25, 1943) MA  
**Belly Turret** Pfc William R. Smith, 15098049 (MIA/KIA) OH  
**Tail Gunner** Sgt Joseph F. Murray, 13047717 (MIA/KIA) PA  
**Observer** 1st Lt. Robert F. Heller, O-398021 380 BG, 529 BS (MIA/KIA) IL





This picture shows some of the crew of that was on the Honi Kuu Okole for its final flight.

Back row – from left –

Sgt. Lawrence L. Rexroat (gunner), Sgt. Robert A. Curry (gunner), Sgt. Joseph F. Murray (gunner)

Front row – far right –

MSgt. Gordon R. Manuel (bombardier and only survivor)

\*The regular pilot of this crew, Charles (Chick) Olson is pictured on the front row – far left. He let his friend, Major Paul I. Williams, take his crew and pilot the plane on May 21<sup>st</sup>. Olson survived the war but never forgot the incident.

Crew photos



1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Robert F. Heller (Observer)



Sgt. Lawrence L. Rexroat (Gunner)



2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Richard U. Aguirre (Navigator)



Sgt. Edward W. Driscoll (Radio Operator)





Sgt. Robert A. Curry (gunner)



Sgt. Joseph F. Murray (gunner)



MSgt. Gordon R. Manuel (bombardier)

\*promoted to officer after his rescue



SSgt. Robert B. Gills (Flight Engineer/Top Turret)