



GEORGE STERLING MC CLELLAN JR.
1ST LEUTENANT, US ARMY AIR FORCE
303RD BOMB GROUP, 427TH SQUADRON, 8TH AIR FORCE
JANUARY 14, 1918 — JANUARY 11, 1944
by Bud Garner

Sterling McClellan came to Pompano at a very young age with his parents, Dr. and Mrs. George (Dr. George) McClellan. Sterling was a special person, always mindful of the underdog, always ready to take up the cause of any wrongdoing, always ready to go the second mile.

Sterling acquired these traits at an early age; he prepared himself mentally and physically. He started on a course of body-building and exercise and eventually worked himself into a position where Willie Baker and Witt Webb began working with him in the boxing arena when he was about sixteen years old. Sterling began to box as an amateur sometime in 1937 or 1938. He was a Golden Glove boxer and the physical condition he worked so hard to obtain paid-off in the boxing ring.

After graduating from Pompano High School, Sterling enrolled in the Pre-Med program at the University of Florida. He continued with his boxing in college but kept this from his family. Sometime in late 1940, he dropped out of school and with the war rapidly approaching, he applied for and was

accepted in the Air Force cadet program. Sterling completed all of the requirements, which was a very vigorous, strenuous program, and he was awarded the silver wings of a pilot.

Sterling trained in several states after winning his wings on the way to becoming a B-17 heavy bomber pilot.

He led the first group of planes down to Sebring Florida when that field was built, arriving while there was heavy equipment on the runways and his flight of trainers landed on the road alongside the airfield. Sterling was allowed to fly home on weekends in a training plane. This was allowed during the war to give pilots more flying time. There were times when he would take the home folks for a ride.

After more training in various parts of the country, he was sent overseas and his bomb group "Hells Angels" was based in England near the town of Molesworth about 70 miles North of London in the mid-lands of East Anglia. The bombing of Germany began in earnest in 1943-44. A pilot or air crewman completing 25 combat missions could be returned home, having beaten the odds of survival (four missions were the average). Surviving six times the normal safe returns was something to rejoice about if and when it did happen.

Sterling returned from a bombing raid to Bremen, Germany on Dec. 20, 1943. His and one other plane were the only planes from the 427th squadron that returned from this raid attesting to the intense fighter and anti-aircraft fire on these deep penetrations into Germany.

Oschersleben, Germany, January 11, 1944. A total of 502 aircraft were dispatched on this raid deep into Germany. Sterling's group, the 303rd dispatched 36 planes on this raid. Sterling was the pilot on the plane named "Bad Check," a B-17F. He was on his 17th or 18th mission, the actual count was never determined. Aggressive enemy fighters were encountered before arriving at the target and after dropping their bombs. Sterling was in the low rear part of the formation which was considered the most vulnerable position. "Bad Check," the plane flown by Sterling, was seen spiraling down, and it was said by other crews: "There goes McClellan going down to give protection to a damaged bomber." Such was the concern that Sterling had for people; he was always ready to help out when he could. But that was not the case this time. Sterling's plane crashed and he was killed on the return run. A short time later, Sterling's brother Bill, a waist gunner on a B-24 Heavy Bomber, was shot down, wounded and parachuted into occupied territory in France. He was picked up and after being treated was sent to a POW camp, the infamous Stalag 17B in Germany. Upon arriving there he was approached by a prisoner that called him by his last name. This prisoner recognized Bill as Sterling's brother by their resemblance. He was a member of Sterling's crew, named Duggan, one of the two that survived from "Bad Check" and then captured by the Germans. The story he told Bill was all too familiar.

They were attacked head on by a Me 109 German fighter. The enemy plane fired a long burst of 20 MM shells of which many found their mark. The bombardier was killed, and the co-pilot W.A. Fisher, also the son of a Dr. from Chicago, a B-26 medium bomber pilot on his first mission in a B-17 was killed. The top turret gunner, a close friend of Sterling's was killed, also the navigator. Sterling was the only man left unhurt in the cockpit area. According to the surviving airman's story, Duggan made his way to the front of the plane and told Sterling it was time to bail out. Sterling put the plane on auto-pilot and reached for his chute. Then he asked how many men were still aboard in the rear of the plane since the radios were out and there was no communication. Duggan told him he didn't know. Sterling climbed back into the pilot's seat, disconnected the auto-pilot and said he couldn't leave not knowing if there were men alive still aboard. Duggan bailed out

and told Bill that the last time he saw his brother was just before he jumped. Sterling was at the controls and desperately trying to fly the damaged plane. Bill was told later that "Bad Check" which was on its 45th trip crashed in Germany or Holland. The bodies of the crew members were recovered and buried in a cemetery with full military honors.

Sterling McClellan's concern for his fellow man was genuine. If he had bailed-out he probably would have survived. Instead he died at the age of 26. He did not hesitate in making the decision to stay with the plane. His concern for the members of his crew was first and foremost to him. He was "One of a kind". We see very few STERLING MC CLELLANS in our lifetime.

The 303rd bomb group "Hells Angels," Sterling's group, flew 364 missions and 10,721 sorties the highest total of any bombardment group in the 8th Air Force in WWII and they had 165 MIA's .

The American Legion Post in Pompano Beach carries the name STERLING MC CLELLAN, POST # 142 in his honor.

Sterling's body was returned home after the war and is buried in the Pompano Beach Cemetery.

(Part of the story of the 303rd Bomb Group is retold in the book, "Half A Wing, Three Engines and a Prayer," written by Brian D. O'Neill, 1989, McGraw-Hill Tab Aero Books. Sterling's exploits are briefly recounted in the book although the description of his final flight is in error concerning eye witnesses' claims that all ten crew members aboard had parachuted to the ground.)

