

# The NINE-O-NINE

## April 7, 1945 - October 2, 2019



On September 9, 2016 I flew in the Collings Foundation beautiful B-17G, the *NINE-O-NINE* (named after the last three digits of its tail number, 42-31909). We flew from Dutchess County Airport up the Hudson past Kingston (or was it Saugerties???) and back. It was a once-in-a-lifetime, remarkable, unforgettable experience. I wrote about the experience in the Boating on the Hudson and Beyond 2016 Holiday Issue, and in the May 2017 issue wrote "The NINE O NINE Revisited" explaining how the "real" B-17G, 44-83575, eventually became the Colling's NINE-O-NINE. Ever since September 9, 2016 I've smiled every time "9:09" pops up on a digital clock, anywhere.

On October 2, 2019 John e-mailed me that the NINE-O-NINE had crashed, at Bradley International Airport in Connecticut. I was shocked, and stunned.

From what I've read, take-off had been delayed because one of the engines (number four, outboard on the right wing???) wouldn't start. The plane eventually took off, and about two minutes into the flight—about eight miles out—the pilots reported a problem to the control tower and requested an emergency landing. Again, from what I've read, there was no real urgency in the exchanges between the pilots and the tower, but eyewitnesses reported the plane "making loud noises" and flying "really low".

News reports say the plane crashed 1,000 feet short of the runway, and then into the airport's de-icer storage tanks, and was then just about totally destroyed in an explosion. Only the vertical rudder and some of the left wing are recognizable in photos.

I know a lot about World War II airplanes, and the B-17's.



From my readings, it was not uncommon for B-17's to return from missions over France, and Germany, on three engines, and, I think, even on two engines. And, these very tough airplanes often landed, or, crash landed, with minimal damage.

Here's a theory—and this is just my theory—if a four-engine airplane loses an engine, it will be very difficult—most likely impossible—for the remaining three engines to allow it to maintain a given altitude. Most likely it will slowly (or maybe not-so-slowly???) lose altitude: let's just say, for the sake of round numbers, about 100 feet per mile.

A World War II bomber, 30,000 feet over France, could then—possibly—make it 300 miles: over, and possibly across, the English Channel. The NINE-O-NINE was eight miles from Bradley, 800 feet up. Do the math... It did make it back to airport property: the de-icer tanks are part of the airport.

To me, on that October 2019 day the veteran pilots did everything they could to save this priceless airplane, but, at some point, things became "in the hands of the gods": and, the gods let us down. And, instead of a belly landing where the plane could have been salvaged, with minimum loss of life, it hit those tanks, and exploded. Plowing into them was just plain rotten, lousy bad luck. Why???

From October 2, 2019, every time I see "9:09" on a digital clock, it will be with unutterable sadness; every time.

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by **Ralph J. Ferrusi**