

BOMBER CREW: A DAY IN THEIR LIVES

B-17 crewmen remember the German missions

BY MARK CARLSON



The Bloody 100th earned its nickname because of the relentless attacks set upon it by the Luftwaffe. One of its bombers had lowered its landing gear over occupied territory, which was the unwritten signal to the enemy fighters that the B-17 was going to surrender and land at a Luftwaffe air base. When the fighters got close to the bomber, it raised its gear and blasted a fighter out of the sky. From then on, the 100th was marked for extinction by the Luftwaffe. (Photo courtesy of the 100th BG.)

Opposite: Standard configuration for the flexible gunner waist positions in the pre-G-model B-17s was an exercise in acquiring mountain goat footing, close encounter avoidance and arctic survival skills to track down a fast moving target. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

Ex communi periculo fraternitas

'FROM COMMON PERIL, BROTHERHOOD'

Aboard each of the thousands of B-17 Flying Fortresses that left the soil of England bound for targets in Europe were 10 young men. Outwardly, they were no different from any late-teen or early-twenties boy you'd meet anywhere in America. Same faces, same names, same youthful vigor and sense of invincibility. But on their shoulders rested the hopes of a nation, a world at war. This article relates missions over Germany through the personal accounts of men no longer young. They have little in common but their memories and that they once flew high in the deadly skies over Hitler's Germany to deliver destruction to the Nazi war machine. Bombardiers and navigators, pilots and copilots, radio operators, flight engineers, ball, waist and tail gunners. Some were officers, most were sergeants. They came from factories and farms, small towns and big cities, and ended up in a narrow aluminum tube with four roaring Cyclone engines, a dozen machine guns and four tons of high explosives. The air temperature was far below freezing even when it was woven with red-hot shrapnel and exploding cannon shells. Very few of them knew one another during the war, but they are forever bonded in blood and duty. Kids then, old men now, they tell their stories of life and death inside B-17s over Germany.



An uneasy sleep

Long before dawn reached the cold sky of East Anglia, a lone man entered the barracks where the aircrews rested in uneasy slumber. Then he began waking them up. Radio operator Don Hammond, who flew 28 missions with the 100th Bomb Group, recalls, "The Charge of Quarters came in and said, 'Hey, you're flying. Breakfast at five, briefing at six, takeoff at seven.' Then they picked us up in a truck and took us to the Mess Hall. We had fresh eggs, served to anyone who was flying."

Things weren't the same all over in the Eighth Air Force. Navigator Dick Tyhurst, a veteran of 35 missions with the 95th Group said, "At Horham we always had powdered eggs, toast and coffee. Each squadron had 120 guys. Three squadrons, that's 360. No way are you going to have fresh eggs."

The sleepy crews made their way over to the main Quonset hut for the mission briefing, conducted by the group commander and intelligence officer. Behind them was a large curtain covering a map of Europe.

"We went to the main hall with all the crews," continued Hammond. "Armed sentries stayed at the door so we couldn't get out. I thought that was kind of funny."

The target for today is ...

Pilot John Gibbons, who survived 49 missions with the 100th, related his memories of briefing.

"They pulled the curtain and told us where we were going. On the Berlin missions that red tape went all the way across Germany and over all these fighter bases. Everybody in the room would just groan and sigh or mutter, 'Oh, goddamn.'"

After the main briefing, the navigators and bombardiers were given instructions about route and target information.

A bombardier of the 493rd Group, Lynn Tipton said, "We were told what bomb load we'd have, the aiming point, and target information."

"I got a sealed bag with my frequencies and information for the day," remembered Hammond. "It had an escape kit in there with a map and stuff. I had about fifty dollars in gold too, to bribe civilians. I hoped I'd never need it. After briefing we drew our equipment, Mae West, pistol and flak vest."

Saddling up

The sky slowly turned from deep violet to dusty pink in the east as the crews stubbed out final cigarettes and drove out to the waiting bombers, already loaded with bombs, fuel and ammunition.

96th Group pilot Ed Davidson commented, "Each squadron was in its own line in the hardstands."

"Our ground crew chief went over all the damage and repairs from the previous mission with Lt. Stan Cebuhar and me," said copilot Delton 'Rip' Reopelle of the 379th.

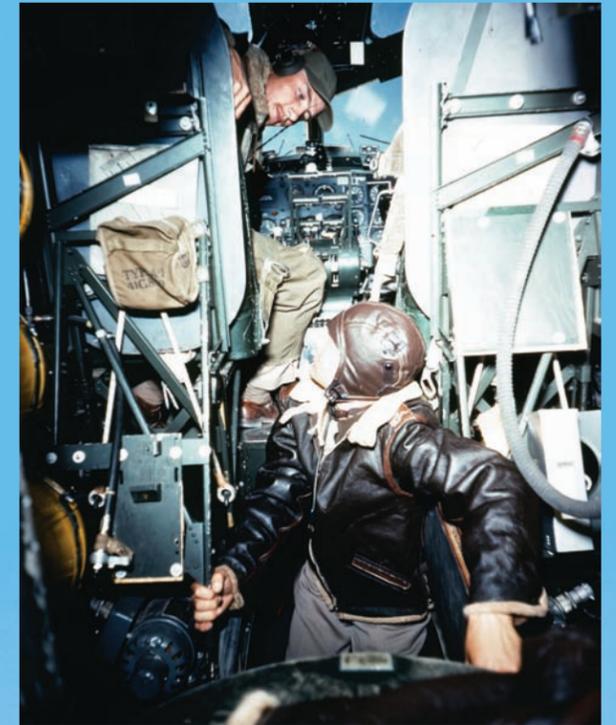


Above: 96th Bomb Group Pilot Ed Davidson in 1943. (Photo courtesy of Ed Davidson)

Below: The B-17's cockpit (below) looked impressive but was actually small. (Photo by Heath Moffatt)



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Above: One of the most completely detailed and flying B-17Gs in the world, the CAF's *Sentimental Journey* is based at Falcon Field in Mesa, Arizona (Phoenix), where it offers the rare opportunity to crawl inside and explore the world of B-17 crewmen. (Photo by Budd Davisson/airbum.com)

Inset: Access to the nose section of the Fortress for the navigator and bombardier/gunner was between the pilots raised seats. Emergency egress was available through the forward port side entrance hatch. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)





The bombardier (above) could only look at oncoming fighters and hope they missed as he couldn't get a clean shot with his single .50. (Photo by Heath Moffatt)

Stanley Lawruk, a flight engineer with the 92nd said, "I walked with the ground crew chief and inspected it to make sure everything was fine for flight."

"I went into the tail and checked my ammunition," Rich Tangradi, a 100th BG tail gunner explained. "Two boxes, each with 600 rounds of one tracer, two armor piercing and two incendiaries. I put the guns in their positions and lifted the receiver, put in the belt, then slammed it down and locked it. No one touched those guns but me."

On their way

Once the doors and hatches were closed and latched, the crews called the pilot and checked in. Then they settled in for takeoff.

Takeoff was done by section and squadron, explained Davidson. "We took off at 30-second intervals and climbed."

Navigator Tyhurst explained, "We had three groups in the 13th Combat Wing. The 100th at Thorpe-Abbots, we were in the middle at Horham, and the 390th was at Framlingham to the southeast.



Left: The navigator's table behind the bombardier in the nose. (Photo by Heath Moffatt) Center: Navigators were provided with a cramped area in the nose along with a small roof astrodome for sighting work. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet) Right: The radio operator's compartment with a small view to other 17s, flak bursts and scenery. (Photo by Heath Moffatt)

"We used vertically-aimed radio beacons called 'Bunchers.' The airfields were roughly five miles apart. When we took off, we had to circle over our beacon because five miles away were other groups within our wing. Sometimes we'd come up out of the clouds and five miles away we'd see another B-17 come out."

Joe Armanini, a 100th bombardier said, "I went back to the bomb bay and pulled the safety pins on the nose and tail of each bomb to arm them. The crew tested their guns when we reached the sea."

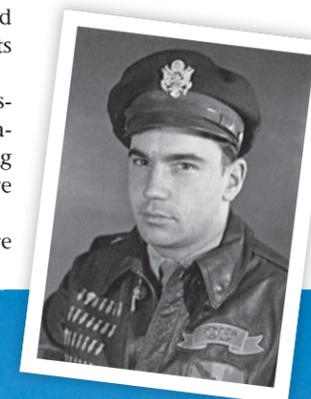
The air temperature at 25,000 feet often dropped

to 40 or 50 degrees below zero. Tyhurst related how the crews endured the cold. "Regular clothes, then the blue electrically heated 'long johns.' They had a six-foot cord to plug into your station. The cuffs had cords to plug into boots and gloves. The leather pants were like overalls with a fleece-lined leather jacket."

Ball gunner Bob Mathiasen, a veteran of 35 missions with the 100th said, "I had my suit temperature turned up all the way to keep from freezing to death. I never touched anything with my bare fingers. My skin would freeze onto the metal."

"In the older B-17Fs, the waist windows were

Navigator Dick Tyhurst in July 1944. (Photo courtesy of Dick Tyhurst)



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Shoo Shoo Baby was one of the very few B-17s returned to the U.S. after the war to actually see combat. She was restored and flown only a few times before being permanently retired to the National Museum of the USAF on Wright-Patterson AFB in Dayton, Ohio. (Photo by Budd Davisson/airbum.com)



Left: Field mod twin-fifties in a B-17F to thwart head-on attacks. Center: The G-model Bendix chin along with the cheek gun addition in the Block-60 model gave the Fortress excellent head-on protection. (Photos by Stan Piet) Right: Norden bombsight, one of WW II's most tightly held secrets. (Photo by Heath Moffatt)

open,” commented Tangradi. “It got colder than hell in there.”

Flak Alley, here we come

As the bombers crossed the North Sea, they entered the domain of German flak batteries. They were often positioned on bomber routes. *Fliegerabwehrkanone*, for aircraft defense cannon, was one of the most feared and despised defenses the bomber crews faced. The Krupp-built 88mm gun could effectively reach up to 25,000 feet, waiting for the bombers to fly into the deadly umbrella of hot shrapnel.

379th pilot Stephen King recalled, “We were briefed that there were over 900 flak

guns at Hamburg. I believe it.”

Bruce Richardson, a 35-mission tail gunner with the 100th, commented “Merseburg had about 1,100 guns, nearly all 88s.”

“The Germans put 88s on railroad cars so they could move them to where they were most needed,” said 384th pilot Bill O’Leary. “Crews talked about flak so thick you could walk on it. The sky over Cologne was almost black. I don’t know how any planes made it through. We came back with an awful lot of holes.”

Rip Reopelle said laconically, “If anybody who went through flak said they weren’t scared, they’re a liar.”

Tyhurst recalled, “When I saw the flak over Munich, I thought ‘Wow, unless we’re lucky as hell, we’re gonna get killed.’ Life got pretty serious all of a sudden. The 88 had a range of over 20,000 feet. Fortunately, we flew above that. The gunners were so good that if you flew below 20,000 feet you were duck soup.”

Joe Armanini related an encounter with flak. “Over Berlin the flak was fierce. If you saw the red ball in the center of the flak that was really close. One exploded, couldn’t have been more than 10 feet away, and it just shook the whole plane like hell. I said, ‘God, that was really close!’”

What flak could do to a plane was made clear to Don Hammond. “On one mission I was bent over getting a chaff roll to eject through the window chute. When I came back up and saw the fuselage there was a huge hole right where my head had been.”

“I lost my radio operator over Germany,” John Gibbons said. “An 88 exploded in his compartment and blew him out, leaving only a six-by-eight foot hole.”

Gunner Buschmeier said, “The Germans fired volleys hoping we’d fly into it. It preyed on our mind more than fighters because there wasn’t anything we could do about it.”

Here come the fighters

The Me 109 and Fw 190 were the deadly sharks in the aerial seas of Europe. Bomber crews almost preferred dealing with fighters because at least gunners could shoot back.

“German fighters would almost never attack in their own flak,” said King, “but over Berlin they came right into the flak and hit the bombers. Most of the time we had either flak or fighters but this time it was both at once.”

“A fighter was approaching from 12 o’clock level and I didn’t hear anything from my top turret gunner, Ray Weehler. I got on the interphone

Below: B-17 F waist gunners Alan Peover and George E. Bowling jockey for position in authentic flight gear, circa 1943. Sliding doors behind the guns kept out the bitter cold at 25,000 ft. (Photo by Heath Moffatt)
Inset: Waist gunner Frank Buschmeier. (Photo courtesy of 100th Bomb Group Foundation/100thbg.com)



The Fortress’s waist gunners’ position was constantly under improvement with new gun mounts, sights and armor, crew flak armor, staggered waist positions and cabin heating. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

and yelled ‘Ray, why aren’t you shooting?’ He said, ‘I’m waiting until I can get a good bead on him.’ I yelled, ‘Goddamnit, scare him away, scare him away!’ Ray was credited with five enemy aircraft. He joked that if he’d been a fighter pilot he’d be an ace.”

Hammond recalled, “On the first Berlin raid there were 20 planes in our group. We were hit head-on by a lot of fighters in their own flak. They got 15 of us on that mission. Four others were hit and later got back but my plane was the only one to land on our base that night.”

“Over Berlin the fighters came into their own flak,” said Ball Gunner Bob Mathiasen. “I looked forward and saw at least 200 fighters coming at us. We lost lots of planes on that mission. I got a confirmed Fw 190. He was coming up and I zeroed in and got him in the cockpit.”

91st ball gunner Dan McGuire told the author, “I got two Me 109s at once. I put about 200 rounds into one and finally he lost control. He plowed into another fighter and they both went down. I learned this after the mission when a waist gunner said, ‘Hey, you got two of them.’ I wasn’t credited with either, though.”

Gunners’ claims were often exaggerated but

with good reason. Scores of gunners fired at each fighter and when one went down, several claimed it.

“Later, we read in the papers that we’d shot down 400 German fighters. Crap,” scoffed Armanini. “If we’d been that good, there’d be no Luftwaffe left.”

Tangradi recalled, “On February 4, 1944, over Germany, I spotted an Fw 190 coming up out of the overcast inching in towards us, I thought, ‘You sonofabitch, when you get to about 600 yards, I’m gonna get you!’ He came in and I hit my triggers and my guns didn’t work. He got to about 200 yards and started shooting. The Focke-Wulf has guns in both wings and the shells were going by on each side of me. I got hit in both arms. It’s a good thing it wasn’t an Me 109 because they have a big 20mm in the nose. If he’d had that he’d have blown me away.”

A welcome sight

During the early raids into Germany, the bombers often had no fighter escort. Until the long-range drop tanks were available for the P-51 Mustangs and P-47 Thunderbolts, American fighters had to return to base long before the bombers reached



Above: 91st BG Ball Turret Dan McGuire after completing his 34th mission. (Photo courtesy of Dan McGuire)
Top: The ball turret as viewed through the access panel. A claustrophobic area with twin '50s firing inches beside your ears. (Photo by Heath Moffatt)
Right: The Sperry ball turret was common to all Fortresses from the E-model on to production end in 1945. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

their targets. Bomber crews were both envious and grateful for the presence of the 'Little Friends.'

Bombardier Armanini related one encounter with a Thunderbolt. "We were supposed to bomb the Ruhr, but it was overcast, so I saw this factory with a tall smokestack, and I made a run at the target and we creamed it. I saw this Focke-Wulf coming at us and then this Thunderbolt was hammering at him and shot him down."

"Later on, I was at the officers' club having a drink and this guy comes in and asked 'Hey, who was the guy who bombed that factory?' I said 'That was me.' The guy turns out to be Francis 'Gabby' Gabreski, a top ace. He said 'Joe, I gotta tell you that was the best bombing I've ever seen.' Real nice guy. He saved our butts and he's congratulating me."

Ball gunner Bob Mathiasen also praised the fighter escort. "Those guys were absolutely great. If we were jumped by fighters and the 'little friends' came up it only took one look and the Germans were gone."

In the fall of 1944, the new cannon-armed Me 262 jet fighter began tearing through the bombers, attacking with near-impunity. But the Mustangs were still there.

"I happened to look out and saw three con-

trails," said Bill O'Leary. "One was horizontal and the other two were almost vertical. It was two P-51s diving to get a 262. They were never going to catch him. But I was glad they were there. He never came back."

The Norden helped make it happen

The B-17s job was to carry four tons of high-explosive bombs to a target in Europe. While the gunners and pilots sweated out the German defenses, the bombardiers prepared to earn their pay.

The role of the flight crew and ground crew was to get the bomber to where the bombardier leaned over his Norden bombsight.

493rd bombardier Lynn Tipton described his duties as the B-17 approached the target run. "At the IP (Initial Point) I had the Norden bombsight all warmed up. The pilot gave me control of the plane, and the Norden did the flying. If you got it all dialed in correctly, you were on the straight line of your course track. Then there's a



line crossing that line. When the target passed under the second line, that's when you hit the bomb release."

Tipton continued. "We flew in 12-plane echelons. When the lead bombardier dropped, we all did."

Armanini also gave the Norden high marks. "If all the settings were done right and the course was correct, there was almost no way you could miss. The only thing that might happen is a nearby flak burst just as I was releasing the bombs. Once they were gone, they were out of my control. I closed the doors and the pilot took over."

With the distant shriek of the falling bombs, the crew had done its job for Uncle Sam, as they said. "Then we were flying for us," said Tipton with a chuckle.

No road home was easy

The route back to England was often different from the approach to the target, but was no less



ALL OF A SUDDEN, OUR TAIL GUNNER WAS FIRING. I LOOKED AND THERE WAS THIS MESSERSCHMITT AND HE WAS RIGHT BEHIND THE STABILIZER. I COULDN'T GET A SHOT.

The B-17Es and Fs were produced with no protection from head-on attacks other than the top turret. Field mods included mounting one or two Browning fifty-fives in the nose bubble and later Fs received the chin turret of the "G" models. (Photo by Xavier Meal)

hazardous, especially after a successful bombing. That was when the fighters came up for blood.

100th waist gunner Frank Buschmeier remembered, "All of a sudden our tail gunner was firing. I looked and there was this Messerschmitt and he was right behind the stabilizer. I couldn't get a shot. He hit us without anybody being able to shoot at him."

He continued. "The radio operator was right next to me, not 18 inches away. One shell hit me in the right leg, and one hit him in the jugular vein and he dropped dead right there. A big pool of blood spilled and froze on the deck."

Tail gunner Tangradi told about his last mission. "The fighter that hit my arms tore us up pretty good and the engines were smoking. I crawled forward and called waist gunner Willy Kemp and asked him to help me with my chute. The blood was running down my wrists and hands. I told the other waist gunner to go forward and find out what the hell was going on. He came back and said, 'The guys up front are all gone.' I figured the plane was so shot up that the bailout bell didn't work. The radio gunner was hit, his face was all bloody, his fingers were frozen, like 10 white candles. The ball turret gunner's elbow was blown away."

Tangradi related the last moments in his doomed B-17. "We kicked the door out and jumped. And Willy Kemp, the kid who helped me put the chute on went down with the plane.

It went into a spin and he got caught inside in the centrifugal force."

Bail out! Bail Out!

Bombers already damaged from flak and earlier attacks were enticing targets and many fell from the skies to turn into flaming smears of debris. In some cases, as bombardier Lynn Tipton recalled, they exploded.

Sperry top turret gunner Jack Levine and his faithful pet show off his two aerial kills by June 1943. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)



Tail gunner Rich Tangradi
(Photo courtesy of 100th
Bomb Group Foundation/
100thbg.com)



Above: Tail gunners' position stayed unchanged from the E- through late G-models when the Cheyenne Mod Center improvement came into the production line. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

Right: The tail gunner's yoke controlled the remote guns. Ammo was delivered in chutes from forward in the fuselage. (Photo by Heath Moffatt)

"The plane was shot to pieces, all four engines were out. The copilot said, 'Bail out.' The pilot was dead. We just dove head-first through the nose hatch. The ball gunner was still in the plane and it suddenly exploded and he fell with all that debris, but he lived."

Pilot Stephen King had a similar experience. "On my last mission, over Hamburg, we were at about 29,000 feet when we were hit by an 88 in the nose." Suddenly, we took another big hit on the right wing. The engineer said, 'Hey, the right wing's on fire!' I looked out past my copilot and the whole right wing was burning like

mad. There was no way to stop it. I rang the bail-out bell and the navigator, bombardier, copilot and flight engineer went out the nose hatch. I checked to see if the rest of the guys in the back were out. I put my chute on and looked back through the bomb bay. The radio operator was staring out the open bomb doors with a panicked look on his face. The gunners in the back were still in the plane. Just then, the plane blew up around us. As far as I know, the only survivors of the explosion were me and the ball turret gunner. The others were killed."

Falling from over 20,000 feet, airmen were told not to pull the ripcord until they were at around 3,000 feet. German fighters sometimes shot at men hanging helplessly under the parachutes.

In sight of home

For the bombers able to elude the maddened German fighters and coastal flak, the blue waters of the North Sea and English Channel were a beacon of hope.

"One thing we never did was to secure the guns until we were over the base," said Ed Davidson. "Some planes were hit by German fighters even

when they were over the Channel.

"If a plane had wounded aboard they fired a red flare and got priority for landing."

When it's over, it's not really over

When the battle-scarred Fortresses reached their revetments and the propellers stopped, it was eerily silent. For the first time in nearly a dozen hours, the noise of the engines and hammering guns was stilled.

The tired, heartsick crews picked up their gear and gratefully stepped onto Allied soil. The grassy loam of the surrounding fields turned golden



in the setting sun. Many men watched as more planes landed, mentally counting, hoping all would return. But for many crews, the image of burning planes and drifting parachutes told the grisly tale. Cigarettes were lit by shaking fingers.

"We went to debriefing," Tipton explained. "Every man was taken aside to speak to an intelligence officer and tell what we saw. Every one was given a shot of whiskey to loosen his tongue."

Rip Reopelle went one better. "We got brandy for our debriefing."

When the sun had set, and the crews bedded down for the night, often with empty cots beside them, they knew it wasn't over. The next day or the day after that, they would once again be awoken, to do it all again. †