

**RECOLLECTIONS OF A WORLD WAR II B-17 BOMBER PILOT**

**Johnny Butler**

**Pilot, 547<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron**

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Dedicated to my son Harry C. Butler and presented to him on his 53rd birthday, April 17, 1996.

This transcript of audio tapes by two very talented ladies, Lela Griffin and Shirley Smith, Court Reporter and Secretary to the Judge to whom I owe a great deal of appreciation.

These audiotapes came about by my responding in this manner to a new friend from Chateaubriant, France by the name of Marcel Deroualliere. We have now been corresponding for more than two years and he has been most helpful in our learning more about Hells Belles II, our plane, that was shot down in 1943. He has arranged for a portion of the plane, plus other memorabilia to be sent to our 8th Air Force Museum at Barksdale Air Force Base.

I owe a tremendous debt to Mr. Serge Lebourg who instigated the development of so much information about not only the location of the crash site, but contacts with the many patriotic French people so important to my escape and evasion from the occupying Germans. His diligence and thoroughness has enabled me, and the remaining members of my crew to have vital information about the events of Sept. 16, 1943. I treasure my friendship with him, and especially the opportunity for a short visit during one of his business trips to the United States.. All of his efforts stemmed from his desire to show appreciation to Americans like me and my crew, who helped regain the freedom of France. He along with the many who have corresponded with me from France have renewed many acquaintances and friendships established in 1943. My big regret is that my health and age now prevents my return to France to personally renew these.

NOTE: This "autobiography" of a phase of my life is very disorganized due to my putting on tape events as they occurred to me while dictating. Some editing has been done, but much more is needed. I trust the limited readers will take this into account.

## PHASE 1

On September 30, 1994: To my new friend from France named Marcel, who has a very sincere interest in aviation. I am trying to give a background of my life to reveal to you how aviation became a part of my life.

I was born in 1917 on September the 9th in a very small rural town in North Louisiana. I grew up in a small town whose population never exceeded one thousand. Its name is Bienville. It was named for one of the two French brothers who helped settle my State of Louisiana. My father was a merchant in this small agricultural area where the principle farm product grown for the market was cotton. He not only had a general merchandise store that run from one street to the other, but he was also a cotton buyer. Back in the 1920s when his business was good and the farming was good, it was a good business. He made money and we had a good standard of living in this time of our lives. But besides that, we had a good community relationship throughout our area, because everybody looked after everybody else. There was a lot of togetherness, friendships, where everybody helped his fellowman. I'm sorry to say that throughout the world today I do not see this type of culture still in existence.

My father became a clerk in a store at the age of twelve and from that time on he made his livelihood as a merchant, with one exception. One year after his business had developed up to the point that he felt that he could leave it, he bought a farm because he had always had a secret desire to be a farmer. He bought a hundred and sixty acre farm and he gave one-sixth interest each in his store to two of his employees for them to run the store in his absence. My mother later told me that that was the happiest year of their married life, when he became a farmer. But he did not instill the farming desire in me. He did give me all of the good loving, discipline and the usual training of a good Christian family. And since he grew up the hard way, he always wanted me and my older brother to have things he did not have. That's how I first became slightly interested in aviation. In the early 1930s Barksdale Air Force Base was established over several thousand acres in nearby Bossier Parish near Shreveport, about fifty miles from where I presently reside. This was one of three major air bases the United States had: One on the East Coast, one on the West Coast, and this one to cover the Gulf Coast, even though it is located several hundred miles from the Gulf of Mexico. We could see planes

frequently flying in the area, plus they had a small commercial airport in Shreveport in addition to the military airport. Also there were air shows and races and my father gave me the opportunity to attend some of these. So that stimulated my early interest in aviation. Even though I developed this early interest it lay dormant because of the necessity of me getting my education and the lack of opportunity for commercial or private flying opportunities. I started to school at six years of age in the small community. In my second year we only had one teacher to teach two grades and she talked my parents into allowing me to skip the second grade and jump into the third grade which caused me to finish my high school education at the age of fifteen. And even at that age, I was in a very small class, and I was pretty immature naturally at that age. Anyway I was fortunate, because of my parents' financial status, to enroll in Louisiana Tech University three days after my sixteenth birthday and I finished school there in 1937 while I was still nineteen years old.

In 1937 we were in the depths of the depression and my father had passed away. In fact my mother was unable to finance my last year of college so I borrowed some money and worked for my room, board and laundry to finish school. Once I got out into the world I found it was not waiting just for me. It was not waiting for a lot of us. I pounded the pavements looking for work and was unable to find anything attractive at all in this area, so I applied to my uncle, who was the president and manager of a wholesale grocery company in Wichita Falls, Texas. That is located in the northeast part of the State of Texas, near the Oklahoma border. He gave me the lowest job in his organization, warehouseman, and paid me only Fourteen Dollars per week. That is pretty meager for about a sixty hour work week, but it was better than no job at all. A way from the business he was my uncle and I was his nephew but at the business we were "Mr. and Mr." He showed no partiality whatsoever. He even called me by my last name. He was pretty tough on me because he was trying to train me. I later felt that during the two and half years I was with him, I probably learned more than I did my four years in college. I worked up into all of the positions in the company and through a stroke of luck I had become his secretary and secretary to the Buyer- Sales Manager who became incapacitated because of an automobile accident. After that I ended up having to do the job as Buyer-Sales Manager and at a salary of about twenty-five or thirty per cent of that of the man I was replacing. Now as a young eager guy I felt like my talents were being wasted, so I

applied for and obtained a job in the sales field working for the Diamond Match Company. I worked out of the Dallas, Texas Office and covered all of the areas between Southeastern Oklahoma throughout North and East Central and Southeast parts of the State of Texas. Before I joined the military I was headquartered in Tyler, Texas but that was just where I would come in on the weekends and be at home. I was still single at the time. In October or late September of 1941 I received my notice from the Selective Service Administration, which was the draft for the military. By that time it was pretty obvious that the United States was going to enter the war

and since I was involved in a job that was non-essential, I elected to volunteer. I wanted to have an opportunity to have a choice as to what type of service I could enter. Patriotism was certainly involved with my decision, but the fact that I was young and single and since I was in a non-essential job, I visited the recruiting offices in Tyler to see what was available in the way of a military career. And the only thing at that time they could offer me was that with the proper educational background and if I could meet the physical requirements, I could apply to be an aviation cadet in pilot training or else I could go into the army as a buck private in the infantry at the glorious salary of twenty-one Dollars a month. So naturally having a slight interest in aviation, I elected to try for the pilot training. I had to go back to the university and get a transcript of my credits to verify my college education. I then met with the Examining Board when they came to Tyler. Unfortunately I did not pass two parts of the physical. My blood pressure was elevated and I was overweight. All other aspects were acceptable and they gave me a conditional acceptance subject to a re-examination thirty days later at my own expense in San Antonio, Texas. This I accomplished and was given approval and acceptance as a cadet but as there were no openings for immediate training I was put on a standby basis for a call when an opening occurred. After I finished my vacation in December 1941, I returned to my job on January the 5th and sure enough the Recruiting Office called me to report. I asked for a two weeks extension so that my company would not be without service to their customers for that period. My boss and the Recruiter compromised and on Friday, January the 10th at Five O'clock in the afternoon, two other young men and I were sworn in at Dallas. We were immediately put on a train for San Antonio for Pre-Flight Training. We arrived at San Antonio the following morning and hustled off the train to the Training Base. It is a basic training unit for the Air Corps. Back in those days instead of being called United States Air

Force, it was called the Army Air Corps. I'd been out of college for four years and the upper classmen were hazing us just like we were freshmen in college. This didn't go over too well with me but I accepted it because I had volunteered to put in my time and serve my country and to try to help stem the tide of Hitler and Mussolini or whoever else was trying to destroy our society in this world. So my military life started at Kelley Field, San Antonio, Texas, and what a career it was from there.

One of the two men that enlisted with me was named Bob Madden and we were so fortunate that everywhere we went we even had the same flight instructors. We became fast friends and our opportunities later on were beneficial to both of us. We spent about six weeks at Kelley Field. But I had the misfortune, or good fortune, to become incapacitated by an injury to my left leg. The muscle near my shinbone was bruised and stripped and damaged by an unfortunate accident in the barracks. The good fortune was that I missed all of the drill, all of the PT and all of the real strenuous exercises, but I was able to go to Ground School and really learn about flying and about becoming an officer in the Air Corps. It was fun to be able to sit there on a blanket on the drill field and watch everybody going through all of their paces and I was just sitting there laughing. But it had its downside. I was physically limited. As we prepared to leave Kelley Field for our primary training, I almost didn't make it because of this physical impairment. I overheard two flight surgeons talking about my case and they agreed to allow me to go on to primary training at Tulsa, Oklahoma, thinking as one of them put it "when he gets a thousand feet up in the air that leg is going to hurt him so badly that he will wash out by his own desires". Well, I did most of my flying at high altitudes and in non-pressurized planes, and I've never had a pain yet from that accidental injury. Tulsa was a civilian contract flying school operated by the Spartan Aircraft Company.

They were builders of airplanes as well as a training facility. Here I had another stroke of luck. Bob and I and four other guys - each instructor had six - were fortunate in getting an instructor named Gimble, who had completed his Army Air Corps training back in 1936 and had flown for Pan-American Airways. He flew commercial airplanes through Central and South America but came back into New York once and ran into some of his old flying buddies. They got drunk and he said that when he sobered up he was flying a twin engine bomber over the Atlantic, flying it to England. He eventually sobered up and came home and got into this

training program. With his unlimited experience he was an extremely capable instructor. So we got a good foundation there and we flew what was known as PT17s. It was a low wing plane and I've forgotten its horsepower, but it was relatively small. It was fun to fly and it was the first airplane I ever put my foot into.

When he took me up for the first orientation flight we had no communications except a tube in his open cockpit and he called me up on the tube saying "Buckle up real tight now, I'm going to show you how it feels to be on your back. " Well, of course, here I am goggled-eyed on my first flight and he rolled it over on the back. I'd thought I'd strapped myself in real tight but I am sure if that plane could be found today you'd find my fingerprints all over it. I just knew I was falling out of it. But this was done to try to relax me and I treasure his influence on my flying. From there I was transferred to another Oklahoma base where we had BT13s. This is a basic trainer. It has a closed cockpit and had a three hundred and seventy-five horsepower engine. We use to call them the Vultee Vibrators. It was a good single engine airplane. We flew it about seventy or eighty hours. Then from the basic training we went to advanced. Bob Madden and I both requested twin engine advance rather than the single engine and were sent to Lubbock, Texas, which is in West Texas. We were out in a pretty flat, almost desert land, and had beautiful flying conditions. Lubbock was a little more extreme from a climate standpoint in that it got real hot in the summer time and real cold in the winter time. I graduated on September the 6th, 1942. While at Lubbock we had the misfortune of having the AT6s removed. It is a single engine airplane. We were all looking forward to the opportunity to fly the AT6 but we missed it by one week. But we did fly two airplanes. One was a Cessna that was known as the AT14 or 17. It was a twin engine' Cessna that was also used for bombardier and navigation training. But the one we loved the most was the little Curtis Wright all metal plane called an AT9. It was not only used as a twin engine trainer for cadets, but also as a trainer for P38 pilots. It had twin 250hp radial engines and very short wings and it practically flew by its propellers. It was certainly a lot of fun to fly and we all enjoyed it immensely.

We graduated in September, got our wings and our commissions as Second Lieutenants and that's where Bob and I separated. He chose to go to Love Field and the Ferry Command at Dallas and I chose to go into B 17s at a training base in Central Florida at Sebring, which was

at that time a very small place. It was a lot of fun but it was in rural Central Florida. We were the second or third group to go there and they had everything from the old YB17s on up to the Model E. I don't think the Model F, which we flew in combat, had been developed at that time. But we had a lot of fun, we worked hard, we played hard. We would have five and a half hours a day of ground school, two and a half hours a day of physical training and then five hours minimum of flying. It was strictly a B17 training base. We not only learned to fly the airplane but we learned all of the navigation, cross country formation flying, night flying and high altitude flying. In the summer time in Florida the thunderheads build up very high. I remember one of my first altitude flights when we were about seventeen or eighteen thousand feet, a good ten thousand feet over a thunderhead and turbulence was severe. I was climbing and it kicked me off into a stall, just from the turbulence. Another time I remember we were in a nine plane formation and got into some instrument weather and had to land at a different air base. We couldn't return to ours because of the front. One of the guys pulled off on his own and got back there but he popped so many rivets they had to put his ship out of commission when he got it on the ground.

We finished our training in Sebring and were sent for reassignment at Salt Lake City, Utah. This is a "great distance across the country. It took us five days by train to get out there. Once at Salt Lake we were then split up into different elements and I ended up at Boise, Idaho in a B 17 Unit. Some went into B24s at other different places. At Boise we got there and gosh, it was so cold that the old fleece lined leather flying suits you've seen in the old time movies, were worn twenty-four hours a day just to try to stay warm. This period was our first entry into combat training and we lived in pretty marginal facilities. The heating was not too good in Boise, Idaho during the winter time. The weather was so bad and it was also in a mountainous area, so flying was very limited. I think in the nine weeks I was at Boise I probably only logged twenty-nine or thirty hours of flying time because of the adverse weather conditions. From there I was chosen as one of the officers assigned to the 384th Bomb Group at Wendover, Utah. And due to my maturity and age I was chosen as a staff officer. I was an Assistant Squadron Operations Officer in the 546th Squadron of the 384th Bomb Group. It was activated about January 1st, 1943, and we went to Wendover. I thought Boise was bad until I got to Wendover. Then I knew that Boise was a country club by comparison. The Air Base was right at the edge of the mountain range near the Great Salt flats of Utah. There are



mountains on three sides of the field but all we had between us and Salt Lake City was a hundred and thirty-six miles and a chain link fence. It was just flat salt beds as far as you could see. There was nothing there, absolutely nothing but that. I know we were the second ones there because we only had tar paper shacks to live in, a mess hall, officers club and necessary administrative building. Only twenty- seven married officers could have their wives with them. That was all of the clerical positions available. I might explain to you at this time that all of our training after we left Sebring was in B17 Series E airplanes, and this carried us all the way through our so-called Phase 1, 2 and 3 of combat training. We still flew the Series E until our final check out place. At Sioux City, Iowa we were issued our brand new planes and they were Series F. Those are the models we flew in combat.

To give you an idea of what my duties were as an Assistant Operations Officer, between myself and the First Operations Officer we arranged all the scheduling of the training, both the Ground School as well as the flying training, which was developed in a program outlined by the 'Training Command. In addition to those duties it was also my duty to assist the Engineering Office in the testing of new engines and recently inspected or repaired engines. After installation of new engines and after one hundred hour inspection on engines, these engines were given what we call slow time. They were not run at the high output until a minimum of five hours of so-called slow time. So a lot of times after all the crews would be out doing their training, I would be working with the Engineering Officer and his line chief to conduct the test flight of the airplanes for any minor repairs or engine replacements, etc.

I might at this time just recall two incidences that occurred while I was at Wendover that I thought was an unusual event for me. On one of the training sessions the crews were all sent on a cross country high altitude exercise and the Squadron Commanding Officer elected to go with one - of the crews that he thought was marginal. About an hour after all the planes took off his plane came back. The Commanding Officer came storming into the Engineering Officers Office next door to mine and begin berating the Engineering Officer for allowing a plane to be on the ready line that was unable to climb to altitude. He said it wouldn't climb over twelve thousand feet. Well; of course, I could hear the tirade next door but after he blew his stack and left, the Engineering Officer said, "Johnny, come and go with me, if you don't mind." So he and I and his line chief

took the airplane out, just the three of us, to test it. We climbed it to thirty-four thousand two hundred feet and were still climbing at the rate of two hundred feet per minute. That was enough to prove he was in error. So we came back down, and we finally decided what it was when the rest of the planes came back. We found out that they ran into some unanticipated instrument flying out in those mountain ranges and we figured that our Commanding Officer got a little chicken flying instruments in the mountain ranges. So it was a comical thing to us. We took that plane with just the three of us on board and the normal gas fuel load. And it did climb. It was a little light, but - calculating for that adjustment, for temperature and everything, it leveled out at about thirty-seven thousand, so I'd say it was a pretty good high altitude airplane. Another incident occurred where the Engineering Office posed a problem. Even though Wendover is right on the edge of the salt flats we did have a period of extremely bad weather where we were fogged in, and the forecast was pretty serious for several days. All of our planes that were flyable flew out with their crews to another air base at Great Falls, Montana, but there were two planes, one in our squadron and one in another squadron, that were undergoing repairs and were not in flying condition when everybody else left. So a couple of days later these planes came back into commission but we were still fogged in. We could hardly see across the room, but they decided that we would fly those planes up to meet with the rest of the group at Great Falls, which is quite a lengthy flight. So the ground crew walked us out to the end of the runway for takeoff. We had a runway that took off right to the salt flats, and between us and Salt Lake City there wasn't any hindrance above a six foot fence. They took me out there and lined up the runway and zeroed my compass for the centerline. Heck, I just made an instrument take off. My one and only. But, you know, it hardly took any time to penetrate the fog and then we climbed up, and the other plane made the same instrument take off. We flew formation until we got into some real tough weather and then we broke up. But that was just two incidences that I recall when my duties were a little bit beyond the normal for an Operations Officer.

We spent the full nine weeks at Wendover and then we were sent to Sioux City, Iowa for the final phase training place. Sioux City is where the entire crew working together spent an awful lot of their efforts on training as a complete crew, doing the gunnery work as well as practice bombing and navigational exercises. On one flight they flew out over the ocean off the Pacific - Coast and made a fly by in the San Francisco Area. Another time they went out that way on

a gunnery mission out over the Nevada Deserts where an Operations Officer from another squadron and I were selected to fly the Tow Target Plane. We didn't follow our orders too well. They asked us to fly at an indicated one fifty-five miles per hour but we actually flew about a one sixty or one sixty-five. We weren't too sure those gunners could hit the target we were towing. Because of that, on the way back, we ran out of gas and had to make an emergency landing over in a small flying field in Nebraska. There were only small planes there but we got enough gasoline to get back to Sioux City. Those are just a few little side things that I thought might interest you. I also will tell you about another thing that happened while we were at Wendover. We had problems being able to keep our gasoline supplies adequate so we frequently had to fly to different air bases all over the northwestern part of the country to fill our tanks in the planes.

We scheduled our training missions to take that into consideration. And on one occasion I remember that we sent a crew to South Dakota. Now in those mountain ranges during the winter period you get some unusually strong winds. 'When the crew landed and went to make their turns, the cross wind on that big tail of the B 17 was so overpowering that the young pilot burned out his brakes. Since he was in my squadron. I had to take the Engineering Officer and his mechanics and the necessary parts to fly up there and get them repaired. Knowing the wind condition, I had no problem landing and getting to the taxi stand. This was an extensive repair job, and it required us to stay overnight. So the next day we got everything repaired and I got them in route back to Wendover. By that time I had become acquainted with the local operations people and I bragged "the B 17 is just a big old Piper Cub, It's not all that much to fly". I said, "Man, it doesn't take all that runway y'all got." And that guy said, "You're kidding." I said, "Well, you watch me when I take off" So I got out on the end of the runway - of course, we had about a sixty mile an hour wind blowing and I'm headed right into the wind - so I rev up my engines and had my brakes tight. 'When I released my brakes I started rolling and started my flaps down, and by the time I got to the control tower I had gained five hundred feet. So I just gave them my farewell and went on my way. I wondered what they must have thought. It took less than a thousand feet for me to be off and suck up my wheels and get up to a five hundred foot altitude. Another unusual incidence during that period: I had to go up and do something for one of our crews in South Dakota somewhere and when I got up there and landed I found they had used snow plows to keep the runways

open. "When I got on the ground the tower advised me, "Wait for the jeep to come lead you in." The snow plows had blown the snow up to the side of the runway so high that by the time the plane got down in its three point position you couldn't see over the snow and didn't know how in the heck to get back to the ramp. So those are a couple of little things that happened during our winter time at Wendover, Utah. After our nine weeks of training at Wendover then we were moved to our third phase training at Sioux City, Iowa. Sioux City is not in the mountains. It's pretty flat country. In fact, it's real flat plains country. We were all anxious to get there because that's where we got our new planes. These were the F Series - B17Fs. And golly, everybody was real delighted. Unfortunately one of the first things that happened after we got our new planes was that the Deputy Group Commander took one of them out and got caught in a sand storm. That dust storm was so bad it plugged the intakes in the engines and he had to make a forced landing. He got out all right, but he couldn't get his wheels down in time and bonged up the four propellers on that brand new airplane. He landed it right on the ball turret and ground it off. But other than replacing the ball -turret and the propellers, the plane was still good as new after they cleaned it out. After that we were more cautious about scheduling our flights when the likelihood of dust storms were in the area.

Of course, this being the final phase training we were doing a lot of screening of our crews at all levels, from gunners to bombardiers, navigators, pilots and co-pilots. And, of course, we were honing in on our formation flying capabilities. So we did a lot of testing as far as the pilots and co--pilots were concerned, and that's where I came into play. Our procedure was that the Assistant Operations officer in one squadron would give test rides to pilots in another squadron so nobody would know anybody's background. There would be no personalities involved so you could be very objective in your evaluation. And that's what really led me to getting assigned onto a crew. Toward the latter part of the time at Sioux City, I gave test flights to three pilots from the 547th Squadron, none of whom I had any knowledge of whatsoever. During these rides, I felt that two out of the three I had tested were not up to standards that I thought would be suitable for taking a crew overseas. So, I recommended that they have further training or retesting by someone other than myself. The Group Operations Officer felt my evaluation was okay so they sent one pilot, or perhaps two out of the three, back for further pilot training.

A few days later it dawned on me that replacements are needed. I said "I'm tired of flying this desk." I volunteered to go to combat, and wanted to see if I could get one of those crews. I went to our Colonel, the group Commanding Officer, and requested that I be considered, which I was. That's when I became the first pilot for the crew of "The Natural."