

MY FIRST MISSION with the 8th Air Force During World War II

Alan Purchase

PROLOG:

I volunteered for the Army Air Corps at age 17 and was called to duty in July 1943, two months after turning 18. We were immediately loaded onto a troop train headed for Texas. First stop was Shepherd Field, Wichita Falls in north Texas for six weeks of basic training. Putting it very mildly, growing up in an upper middle-class neighborhood in Oakland, California did not prepare me for the shock of army life. The first night at Shepherd Field was spent under a canvas tarp with a dozen other recruits, trying to sleep on the ground with only one blanket serving as mattress and cover. The next day we were issued uniforms and immediately threw away the clothes we had worn for the last six days. They were filthy from the dirt, dust and soot accumulated during five days of stop and go troop train travel, sleeping two in the lower bunk and one in the upper, without any showers.

Our barracks were badly overcrowded. At night we often resorted to dragging our mattresses down from the second story to a patch of lawn, even though we had to be up, dressed, looking spick and span with beds made military fashion by four in the morning. That was when we lined up into platoons and marched briskly to the mess hall for breakfast. Not exactly the routine I was used to, not at all like life at home.

My next stop was Henderson State Teachers College, Arkadelphia Arkansas, for academic study, not as advanced as I had in high school. Arkadelphia was a small town with one drug store, two gas stations, three large churches, with blacks living in squalor on its edge. I was a cadet officer and quickly learned that if I walked like I knew where I was going and carried a clipboard, no one ever questioned me.

Next was Ellington Field, Houston for aviation cadet training. Then Laredo on the southern border of Texas for gunnery school. That was fun for everyone except the poor pilots pulling the targets. Several had been shot down by mistake. I even stood up in an open cockpit plane, shooting at both airborne and ground targets. We also became very proficient at skeet shooting, using shotguns to shoot at clay disks that mechanical triggers fired out in various directions. That was a fun skill I would never again use.

Later came testing and classification in Lincoln, Nebraska. I had my choice of pilot, navigator or bombardier training, but knew if I chose pilot, at six feet I was too tall for fighters and as a 19-year-old I would only be a copilot. I didn't want to be a bombardier and, since I liked math, navigator was a natural choice. I was assigned to navigation school at San Marcos, in the middle of Texas.

After fourteen months of service, in August 1944, I was commissioned a second lieutenant and received my navigator's wings. Following graduation, I was assigned to a new flight crew at Biggs Army Air Force Base, El Paso, to train on B-17 "Flying Fortress" bombers. I'm sure that

some powers that be looked at my record and decided that since I had already been stationed in the north, south, east and central parts of Texas, I should experience west Texas.

Being assigned to this crew was my good fortune. Our pilot was twenty-seven, several years older than average, with considerable flying experience. He had grown up in Alaska where he was a part time bush pilot. He had also been an instructor pilot on B17s. He knew our airplane very well.

REMEMBRANCES:

The temperature was hitting a record 112 degrees at Wichita Falls. While we were jogging on dusty roads in heavy GI boots out at Shepherd Field, I lost 14 pounds in less than six weeks.

Learning how to drink beer while stationed at Laredo. The water was not drinkable due to color, aroma, visible impurities, and taste. It took me four sessions before I could finish one bottle, but then I got the hang of it.

Doing guard duty at night in freezing rain at Ellington Field and patrolling outside our barracks with a wooden rifle. Welcome to army life!

Seeing a shanty town where blacks lived on the outskirts of Arkadelphia. Discrimination was foreign to me, growing up in a nice district of Oakland, California in the 1930s and 40s.

While stationed at San Marcos, watching thunderheads form; growing from small, pretty white clouds in the late morning to awesome, full-fledged menaces by evening.

Getting my first three-day pass in nine months and going into San Antonio. After four hours of wandering around, returning to our base to play gin rummy with friends.

Flying over west Texas and New Mexico at night and sitting in the Plexiglas nose of a B-17. I saw spectacular skies, often filled with shooting stars. They were awe-inspiring.

B-24's had been stationed at Biggs Field prior to our arrival. After several crashed into the Franklin Mountains that rose up off the end of the runway they changed to B-17s. Every time we took off, as our plane struggled to gain enough altitude to clear the mountains, we could see black scars directly in front of us.

TRANSITION TO EUROPE:

Upon completion of our training came assignment to the 8th Air Force based in England. In December we crossed the North Atlantic on the French liner "Normandy", traveling at full speed, without any escort. Our choice had been either to try to outrun submarines or to stay in a slow-moving convoy. Life on board was not pleasant for officers, much worse for the enlisted men who slept in five-high canvas bunks. The stench from sea sickness was pervasive.

Arriving in Scotland we talked with some of the locals and quickly realized we could not understand a word they were saying. Awaiting orders, we slept on thin straw mattresses on wooden platforms at a very cold monastery.

Our crew was assigned to the 384th Bomb Group, 546th Squadron stationed at Grafton, Underwood; a "two pub" village in the midlands. Our base was affectionately referred to as "Grafton Under Mud".

I had to learn to drink beer all over again. The English pub beer was warm, weak, and bitter, but I got the hang of it quickly. I also had to learn to drink scotch since bourbon was in very short supply. The base regularly sent a plane to Scotland on "training missions" so there was always an ample supply of scotch. (I still have my taste for scotch and couldn't care less for bourbon).

Officer's quarters were in prefab buildings with corrugated metal sides and roofs. Each housed 24-32 officers in double deck bunks, heated by a central coal fired potbellied stove. Because the midlands are very cold and damp in winter, I "requisitioned " extra blankets, folding some double, so I had eight layers to crawl under. They were heavy but I was reasonably warm. Unfortunately, earlier residents had shot holes in the roof of our building, so rain and snow leaked in.

We spent a week flying around those areas, getting familiar with the terrain, the base location, the wide variety of bad British weather, where to expect barrage balloons. We were then deemed ready to go.

OUR FIRST MISSION:

The Officers Club had the usual hum of activity about 9 pm when the jug with the smiling face on the mantel was turned to face the wall, a red light came on and the bar stopped serving. A mission was scheduled for the next day; our crew would be on it.

I could finally call myself a "fly boy". I had seen all of the John Wayne movies and other propaganda, so I knew it was the good guys against the bad guys. I was ready to go out and help save the world from the evil empire. At age nineteen the thought of injury or death was not a consideration. I felt fatalistic. What was going to happen would happen.

Wake up came at 3:30 in the morning, breakfast at 4:00, briefing at 4:30. The briefing room was a long building with folding chairs and a raised platform at the end. A map of northern Europe, hidden by a curtain, covered the wall. The briefing officer pulled the curtain back dramatically and a loud groan came from the audience. Our target was to be Nuremberg, about as far into Germany as we could go, with a route that zigzagged diagonally across the country to cause confusion about what would be our ultimate target. We would be flying over Germany for a long time. That was heady stuff for a wet behind the ears 19-year-old.

The separate navigator's briefing was at 5:30 where I was issued maps before going to the flight line by 6:00 am. We picked up our flight gear, parachutes and escape packages and reported to our plane. Being the newest crew, we were assigned the oldest and coldest B-17 on the base, but we were excited to finally be flying a real mission.

GETTING DRESSED:

First, we put the flight suit over our uniform wool pants and shirt. It was followed by the electrical suit, the insulated flight jacket, pants, and boots, plus gloves with silk liners. It regularly gets to minus 30-50 degrees F at 25-30,000 feet, in an uninsulated cabin with undependable heat. The only thing between us and the outside was a thin aluminum skin. Next came the helmet with earphones, throat mike, the "Mae West" flotation vest and then the

parachute harness. Finally, the oxygen mask was clipped to the helmet. The whole process took a while, and everything had to be done just so. It is hard to make corrections in the air.

After pulling ourselves up through the front escape hatch, (something I could never do today), the pilot, copilot and engineer climbed up to the cockpit while the bombardier and I went into the nose compartment. The radio man, waist gunners, belly gunner and tail gunner had an easy entrance to the rear of the aircraft behind the bomb bay. It was time to get organized with maps and other items, and get plugged in. The electric suit went into one jack, the nose mike into another, the headset into a third and the oxygen mask hanging from my helmet will go into a fourth when we reach 10,000 feet. With three or four lines connected I am careful when moving about, but I was able to reach the "cheek" gun across from my navigator's desk in case of fighter attack.

At seven am we rolled onto the taxi strip with other members of our squadron. After takeoff climbing to higher altitudes, we circled our field numerous times as we formed our squadron and then group formations. Through the clouds we can see aircraft from neighboring fields and hope they are able to keep in their areas of the sky.

After forty minutes of circling, we headed for the rendezvous point to join our wing and other groups participating in the mission. With several hundred planes in the air precision timing is mandatory.

The English Channel looked rough, France itself was quite pretty, and then, after another hour in the air, we enter Germany. During this time, we had been escorted by what we called "our little friends", P 51 fighters based in France. But shortly after entering Germany we are on our own. Looking down, the German countryside was peaceful and pastoral with neat farms and small villages appearing from time to time. But we knew we'd meet with hostility if we were forced down.

There are heavy concentrations of anti-aircraft guns in the region we entered Germany and "flak" (small pieces of steel) darkened the sky. Fortunately, we are high enough so most of the guns could not reach us. We then faced flying for more than two hours from the northwest to the south east of Germany, with the threat of fighters all the way.

Finally, we saw Nuremberg, surrounded with more anti-aircraft guns. We drop to 23,000 feet in altitude for better bombing accuracy, within range of the guns. Our target was the railroad marshaling yards on the edge of the city. The dangerous part is the long two- or three-minute bombing run when the plane is under the control of the bombardier. For accurate bombing it must be very steady, maintaining constant altitude, speed, and direction. That day everything worked as planned with a good bomb drop.

As we turned away from the target, preparing for our flight home, things changed very rapidly. Our far-right engine failed, and we had to drop out of formation since we could no longer keep up with the other planes. As we watched the rest of the bomber stream head northwest, we headed due west for the nearest friendly area. Within five minutes we also lost our far-left engine. That was not too unexpected since they shared many common systems. Flying on two engines meant we burnt a lot more fuel since the remaining engines were operating at full

capacity. If they faltered, we would really be in trouble. We would not be able to maintain a safe altitude and would be forced to crash land or bail out.

We were able to fly at about 90 mph instead of the normal 170, feeling very much alone and gradually losing altitude. To reduce our weight, we threw out all of our extra ammunition, saving only enough for a few short bursts. We were a sitting duck for any German fighter that saw us. Shortly we left the area covered by the maps I was issued. We just headed west and hoped. Finally, we received a response to our distress radio calls and headed for that base. We are down to 10,000 feet by the time we crossed the Rhine, but luck was definitely on our side. We had missed major cities and there was only one anti-aircraft gun shooting at us. Since we were within easy range, he should have been able to pick us off without difficulty. (I think his glasses were broken.) We found out later that our P-47 fighters were strafing the area so most of the guns were quiet.

The field where we were to land was at Etain, France. It was a forward fighter base that had only been established six weeks earlier. The runway was steel mesh spread across the meadow with minimum grading. It wasn't designed to be strong enough, wide enough or long enough for bombers, so they were justly concerned our bomber would damage it so their planes wouldn't be able to land.

With only two engines we had to make it on our first pass, there wouldn't be any more. The bombardier, engineer and I crawled through the bomb bay and sat down mid-ship with our gunners, bracing ourselves as best we could. Bombers do not have seats and safety belts, except for the pilots. I sat on the metal floor and braced myself against the bulkheads, thanking God for our pilot's experience. He made an excellent landing; slowed down as much as possible before we skidded off the end of the runway and across the mud, making one or more out-of-control ground loops before stopping by some bushes. None of us were even badly bruised. We exited very quickly to avoid a possible fire. Our plane did not fare as well. It sat with landing gear destroyed, the propellers bent 90 degrees around the engines, the underbelly bashed in, and one wing severely damaged-a pile of useless metal on the far edge of the field. Our glorious first mission had ended on a damp, cold day with us tramping across a muddy field. It didn't exactly feel like a glorious ending.

In the past Etain might have been a pretty French village but had suffered greatly from years of war. The mud on the main road through town was almost to the top of my flight boots. However, there was still a pretty little white church on the edge of the village where we all spent some time. (Etain later became a major American Air Force base and is still in active use as part of NATO.)

The next day we caught the once-a-day courier flight to Paris where we were housed in a special hotel the Air Force maintained for escapees and people like us. The rooms, like those in all French hotels, contained a bidet. None of us knew what it was for, but we found it very handy for washing our feet.

The weather then closed in, so we ended up spending three nights in Paris in our not very upscale hotel. Paris at that time was not a very glamorous city. This was only a few months after the city had been liberated and there was still the blackout with a nine o'clock curfew for all cafes and businesses. We all learned that eau de vie was not a safe drink.

When the weather finally cleared enough for us to catch a flight to London, a pea soup fog developed so we spent a night there, returning to our base six days after we started our flight. We left as the newest of new crews and returned as a crew rapidly on our way to becoming veterans.

Epilog #1

On our next few missions, we crash landed two more times. The first was again due to mechanical failure. We landed at a base in northern France designed for such events, with extra wide, long runways. After one night there a shuttle flight returned us to our base.

The second occurred when we were hit by “flak” over Berlin. In a strange way, the deadly pieces of steel flak tearing through our aircraft’s aluminum body and wings sounded just like Christmas tree bells, or the chime of wine glasses being clinked by happy diners toasting. Fuel was spewing out of both wings, so our squadron mates asked us to leave the protection of the formation. It looked to them as if we were going to blow up and, if that were so, we ought to do it by ourselves. We flew north over Denmark and then headed on the long trip home diagonally across the North Sea. Since we did not know how much fuel we were losing, we looked at the dark cold water with a great deal of apprehension.

Fortunately, we made it all the way back to our base. After firing the warning flares indicating damage we came in for our landing. Fire trucks and ambulances were waiting to chase us down the runway and “pick up the pieces.” We saw them with mixed feelings. The tower had warned us that only one of our landing gear was in the down position. As usual, we got into our crash positions, bracing ourselves as best we could. Our pilot made a very skillful landing on the one good wheel, slowing down some before a wing touched the ground. We again found ourselves wildly spinning around into the muddy field with several ground loops. Fortunately, no one was injured. Fearing the plane would burst into flames we scrambled out and ran across the field.

Our squadron commander later made the comment that our crew had done more to bring in nice new replacement aircraft than anyone else. A very dubious honor!

Epilog #2

In the mid 1970’s, some 25-30 years after our first mission, I made a business trip to Germany. It was my first visit since the war and, as fate would have it, my destination was Nuremberg. I traveled with a great deal of apprehension and emotion. I arrived on a dark cold winter evening and checked into an equally dark, cold commercial hotel that appeared to be almost empty. Prior to dinner I went into the bar/lounge; also, dark and uninviting. The only people there were a couple sitting in the lounge area, who left shortly after I arrived. I sat on one of the four bar stools and ordered a beer from the older grim looking bartender. As he served the beer he asked if I were English. Still very tense and full of apprehension I said no, American, from California. Suddenly his face lit up into a broad smile and he said, “I love California!” He had been a prisoner of war in La Jolla. He had been captured in Africa in 1942, was initially sent to Biloxi, then El Paso and finally to La Jolla. He did not like Biloxi or El Paso at all, but he really loved La Jolla. He continued to talk excitedly, extolling the warm weather, beaches, and fresh fruit. I finally relaxed.

The next day a young man from the company I was visiting took me on a tour of Nuremberg's old town, proudly pointing out how they had carefully rebuilt all of the damaged buildings from old plans, so it has been restored just as it was. We then stopped and had some of Nuremberg's famous spicy little sausages.

Computer documented by Fred Terzian on 3/3/09

Fred Terzian Notes: Alan Purchase married Barbara Hahn. Barbara's brother Brayton married my oldest sister, Betty Terzian. Alan and Barbara's son John is my Godson. They also have two daughters.

Source information: "Alan had shared his wartime experience with me [Terzian] and I had the opportunity to review his notes as part of a WWII documentary that he was providing to residents of a senior living center here in Santa Clara County (California). I made corrections to the text where grammar or place names were misspelled. He was very pleased with the work I had done during one of his earlier birthday celebrations. I am his son John's godfather. I see no problem with you sharing this narrative with the group you represent."

Webmaster Historical Notes:

- Alan Purchase's Original Crew, assigned to the 546th Bomb Squadron on 21 January 1945:
 - 1st Lt. Ostnes, Leif Robert, Pilot
 - 2nd Lt. Leighton, Gerald Eugene, Co-pilot
 - 2nd Lt. Purchase, George Alan, Navigator
 - 2nd Lt. Robinson, John V, Bombardier
 - CPL. Nepo, Alexander Harry, Radio Operator / Gunner
 - CPL. Riordan, Victor Joseph, Engineer / Top Turret Gunner
 - CPL. Beck, Harrison Gerald, Ball Turret Gunner
 - CPL. Burns, Harry Worren, Tail Gunner
 - CPL. Hamblin, Robert George, Flexible Gunner
- During his Combat Tour in the 384th, Purchase flew 16 missions, with his original crewmembers and 19 others, in eight different B-17 aircraft.
- First mission date: 14 February 1945.
- Purchase's combat mission schedule suggests that he was a highly skilled Navigator, being assigned to deputy and lead roles after only a few missions.
- For more information: <https://384thbombgroup.com/content/pages/person.php?PersonKey=8086>