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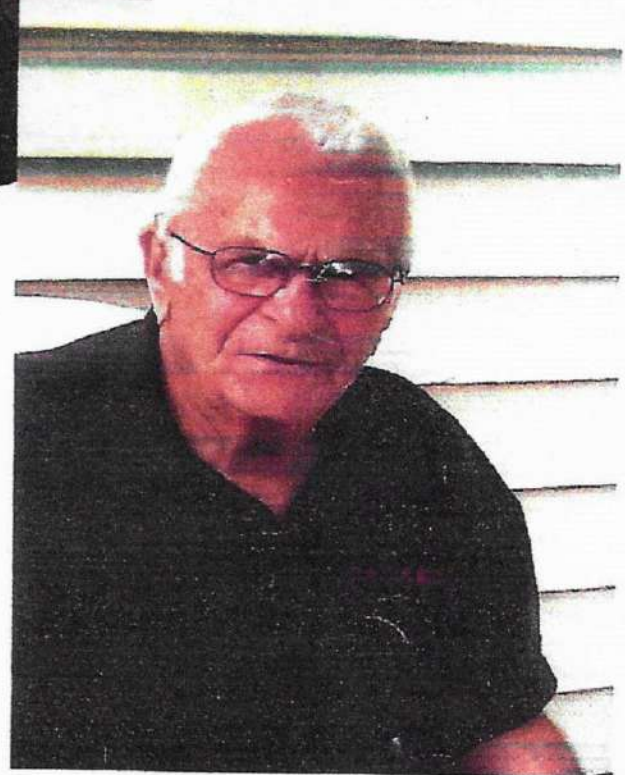
The Trip of a Lifetime

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An
Autobiography
by
Albert
Williamson



The War Years

As most of Americans know, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii on December 7, 1941. Though the war with Germany had not been declared by our Congress, even with all of the German submarine attacks on US shipping since 1940. War was declared with the Japanese the next day by the then President, Franklin D. Roosevelt. It was on that Monday that I drove over to the Army recruiting office in Patterson, NJ. I was doubtful that I would be accepted because I had a 60% hearing loss in my right ear. Anyway, I failed the hearing test, therefore was rejected. Some time later, I was mailed my notice to be drafted and was scheduled for a general physical. I guess it was in the spring of 1942. We were bused to Newark Armory, stripped naked and walked around with just a sheet of medical exam test results from all of the different tests that the doctors performed on us. Imagine that, a sheet of paper gave identity to the body that carried it! When all was said and done, I was notified by the draft board that I was classified 4F. "unfit for military service."

I knew one of the members of the draft board through my occasional dating of his daughter. I prevailed upon him to give me another whack at the tests and be tested again. Sure enough I got a new notice to appear for a physical. I was shipped with a high school friend of mine, by name, Walter Weber, who had also been rejected for a lingual hernia. Since we both knew the drill at the exam center; it was a simple matter of me exchanging his exam paper and taking his hernia exam and he exchanging my paper and taking the hearing test. Result=WE BOTH WERE ACCEPTED FOR SERVICE. We got inducted Jan, 12th?, 1943 and sent to Fort Dix , NJ the 29th?

It was pretty cold at Dix and we were assigned to 6 man tents with a wood / coal burning pot belly stove. Of course we were first issued our GI clothing and we packed up our civies and the army sent the package back to our homes. We then went through the process of testing our mental powers to see just where we would fit into the needs of the army. Of course we had the basic instruction , oral and film, of the military history, construction, our behavior etc. I guess all, or most. of us wrote quick notes to our parents to let them know that we were still alive and adjusting to this new way of life

I do not know where Walter was shipped for his basic training but I do know that he was infantry. I was shipped to Miami Beach, Florida as part of the army air corps and was barracked in a hotel that had been converted. It was located on 41st street and Collins avenue. Of course this was living! In high style! We had a lot of military drill, firearms (rifle) instruction along with guard duty patrolling along the beach areas at night. There seemed to be a threat of enemy attempts to land spies and saboteurs. But, I do not think the Springfield 303 was even loaded! Never mind that I had not fired anything larger than a 22 caliber! Wonder if the pre emptory challenge of "who goes there" or "advance and be recognized" would have deterred an enemy trained to kill? Of course we were lined up in single file a few times and herded into a big reception hall to get our shots. A medic on both sides of us would wipe with alcohol and then both would hit us with the needles at the same time; one in each arm. Mass production! As would be expected our arms were sore for a couple of days. I had the good fortune of getting a pair of really good drill instructors. They were tough but good. I messed up on something because I was assigned to extra drill. This was called monkey drill. This wasn't punishment at all! This was fun!

We took the regulation drill steps and positions and converted them to do crazy maneuvers. We got very good at it. Of course our muscles got quite strong and our mental abilities became persistent and focused. Of course what would military life be without a good parade? There was a family park about a mile away from the hotel that we used to practice formation and marching plus parade dress. We used it often. Standing at attention in the Florida hot sun for a couple of hours tested our mettle to concentrate. A few fainted and we just had to let them lie where they fell until the exercise was over. Basic was a vacation!

The first week of April I was shipped via troop train to Scott Field in Illinois. This was radio school. The task of learning the Morse code of dots and dashes, the detailed physics and wiring and vacuum tube operation was our destiny. At least for the duration of the schooling and assuming that we passed all of the tests. The primary test was how fast we could send and receive the Morse code, including with blinker light. Of course we were housed in barracks containing some 80 - 90 men in bunk beds. There was not much room between bunks but was livable and busy with many personal and barracks inspections. I learned quickly how to make beds with hospital corners and white collars.. So the military was a good place to learn many social skills! So too was scrubbing the floors and bathrooms with Fels Naptha bar soap a requirement for keeping our "house" clean. However, keeping some of the people clean was a much different story. What with PT every day, 5 and 10 mile hikes in some pretty warm sunshine on the back country roads, the dust from which produced some skin mud when it mixed with the sweat. One rainy week the flood waters from the Ohio river caused the water to raise above the levees and we were pressed into service to aid the townsfolk with filling and placing sandbags. A few fellows were reluctant to take a shower, so the scrub brush worked well on the human body! Commonly known as a GI party!

My one unpleasant exposure was the guy in the bunk above me was a very hairy Italian with a lot of body hair. He had a bad case of the crabs and some of them made it to my bunk space and gave me a dose of these minute critters. I went to a pharmacist and got some salve to apply to my body after I had shaved all of the body hair except my head. Looked pretty ugly but it worked. Needless to say, I had a few well chosen words for the guy in the upper bunk.

I got so that I could read, copy and send code at twenty words per minute. Fast enough to graduate! After the formal school training we had a ride in a Piper cub aeroplane, the same as used for flyover scouting. We had to send code using a hand key so that it was readable by the ground station. A little tricky because the pilot had been instructed to flop all over the sky to make it difficult to work the key. Likewise we had to practice using the handheld signal light. Sending and reading!

I liked Scott Field and I liked the nearby town of Bellville. A small quiet Midwest town to have a glass of beer or go to church on Sunday. It had a USO facility for those who needed a cot to go to sleep on. I met so many good men that it was difficult to leave them. We had developed a camaraderie among us. When we marched in formation I had the honor of singing a cadence song, "Amen", that I had picked up in basic training in Miami. The words go like this:

Born in Texas,

Raised in Tennessee
A red headed woman
Made a fool outa me
Ayyymen A men Ay Ay men

Standin on a corner
A doin no harm
Up steps an MP
An grabs me by the arm

Refrain

Took me to the judge
Gave me thirty days
Down in the cellar
Is where I stay

Refrain

Down in the cellar
My back agin the wall
A red headed woman
Was the cause of it all

Refrain

I also had the honor and "privilege" of being called upon to do KP several times. It was not considered punishment, only educational! Up at two am until well after eight pm.. Pots and pans! Some very big ones! Lots of potatoes, later on we got the automatic tub peelers, no more paring knife peeling! I think we finished school in July and were shipped by troop train to Las Vegas, Nevada for gunnery school.

Again the troop train had "square" wheels. Clickety-clackety, bump- bump! It seemed that we were on that train for 2 ½ days but the scenery was absolutely beautiful. I hadn't been further west than Chicago before. They had a kitchen mess car where I had the pleasure of doing KP. Got to Vegas just as the sun went down and soon learned that being almost a mile high in the desert country would be quite cold and would require blankets and heavy clothing. I forget the number of men in each gunnery class but at least a company, maybe 100 men. They started us off in stationery mounted turrets, similar to the top turret on a B-17. In front of the turret was a tower, approximately 100 feet high. The automatic trap machines would fire clay pigeons and it was your job to lead the track of the pigeon and fire the shotgun mounted in the turret, in time to burst the clay. Lots of noise and very exciting and at the same time got the competitive juices flowing so that you tried very hard to beat the score of your fellow gunners. Of course we had classes in enemy aircraft recognition and heavy schooling in take down and assembly, eyes wide open and blind folded ,of 30 caliber and 50 caliber machine guns. Plus we had the Thompson sub machine gun with drum and clip magazines. The last weapon studied was the Colt 45 caliber. I was quite good with the Thompson but I was weak with holding the Colt steady on the bull's eye at 50 feet. The Thompson, per instruction, was to be held with the ejection chute pointing at the ground. Reason: with it upright, the gun would climb up and to the right; with it on its right side it was easier to control the weapon on

the level. Of course, we had very close instruction in the make up and contents of the turrets; top, ball and tail. How to crank them up by hand if the hydraulic systems were shot out. The nose guns would be fired by the navigator and bombardier. My job would be on the waist guns if needed. We did not train with the chin turret as it was not installed on the B-17 at this time.

At about this time in the schedule we had to be exposed to the high altitude pressure tank. I really started to get worked up emotionally because I did not have any idea of what effect, if any, this pressure tank would have on my ears, I had nothing to worry about! We walked into this huge horizontal tank, took a seat along either side. We were fitted with an oxygen mask and sat and waited. The instructor took a balloon and blew a tiny bit of air into it and tied it off. As they pumped air out of the tank; this was to simulate the reducing air pressure in the airplane as it gained altitude; the balloon got bigger and bigger. Learned later this was because the pressure inside the balloon was greater than the pressure on the outside of the balloon. Ground pressure being about 33 lbs per sq. inch. I cannot remember just how much 1 atmosphere exerts on our bodies. Since there was a hole in my right ear drum the pressure on both side of the drum was the same!

The next bloc of training was with the shot guns using the standard positions of the arc and the connecting straight. The trap slingers were in towers at each end of the arc, both with high and low traps. We started out with single shots from every position. As we got better at leading the clay, we advanced to doubles from either or both ends. Man this was the greatest! Nothing like it for getting the juices going! The next bloc was from the back end of a jeep that had been rigged with a waist high protective railing to keep you from falling off the rear. There was a step down so that your feet were about 8 inches off of the ground. We, the shot gunners were facing to the rear, and the driver would drive down the black top, that was twisty and hilly and the clays would be fired from hidden slingers. Talk about getting your eyes moving fast!

Next came the machine guns from a stationery mount some 200 yards in front of a railroad track. On this track was mounted a hand car with a sheet target that stood about six feet tall and six feet wide. The ammo bullet tips had been dipped in colored liquid wax. A different color for every gunner. The ammo was in link belts. As the bullet hit the target some of the colored wax would be left around the bullet hole in the fabric. Thus, credit for that gunner who had that color. The track was an equilateral triangle about 200 yards to a side. Talk about a lot of noise!

The final stage of this class was the air to air target shoot. For this we were moved to a camp high in the mountains. It was so cold at night! I shivered even when enclosed in my sheepskin flight jacket! Up at dawn and 5 men to each B-17D that had slide waist windows that you would open up and mount your .50 caliber in the fixed mount near the opening with the muzzle sticking outside. The AT 6 would come alongside at varying speeds towing the target "sleeve" with variation of up and down to simulate an incoming enemy aircraft. Sometimes the instructor would create a gun jam and the student would have to make whatever adjustments that were needed to get the gun firing again. It was so cold with the air coming in that open window! In combat over Europe it would be from 20 degree Fahrenheit below zero to 30-40 below. That is why they started to make the B-17 with fixed windows with provision for a swivel mount through the plexi-glass. It was so good to get back to the valley where the heat of the day was a welcome home! Finally!

We had completed this very exciting "turkey shoot". My total scoring was good enough to place me in the top 10 in our class of 100. For this achievement we were taken to the then town of Las Vegas which at that time was about 3 blocks long with bars, eateries and little else for entertainment. It was at this one bar that we were introduced to Andy Devine, who was a Hollywood character actor, chunky build and a gravelly voice with a country western twang. We were impressed and appreciated him, the booze and the food. Plus we were credited with the award of the US Army Air Corps Marksmanship medal. I got a week leave to go home so on my way there I stopped off to pay my sister Dorothy a visit at the University of Colorado in Boulder, Colorado. Just over night, and the next morning on my way to Englewood, NJ.

After my leave, orders were to report to Dalhart, Texas for combat crew training. There I met the other members of my crew, with whom I would go into combat . At this time we knew not where the combat would be. Pacific or Atlantic?

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Pilot | Bernard Pompe from Pennsylvania age 21 or 22 |
| Co-pilot | Howard Morton from Johnstown, Pa age 25 |
| Navigator | William Kane from ? Michigan |
| Bombardier | William Radokovitz ? Wisconsin |
| John Bliss | Engineer, top turret; Bronx New York |
| Al Williamson | Radio operator, spare gunner for any position, if needed, N. J. |
| Elroy (?) Glotfelty | Armorer, ball turret, ? |
| Fritz Lemoine | Armorer, Waist gun, Louisiana |
| Bill Balvin | Armorer, Waist gun, Brooklyn, NY |
| Luther Thompson | Armorer, Tail gun, Kentucky |

We were not in the same barracks during this training period. We would get any one of the training B-17's most of which were tired old aircraft that had done a lot of training flights. We practiced evasion tactics, ditching procedure, escape procedure and parachute handling as well as our specific jobs under fire and emergencies. The pilot, navigator, bombardier and radio operator got together in a hangar and sat on top of a movable tower, under electric power, that was about ten feet tall and they, pilot, navigator would plot the route to the IP (initial point) which became the run up to the target and the bombardier would start aiming with the bombsight and actually take control of the aircraft in the run up. There were huge holograms of European geography, reflected on the floor, that they would select the target area and the controls on this mobile tower would simulate the flyover of the country side as if in a B-17. The bombardier would open bomb bay doors and drop the load as the bombsight zeroed in on the target. The radio operator would transmit via his radio the results of the drop.

We had several cross country training flights in these old tired aircraft. One flight we had was a night flight out to Lubbock, Texas. We had to simulate engine trouble, radio an sos and land on the strip at Lubbock. In theory we had an engine fire and the pilot dove the aircraft to blow out the fire. When he pulled back on the stick to raise the nose, the gravity pull was (I thought) fierce, As he pulled up the number three engine just dropped out of its mounting and fell into the desert. We, in fact did have an emergency! The pilot, Pompe did an excellent job of stabilizing the aircraft and bring it down to land on the runway. Spent overnight there and flew out the next day! Whew!

Combat crew training ended and we were all held incommunicado and shipped to Salt Lake City, Utah. Still no exchange of communication. Secrecy! We got our final physical examinations and that is where the military finally caught up with Al Williamson. The doctor discovered the middle ear infection and the partial loss of hearing. I pleaded for the doctor to find a way to not disqualify me. I had spent so much time in training; the government had spent so much money in that training; Please! He handed me a waiver that released the US from any liability and I was on my way.

We got a brand new B-17G (with nose turret) which had been outfitted with warm weather gear (for the Pacific) which we had to turn in and get the cold weather stuff! We flew out at night from Salt Lake; the pilot buzzed his home town in Pa and we landed at Bangor, Maine for refueling. From Bangor we flew to Goose Bay Labrador; from there to Reykjavik, Iceland and from there to Scotland where we had to give up our brand new plane. They packed us into a troop truck and hauled us to Grafton, Underwood, Leicester, England. The home of the 384th Bomb Group (Heavy).

Like virtually every air base in England it was carved out of the available farmland and coated with asphalt and concrete; a small three story control tower that looked out over the runways and revetment storage areas for the planes. Also there was the occasional security dugouts around the perimeter for the chosen few to do the guard duty against any stealth invaders. Again like most all bomb groups the mix of new and old aircraft was pretty much 2/3rds old and one third new. We only had a few G models with the chin turret. There were 4 squadrons of 9 planes each for a group total of 36 that would make up for the high, low and middle elements of the standard defensive stacking of the squadrons. Three groups made a wing and three wings made a division. At least that is the way I remember it. Of course it has been over 64 years since my first glimpse of my new home. There were many groups in the mid east English country side. I think we were about 70-80 miles NNE of London. The squadrons were the 544th, 545th, 546th and 547th. Of course the officers were housed in a separate area from the enlisted men. All were housed in preformed and ribbed Quonset huts.

At the moment I can only remember just our six enlisted man crew being in the one hut. Or at least half of the hut. We were all armed with the Colt 45 automatic pistols to maybe, defend oneself from the enemy soldiers as well as the civilians of the Third Reich in the event of a bailout. The rest of the buildings, also Quonset style, were the chow hall, dress changing hall, administration, medical facilities (no hospital, just emergency treatment), a large review room for mission preview and after mission de-briefing. There were a few repair shop type buildings for takedown of engines and armament, wheels and brakes and instruments. Most of the repair work was done outside with high rise platforms for the mechanics to work from. The latrines were separate little buildings, kinda like several out houses joined together. The showering was in underground concrete rooms. It was a great gathering place for mold and slime because it never seemed to dry out and wasn't a priority for anti-septic cleaning! I think this is where I got the fungus in my toenails in which the result is very thick toenails that curl under along the edges. Oh well at almost 86 it isn't something that will kill me! We trained together as a crew along with other new crews on practice missions to get the feel of group flying in formation and to get used to the radio system that was used in the UK. They had a system that any three

stations could get a fix on any aircraft and pinpoint its location. Of course the UK was small enough that the radio signals covered a lot of miles without losing power. After about a week we were ready for our first mission.

We were wakened about three am. It was dark outside. We walked to the mess hall got some juice, powdered eggs, toast and coffee. Back to our barracks to do our morning personal hygiene and then report in our flying suits to the dressing hall where we were issued the leather sheep skin cold weather gear; pants, boots and jackets and gloves that had wool inserts into leather outer shell. From there it was to the briefing hall where we were issued K rations, which consisted of candy bar, cookies, hard candies and chewing gum; escape kits with our photos. in civilian clothes We had to get rid of anything else that gave any information of our identity or unit. The hall had about 200 men in it. The briefing officers unveiled the huge wall map with ribbons stretching from our base to the target. We then would have the information officer describe the name and the importance of what we were to obliterate with our load of bombs. The target more often than not was a producer of necessary war material for the German military forces. Steel, ball bearings, oil, airplane body parts, engines, wheels, tracks, etc. Anything that would roll or fire along with the fluids that made it roll or fire. Certainly any known munitions caches, where ever located and any transportation facilities whether by boat, train or overland trucks. Anything that would cripple the mighty German /Italian war machine ! The next officer would describe the type and size of bomb load. The next one would tell us about the weather at the base, to the target and over the target; at the rising layers of altitude. Finally, the "inspiration" officer would tell us what other units would join us and whether we could expect fighter protection and any special formation groupings if needed. He would also note the defensive guns around the target. How many and their caliber, if known. What and where resistance could be expected on the way to and from the target. The call letters for the day for any radio transmission. Who would be flying group lead and sub lead. God speed and Good Luck!

At that time it was required for every combat airman to fly 20 missions. After about eight they made it 25. Perhaps you might relate missions to infantry search and destroy fire fights. About the same degree of risk and losses. The biggest difference was the fact that we, airmen, did our killing at 25,000 feet and the "grunt" did his at eye level! That is a huge difference!

Each ten man crew would be trucked to the revetment where the airplane was parked. I must say, at this time, that the ground crew of mechanics and bomb loaders, armorers, loading up the machine gun link belts in their holding cans for all of the turrets and nose and waist, all of whom had worked throughout the night and weather to get the airplane ready for lift off at daybreak, were faithful and dutiful soldiers with the safety of the air crew as their top priority.

As we jumped off of the truck by the airplane each man had to perform all of his own pre-flight checks for his job area and to load up his machine guns into the housings in his area. The navigator and bombardier had their guns emplaced by armorers of the ground crew. Each of the enlisted men would take turns for each mission to take three or four turns of each propeller to basically "prime" the cylinders with gas before the pilots turned the switch on in the cockpit. I had to check my radio with a call to the base station to ensure that the radio was operative, check the portable oxygen tanks in my cabin, install

the camera in the camera well and check out the ball turret with the turret gunner. The other crew members had similar tasks to ready or make certain that the equipment was in place and were operational. We could not prime the machine guns whilst we were on the ground. Too many accidents; plus the lead had to come to ground somewhere in the English countryside!

You get 20 or 30 planes doing all of this and finally each craft taxis slowly out to the prevailing runway and gets in line. It is quite a sight seeing all of those whirring propellers and the noise of the engines. The adrenaline juices really get moving! Finally the control tower officer shoots off the green flare as a signal to take off. I think that there was only about 30 seconds between airplanes taking off. As soon as the one in front had cleared his wheels from the runway, the one following would gun it down the runway. The group would have pre-selected a place (a radio marker signal) to rendezvous to set up the predetermined formation.

The flight to and across the English channel to the European continent usually did not take too long. From the coast of Europe and depending on where the target was located the group would try to avoid those known areas of ground fire that may prove damaging. Evading enemy fighter craft was not an option; tighten up the formation and keep on the prescribed course! Of course those that got too far behind the group were easy pickings for the enemy fighters! When you get 30 bombers stacked high, low, and middle and each airplane has ten machine guns, that is possibly 300 guns shooting at any fighter that tried to penetrate the formation. Of course not all 300 could be in a position to fire at the same target at the same time! Each gun fired 660 rounds per minute. That's 11 rounds per second x 300 = 3300 rounds per second. Literally raining bullets! Just an exclamation point for the damage potential. Usually by the time we got to the channel we would have climbed to 10,000 feet or higher and had put on our oxygen masks. That sweet cold air coming into the masks used to make my nose leak. Plus, after a bit, it had a tendency to dry out the throat and nasal passages. Of course the higher we went the colder it got! The average was 20-25,000 feet and 25-40 degrees below zero Fahrenheit! Even with all of that sheepskin cold weather gear; it was cold! After several missions, we were issued electric suits, booties and gloves, covered by an ordinary heavy weight cotton flight suit. My problem was that I cranked up the heat to warm my hands and I would just about burn my belly button off! So, the heat did not spread out evenly! Another rather interesting personal note was the pee tubes were just a funnel with a hose connected to it and ran out a hole in the bottom of the plane. They work just fine in weather that urine flows, BUT at this cold altitude the pee would immediately freeze up in the funnel and you end up peeing all over your hands and the airplane! Evacuation of the bowels was simply done into a cardboard carton and dumped overboard. Literally, one might say that some Germans got shit on!

After about eight missions we were issued flak jackets; very much like the bullet proof vests of today except these were heavier. They were extremely uncomfortable to wear especially if you had to move about. I chose to stand on mine. I guess the fear was most about getting shot up the backside! Plus we had parachutes to either wear or keep close by. All were chest packs that clipped to the front of your chest harness. Again, most uncomfortable to wear; so practically every crew member had their chutes close by. Mine was tied to my ankle. My theory was that if the ship got hit and there was an explosion, I

just might get blown clear of the ship and could fasten the chute to the harness on the way down! I was told that my co-pilot Morton was in an air to air accident in which the top of the pilots cabin was torn away , the ship went into a spin and he was thrown out and was able to put his chute on while falling through the air. He and the pilot kept their chutes under their seats. Readily available!

Depending on the importance of the target, the defense of that target was proportional! Both for anti aircraft guns and enemy fighters. The fighters would attack and harass up to about the IP and break off as soon as the ack-ack (usually 88mm) took over their defense of the target. After the bomb load was dropped over the target and the group started to reform, the enemy fighters would attack again. Obviously, the enemy fighters did not want to get in the middle of all of the ground fire, so they pulled away temporarily. As mentioned earlier once the group got over the IP there would be no deviation of flight, level or direction. Whatever the enemy threw at you, it had to be absorbed! The mission was the target and a successful bomb run and drop was most essential to wipe out the target! It usually was quite a scramble for the group to get back together and the enemy would do all he could to knock you down so that you could not do it again! Again , some targets had a lot of ground guns and some had great fighter defenses. For instance, Berlin had over 800 guns in a ring around Berlin. That many guns could put up a barrage of steel that really looked like you could walk on it! Much noise and smoke! So as soon as the IP came up and we were on it, I had to open up the camera well and turn on the camera. Then off again after the bomb drop but delayed until a clear view of the hits were recorded. (If the weather was clear, you could see the concussion rings as the bombs exploded) Hopefully this would give intelligence a clear picture of the strike and results! The trip back to home base was, most of the time, uneventful unless of course you suffered severe damage and had to lag; or get down close to the ground; or dump out your guns and any other heavy gear to keep you air born (especially if you had two engines that were shut down) or flying surface controls, ailerons, stabilizers and rudder, were not functional.

Landing back home at the base, aircraft that had wounded aboard were given priority to land first and they indicated that by firing red flares from the cockpit window as they came over the airfield. There were many kinds of landings. Some good and some bad, especially when the landing gears and tires or hydraulic system were shot out and ball turret guns were pointed down, then they landed on the grass to save as much of the airplane as possible. Once down, the plane was parked in its revetment, shut down the engines and we, the crew, would get out and wait for the truck to take us to the hall for debriefing. As we sat down at a table to accommodate all ten of us, we were served a shot of whiskey. Boy did that ever taste good! Coffee was served as a chaser. Tasted good, strong and black! For those that did not drink, there were plenty of those that did drink! There was no drink left on the table! The debriefing officer would ask the questions and we would answer and explain. We would turn in our escape kits and K rations(if complete) and get back our wallets and other personal items with ID' s that we had deposited before we left. The walk back to the huts was usually a tired one. Probably from being confined in the small quarters and the emotional letdown. I would just flop into my cot and fall asleep. Who knows, Maybe the weather would not permit a flight tomorrow? Or, maybe you would not be scheduled to fly?

I flew with my original crew for 9 missions and then they broke our crew up for each member to fly as scheduled with any pilot that needed a full crew. The group had suffered losses from different causes; death, missing, illness etc. and had to make up crews of 4 officers and 6 enlisted men. I had some very good pilots and some very poor pilots. Most of the crews that I flew with knew their jobs and performed well under fire. I cannot remember the details of the 25 missions; the targets, the action of enemy fighters, the flack, the damage to the aircraft. My four battle stars are for: Normandy, Northern France, Ardennes and Rhineland, So, will just give what recalls that stands out.

As new crews, we had to take the end positions of the formation. Obviously the "veteran" crews would get the best spots. Our first flight saw enemy fighters and not much flak. There was a straggler behind us, about a half mile, and an ME 109 pulled up along side of him, made a 180 deg left turn and came at the slow bird head on. A good move by the ME 109 because he had minimum firepower directed at him whilst he had maximum position to fire straight on to the cab, engines and wings of the B-17. Our tail gunner did not have a decent shot at the ME 109 before it had made the u-turn. The B-17 went down, straight down to ground. No chutes were seen to come out of the plane. In the same mission near the target there was a lot of guns firing at the enemy fighters who were coming at all angles to the group. A lot of chatter over the earphones calling out the enemy locations. We could see other B-17's get hit; some exploded; some headed down in a flat spin or a glide down as we counted the number of chutes. When a B-17 goes into a hard tight spin the gravity of the spin pulls you to the side of the aircraft and it takes all the muscle you have got to pull yourself away, grab your chute, look for an exit and jump out. Hopefully, not hitting any of the plane as you jump out. It must be an awful feeling going down with the airplane. You could have a couple of minutes to think about it before you hit the ground! This first flight was an exciting drama; just like a movie! It would only be later, after a few more of these losses of friends and aircraft that we could feel the fear of death! The drama became the fear! Even so, you still had to perform your job and do it well or you might become a statistic.

I had five flights to Berlin. The first one was in the minds eye of the tremendous fire power that the Germans had surrounding their capital city. About 800 guns of 88 millimeters or like 3 ½ " in diameter.

A lot of flak ! The bits of shell bursts of fragments would zing through the thin aluminum aircraft skin. Some fighters before the IP and some after the completed bomb run. The mission was a long one. I think it was about 10 hours from loading up to the drink of whiskey. More losses of B-17's and fellow airmen. Again we got lucky!

We had a run to Cologne. What makes it so special was the way we delivered the bomb load. They used 2,000 lb. general demolition bombs. They had built a pair of (I think, plywood) wings and a what looked like 4" x 4" booms alongside of the bomb. The booms were tied together at the rear where they had a stabilizer. It looked like a miniature P-38 fighter. We had one strapped under each wing with a jury rigged toggle hook that would respond to a switch in the cockpit. The division was trying to avoid losses of craft to a heavy battery of ack-ack guns around the city of Cologne. The theory was to get to the IP

and somewhere between there and the target cut the bombs loose and they would glide into the target! Well, innovations are great IF they work! In this case the idea did not! These "flying" bombs flew all over the sky and landed every where except the target! Nothing ventured, nothing gained!. At least, we did not lose any aircraft or men!

Of course the landing of the ground troops on the beaches of Normandy was the biggest one day effort that the US and its allies would mount in this fight. June 6, 1944! We knew this day was coming because for two weeks before the landing the C-47 troop carriers and those towing troop gliders were doing their practice runs over our base with regularity. They got us up around 12:00 midnight and into the usual routine before any mission. EXCEPT the briefing became very solemn and quiet even as they told us of the target. Our objective was a marshaling yard not too far from the coast. Disrupt any chance that the Germans could mount a counter attack or escape from the invasion. Our flights were low, about 8,000 feet Could see the hits very clearly and the concussion rings seemed to get up as high as our flight. I know that they didn't but just looked like they did! The flight over the channel started out quite free of overcast but 2/3 of the way to the beach of Normandy, became complete and blocked off any vision of the landings. We did see all of the ships and the bigger ships on the outer perimeter firing their guns at the beach. Our fighters quickly cleared the area of any enemy fighter attacks at the group. This was the classic "milk run" The total time from rising to return was about 5 hours. We did a second mission the same day at targets a little further in land. I do not think our group suffered any aircraft losses or injuries to any crew member.

Just this last memory! Our mission was St. Lo in Northern France. It was just a farm village. What made it important was the fact that our ground troops had called in for support as they had run into a heavy concentration of German troops with some armor supporting them. We were loaded up with "frag" bombs. These are smaller bombs that had been machined with ring grooves in them so that when they exploded the casings would break up into a mass of flying shrapnel. This was an anti personnel mine, in a cluster, dropped from our B-17's! There truly was a glitch in communication and someone did not tell our bomb group! Because our troops had gained ground from the Germans and we dropped a whole load upon our own troops! Killing many and destruction to our own boys! This was one mission not to be proud of! May those dear boys forgive us! Of course we learned of the deed some time after, while we were being debriefed.

Somewhere along here whilst we were still bunked together (my original crew shared the same Quonset hut), the waist gunner, Bill Balvin and a visiting gunner from another crew got into an argument which escalated into the visitor pulling a .45 from a holster hanging from the wall. They wrestled for it and Balvin was shot through his side. MP's, Medics Officer of the Day and ambulance crowded all around. Hell of a way to end your fighting days!

After I had completed my 25 mission, I was asked by a lieutenant who was in charge of the base radio and radio instruction for the new crews if I would like to be the new

instructor and monitor the base radio for incoming signals. Before I started at that job I had been selected to do night guard duty patrolling the revetments and being a stationary guard in one of the revetments. We had a major in charge who was a very big thorn in our butts because he would try to sneak up on you and try to get your rifle away from you. Of course night duty is long and boring!

I got oriented very quickly within the radio school and created some visual instruction techniques that made it easier to teach the land radio systems in the UK. I think that I was a pretty good teacher and I liked it! At least, I got a very good reference letter from my boss, the Lt. The new crews helped me to do a better job because they asked me some questions that I had to dig out the answers by asking others and looking in the technical books. I also received the bomb drop messages from the flying operators on each mission. I was on this job for perhaps three months and then received orders to go back to the US.

Somewhere between here, I was called to stand ready for a brief honor of having the Lt. Col. of the group, pin the DFC on my tunic. Me and about 7 others! In my mind, this award and that of the Air Medal with bronze clusters is not an award of duty" beyond" but an award for staying alive for the 30 missions. These 30 missions were a mix of the hard and easy flights. I suppose only my God knows why I made it and so many others did not! Our group, the 384th Bomb Group lost 159 B -17's in combat over Europe. The group flew 314 missions. So, on average the group lost 1 aircraft for each 2 missions. Of course the earliest mission were the most deadly for lack of fighter support and German superiority in the skies. That is also saying that we lost 1,590 men in those airplanes. So many young men! Of course all of them did not die. Some got very lucky and managed to survive and get on the ground as prisoners or escapee's.

I was shipped out to Liverpool, on the west coast of England to a holding area whilst waiting for a ship. One came in about a week, the equivalent of a British destroyer class. It really bounced and rolled with the seas! I was sea sick for the first day but then got outside on the deck and ate nothing but hardtack for the second day. Got my sea legs and ate regular chow for the duration of the trip. We were on the sea for Christmas of 1944! Not much of a celebration on board. Landed at Newport News in Virginia. Had a couple of weeks of R & R in Miami Beach where I connected with Bob Wyman, Burt's brother. His ship was in dock and we got to spend the day and night together reminiscing of the good times we had when we were young!

I was shipped out back to Scott Field, Illinois for radio training. These were new style radios, crystal controlled, that were being used on the long range bombers. Of course I had to pass all of the tests required to maintain my flight status and collect the 50% extra flight pay! Coincidental but it was almost a year ago that I was here. New friends and new adventures! Met a local farm girl, Evelyn Nimnicht (Wright), 8 years older than me; good looking and wiser than me; with an 8 year old son. I was attracted to her looks and her body. However she would not do the sex thing. Fast forward; brought her home to Englewood to marry her. Met Ruth Glen, an on again off again romance in high school, who called on me while I was in Englewood. I knew that my marriage to Evelyn was not the way that I wanted to go! Lucked out again! My priest at the Episcopal church refused

to marry us because she was a divorcee! Told her perhaps we should wait until the war was over. Took her back to St. Louis and I continued on to Lincoln Air Base in Lincoln, Nebraska. Later on asked her for my ribbons, wings and marksman badge which I had given her as a show of affection. She returned them with no acrimony. No further communication!

Lincoln was a B-29 base and I was to be crewed up with the other members of the crew and receive training there for shipment to the Pacific. I never got a flight in the 29. Got a lot of ground walk thru's and inside the aircraft. By comparison this bird seemed twice as big as the B-17. I was not at all pleased with the differences. In this one there was an overhead tunnel to get from the radio compartment to the pilots cabin. This tunnel was over the bomb bay and was pressurized. One could get claustrophobia creeping through it! In August the US dropped the A-bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the war ended! Everything intended for combat was done. Finished! I was placed in charge of a squad of men who were in the same position as I. Most were not combat vets. Policing the area became the job of the day. Was later placed in the parachute rigging room; learning to fold the chutes. My discharge orders arrived and I was released from military laws and functions on October 4, 1945. The train ride was long and dirty but I was FREE! A few years later I tried to re-enlist but they would only make me a buck sergeant and that was not enough money to keep a wife and two kids! However, I did love the life of being in the military!

F. Y. I. (1941 - 1945)

| <u>U.S. Servicemen.:</u> | | | <u>Killed</u> | <u>Wounded</u> |
|--------------------------|-------------------|------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Volunteers | 6,332,000 | Army & Air Force | 234,874 | 565,861 |
| Draftees | <u>11,535,000</u> | Navy | 36,950 | 37,778 |
| Total | 17,865,000 | Marines | 19,733 | 67,207 |
| | | Coast Guard | <u>534</u> | 432 |
| | | Total | *292,131 | |
| | | | | 671,278 |

* Some discrepancy : WW II Memorial shows 400,000 killed

| <u>8th Air Force Groups in England</u> | <u>Combat Losses</u> | <u>Non Combat Loss</u> |
|---|----------------------|------------------------|
| 26 groups B -17 | 3,027 | 1,727 |
| 14 Groups B -24 | 1,218 | 894 |
| *Total 40 Groups | 4,245 | 2621 |

10 men to a bomber would equal 44,250 flying men.

*This info from 384th BG Newsletter, Nov. 1999