

Trials of a B-17 Bomber Crew

It was a chilly February morning when I finally arrived back home in Wycoff, MN. The bank was my first stop to deposit money I carried with me on my voyage and train ride from our 493rd Bomber Group base named Debach near Ipswich, England. It was the last day I would ever wear my Army Air Force uniform. As I approached the teller, she struck me as the most beautiful girl I had ever seen in my whole life. My heart was beating fast, and I was nearly as scared as any of my thirty-six bombing missions over the previous seven months. I pushed my envelope of cash under the partition.

She looked down and noticed my hand shaking. I thought, “Great, now she thinks I’m a nervous wreck,” which I knew was as true as her pretty/red lipstick. She reached out and held my hand for a minute and smiled with sweet concern.

“Are you going to be ok?”

My eyes met hers. I said, “I will be in time.”

I’m convinced that we had the finest bomber crew in all the 493rd Bomb Group: Up front was Bob our Pilot, with Henry the Co-Pilot. Right behind them was John the Navigator, Stanley the Bombardier, and Herb the Radio Operator. Thomas was our Top Turret Gunner/Engineer, Romeo manned the dangerous Ball Turret Gun. Our Tail Gunner in the back was Joe. Then it was Bill on the Right Waist Gun, and I, John, was the Left Waist Gunner/Engineer.

We trained together as a flying crew for a few months at a base in Southern California before transferring to a newly constructed 8th Air Force Bomber Base near Ipswich, England. We all bonded as a very close team and went everywhere together.

The first eight missions we flew were to France in support of the on-going Normandy Invasion. As rookies, we targeted German ground troop Battalions, gun batteries along the coastline, German Airfields, and transportation junction points. All of which were causing havoc to the Allied ground and air invasion.

On July 17, 1944, we flew our 3rd mission as Tail-End Charlie. We were positioned in the rear of the attacking bombers with cameras fitted to take important pictures of German ground positions. Our orders were to return to base with the pictures right after the bombing run. The anti-aircraft fire was fierce and we lost the number 4 engine in one large flak explosion before turning back to base.

Our B-24 bomber Lucy Quipment, as we named her, lost fuel in a hurry with battle holes in her right-wing tanks. The two-hour return back to base with pictures was total cloud cover that looked like pea soup. We reached a point in flying where John our Navigator had calculated that England was below us. Bob descended to 1,800 feet as we searched for a place to land with no luck in the English fog. He took us back up to 5,000 feet and flew toward the sea coast as the number one engine sputtered. Bob had no choice and gave the order to secure our parachutes and bail out. John, our Navigator, was in tears.

Herb called over the radio, "John is too scared to jump."

"Throw him out," Bob said. And that's just what Herb did.

Amazingly, none of us were hurt as some fell on land with others in the cold water below to be picked up by RAF Rescue Teams. It was incredibly peaceful and quiet as I floated to the ground and landed in a turnip patch. But the sight of our B-24, Lucy Quipment, crashing in a steep dive below the cloud cover made me very sad.

We flew ten bombing missions in B-24 Liberators. There were six different airplanes: “Lucy Quipment”, “Wild Hare”, “Miakinback”, “Baby Doll”, “Silver Wolf”, and “LONI, which was in honor of League of Nations International organization.” Our 9th mission was with LONI to attack highly important enemy oil storage depots near Brussels, Belgium. The Germans fiercely defended it with anti-aircraft fire and attacking fighter planes. We were hammered with very heavy flak and enemy fire over the target. LONI was badly shot up but continued air worthy. It would be her last mission. With the number 1 engine out and number 3 badly leaking from the oil sump, we somehow made it back and started our landing approach to Debach Air Field. We soon realized the left landing gear cable was busted clean in half.

As LONI touched down, our Pilot Bob said to the Co-Pilot, “Gene, get off the brakes.”

“I’m not on the brakes,” Gene replied, as LONI lurched left wing down to the ground.

“Gene, get off the damn brakes,” Bob repeated.

Bob, “I’m not on the damn brakes!”

We were sliding on our left wing directly toward the control tower at over 90 MPH. Top Turret Gunner Herb said men were running out of the tower and jumping out of second story windows. LONI came to rest no more than 20 feet from the control tower with 3,000 LBS of bombs jammed up on the left rack.

With his typical dry humor, Colonel Helton, our Group Commander came out and said, “Great job getting it off the runway boys.” Then he ordered a 3 day leave for crew to London. I guess destroying two B-24’s over ten days deserves a break. But Lucy Quipment and LONI weren’t the only casualties. Our nervous Navigator John had flown his last mission.

We came back from London and began two weeks of training on the B-17 Flying Fortress. The final 26 missions were flown in a brand-new B-17 we named, “Lucy Quipment II.

Lucy Quipment II was the love of my life for 6 months. I truly believe this beautiful Flying Fortress saved our lives on several missions. After a few weeks of additional training we returned to combat duty.

On November 2nd, 1944, we flew mission number 26 to bomb the dreaded and fiercely defended oil refinery in Merseburg, Germany. Someone in our group shot down one of several ME-163 jets attacking our formation as we approached the target. All of the sudden there was a swarm of ME-190 German fighters circling like buzzards for the kill. It was so much fun, but I was so damn scared. I unloaded hundreds of rounds on them as flak bounced off my helmet and pieces of glass pelted my face. The drops of blood on my flak jacket was the least of my concerns. Lucy was taking a beating like no other mission.

We watched as Colonel Whitlock, the 863rd Squadron Commander, had his entire right wing on fire as the crew went down in peril. We were in shock, but we made our way back to base. Colonel Whitlock was a great inspiration for all of us. He was a man of great character and a valiant warrior among us. The whole Bomb Group was in mourning. Two days later, we were back in the air with mission number 27 and nine more after that.

One of the truly enjoyable experiences for us was a seven-day vacation to the “Flak House,” as it was nick-named. It was a nice retreat in Southport England called “Palace Hotel”. We had no detail work at all, just rest and recreation. And nobody was required to wear their military inform. We enjoyed every minute of our time there. Every single battle-worn aircrew needed the rest. But I have to say that our 3-day leave to London was my favorite following the crash-landing with LONI. The Londoners were so much fun to meet, and we got to have a few beers with Army ground troops on leave.

September 17th, 1944 is a day I will never be able to erase from my memory. I had experienced terrible things, but not like this so close to home. On this day our Bomb Group was divided to attack two different targets. We were sent in the group to destroy a menacing flak battery near Rotterdam in the Netherlands. We completed our mission, returned to base and learned the terrible news.

The sister group from our base attacking the deadly oil refinery target in Magdeburg, Germany had lost ten aircraft in less than five minutes over the target. The number of returning wounded on board was high and many men were taken prisoner of war after bailing out of destroyed B-17s.

To this day it is very hard to share the agony of seeing so many empty sleeping quarters that night. Many men I called friends were suddenly gone. No more joking around and teasing each other. Many of us were 19 and 20 years old, but no longer was there a boy among us.

Our 33rd mission went back to the oil refinery from Hell in Merseburg, Germany. We had barely escaped this target a few times before, but with only 4 missions remaining to fulfill our duty, there was no room for superstition. We had survived the worst and this mission was no different. Flak over the oil refinery was heavy and thick. We dropped our bombs with good aim over the target and turned right to begin our departure from the target area. We watched as a group of bombers behind us over the target caught Holy Hell.

I saw at least twenty ships go down, blow up, and fall apart in flames. They weren't crews from the 493rd, but the horror of watching over 200 men perish in plain sight was beyond my human understanding. It is forever etched in my mind.

We completed the remaining 3 missions with relative ease, if you can rightly call it that. The German Leaders had waged an all-out last-ditch response to the Allied Invasion and we

were there to experience it. We learned how the devastating human cost of war and defeating such evil is incalculable.

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“Are you going to be ok?”

My eyes met hers, “I will be in time.”

Mary was always helping at her grandmother’s midwife clinic which only took donations and helped women deliver their babies. We shared a hot cup of coffee that day. Fourteen years later we had six healthy baby boys together. I cannot begin to add up the many blessings I have been given. I can only hope to be worthy of those who never had the chance.