

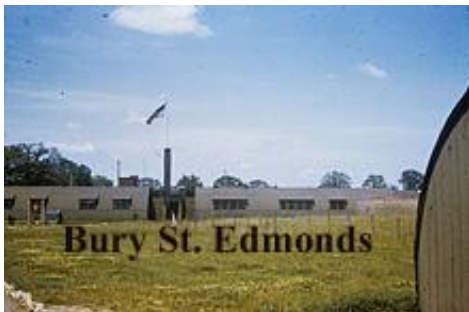
Flying a B17 Over Germany in WWII

World War II started as a grand adventure for me. I always wanted to fly and what fun it was to learn all about flying - and for free: Piper Cubs, PT22 Ryans, Vultees, Cessna twins, AT6s, B17s and many more.



Bomber crew training was exciting, especially the night we ran into a thunderstorm at 27,000 ft, got severely tossed about and came out of the bottom of the storm, flying straight and level. My crew suffered many bruises, but soon recovered and the 10 of us were proclaimed ready for combat. We flew a B17 from training Headquarters at Lincoln, Nebraska, where I had lived since I was 11 years old, to England via Reikjevic, Iceland, where I celebrated my 21st birthday. We were sent to Ipswitsch, Northern England.

Two days after our arrival at Ipswitsch, I was told to gather my crew and all our belongings, because we were moving to the 94th bomb group at Bury St. Edmonds, about 100 miles North of London.



We arrived at the 94th and were promptly assigned our quarters, the officers in a Quonset hut and the enlisted men in tents. I moved my duffle bags in to find all of the last occupant's effects were still there. Two days in a row the 94th sent out planes and crews and two days in a row, none came back to Bury St. Edmonds: All their planes and crews were lost. That day, October 7th, was the day I first confronted the realities of war. I now understood the gloomy mood of the base personnel. Moving out the personal effects of the previous crews was a sobering experience; could we be mortal and suffer a similar fate?

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The months that followed were exciting, sometimes very frightening, but filled with the stuff that creates lifelong bonds between your fellow warriors that is incomprehensible to others that have not had similar experiences. But the stories behind these bonds can be simply told.

Mission days were all the same. We would get up usually about 1 AM. Breakfast, for those that flew the mission, included two fried eggs, a treat almost worth the risk of the mission. We would be briefed on the mission, get our plane ready, take off, join the formation, climb to about 27000 ft altitude where it was usually 57degrees F below zero, bomb about noon, come home, land, store our stuff and go to debriefing. First was the Red Cross line where we had our first food since breakfast, which was a glass of hot chocolate and sometimes a bisquet. Next came the Medics, where we either drank a fourth of a water glass of Scotch or signed a waiver that the drink was refused. As Pilot, I then had to go through a debriefing process, which sometimes was traumatic to some pilots after a tough mission. Finally, we had dinner, often after 6 Pm, and then back to our quarters for a welcome rest. But all the missions were different and ranged from exciting to frightening but they were never boring!

We vividly remember our first bombing raid on Berlin; the flak was so dense we wondered if anyone could survive. Where were the metal chunks in that huge cloud created by exploding anti aircraft shells? But we flew through it and, in the end, this was a relatively easy mission for us. We were rewarded by the Air Force after the raid with a great photo of our crew, which we cherish, showing us leaving our plane in a truck to return for mission debriefing.



Then there was the day a flak burst removed our entire rudder and vertical stabilizer. After landing back at Bury St Edmonds, Bevins, our 19 year old tail gunner, got out of his position and saw that the entire rudder structure from about 6 inches above his head was gone. He promptly passed out. On recovery, he was unable to move. Bevins was paralyzed. He was taken to the hospital where he remained paralyzed for several days. Finally the Doctors fed him a

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bottle of Scotch and when he woke up from that treatment, he was normal and returned to his flight duties.

We were shot down twice. On one occasion, we suffered considerable flak damage - the plane could not return to Bury St Edmonds. As we were going down, a fighter plane came along side and lowered his wheels, a sign to follow him. The Germans rebuilt our planes as they were shot down, so we never knew for sure which side the pilot was on. Since I had no choice, I decided he was American. We were led to a field near Vincennes, France. I saw a heavily bombed field through the misty rain while on a very short final approach but I landed anyway, trusting our guide. The craters on the runway were filled in so our landing was rough, but OK. Two other planes landed that day, a B24 that did not believe the runway was safe so he veered to the left and crashed into a bomb crater, injuring his crew. The other was a B17 (only 1 engine operating) that also did not believe his guide, veered right, ran into a farmhouse and killed his crew and the French farmers in the house. The field was an abandoned German air base - there were no soldiers there, German or Allies. We stayed two days, finding some food in a local village. Finally some Frenchmen came in a truck and told us to get in. We did. They took us to a big pasture about 45 minutes away where a C47 transport plane was waiting to take us back to Bury St. Edmonds.



Some of you may have visited Castle Air Base near Merced. The base has a collection of WWII planes and the 94th Bomb Group Museum. The Museum features our commander, General Castle. He was killed on Christmas day at the Battle of the Bulge while leading the mission that day. I was flying box, the position just under Castle's plane, in a 4- plane "diamond" formation. There were 9 such elements in the Bomb Group formation. An estimated 250 German fighters attacked us: Our fighters were late and had not yet appeared. General Castle was shot down and killed with the rest of his crew. Our B17 had no damage and we returned home safely. Once again, we were lucky!

On another raid to Hamburg, we saw many Allied and German fighters. That day the US Air Force shot down the largest number of German Planes of any single day of WWII, 157 of them. Our plane even got credit for a part of a fighter. That was an exciting day. So exciting, our ball turret gunner, Vess, had an accident, shorted out his electrical flying suit and frostbit his rear. As usual, the German fighters shot bullets that glowed so we could see them coming at us. We could

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also watch incoming flak shells and we knew they would explode about at our altitude. But, all we could do was watch, hope, and wait.

A submarine shot at us on another raid while flying over the North Sea in route to our target. It blew out the windscreen in front of me. So I flew the rest of the mission under very cold (-57degrees F) and windy conditions. My electrical, fleece lined flying suit was far from being cozy. How weird was to be hit by a submarine.

Then there was the day when my Bombardier, Dahl, got hit in the chest by a large piece of flak. The impact threw him over the head of the navigator and slammed him into the bulkhead in front of the cockpit. Luckily, he was wearing his heavy metal flak suit. The flak fragment bruised him severely - his chest became very black and blue and his ribs hurt for weeks. What a scare. But think of the alternative.

On another mission, my Engineer, Nabors, who was manning the top - turret claimed he was wounded. A piece of flak did go through the turret and it sprayed shards of Plexiglas everywhere. The shards punctured his oxygen mask and when he took off his mask, he looked like he had a severe case of measles. They stung and hurt. He had a reason to be shaken and excited. But according to Air Force rules, he was not wounded enough to get a Purple Heart. That was OK with Nabors and the rest of us. Good thing he was wearing a steel helmet and his flak suit.

Some exciting times did not include flak and fighters. Twice I took off with an overload of bombs and fuel when it was so foggy, I could not see the ground from the cockpit and could not taxi. The ground crew pulled our plane to the runway, set the wheels on spots on the runway for alignment, and told us to go. Some planes didn't make it and exploded on/or right after take-off. The next plane in line was sent off anyway. Once we landed under the same conditions. We knew others were trying to land after us. They also were unable to see anything after landing. After landing we taxied and then got out of the plane and ran - hoping we were at Bury St Edmonds and no one would run into us. We did not have modern landing aids during WWII.

There was a time the 94th Bomb Group tried to save enough gas to get back to base after a very long mission. Each plane returned from the target alone at low altitude. As usual, the weather was bad. We were about 5000 feet above the English Channel when all 4 engines quit due to carburetor ice. We got them running just in time to prevent a ditching in water so cold survival time was only a few minutes. All of us were horrified at the prospects of ditching.

There are similar stories I could tell about other missions. But this gives you a good idea what it was like flying B17s over Germany in WWII. It was never dull. Living through those days forged strong bonds to our fellow airmen but they were

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especially strong between crewmembers. Our memories are as fresh today as when we were flying together.

We were lucky. My crew and I, all 10 of us, survived our assigned 35 missions without even gaining a Purple Heart.