

WHITEY WRIGHT

I was a fighter pilot in WWII, flying P 38's and P 51's in Europe (66 missions and 300 combat hours). We flew both Bomber Escort and Ground Support missions, including flying cover over Omaha Beach on D-Day.



My story follows.

I grew up in Massachusetts and had two years at Tufts College. Running low on funds, I went to work for General Electric in the summer of 1941. When Pearl Harbor was attacked, I immediately applied to become an Army Air Corps flying cadet. There were so many applications that I wasn't called up until the end of 1942. I went through Primary flight training (Ryan PT-22) in Blythe, California, Basic (Vultee BT-13) at Marana, Arizona, and Advanced (AT-9 and North American AT-6) at Chandler, Arizona. I then graduated to the RP322, an early version of the Lockheed P-38, to finally receive my wings in twin engine fighters on November 3, 1943. Besides being one of the fastest airplanes in WWII, the P-38 was very stable, well-armed, good range, although its size required manhandling at the controls.

In April, 1944, after various flying duties, I shipped out on the Isle de France, a converted luxury ship. I was fortunate to be assigned to the 55th Fighter Group, 343rd Fighter Squadron, based at Wormingford, England. After getting acquainted with the squadron I started combat missions. We flew both bomber escort and ground support.

Emblem of the 55th Fighter Group (World War II)

A typical Bomber Escort Mission started with an early dawn awakening. The bombers were already in the air forming up into groups. A normal raid involves about 800 bombers and about 350 fighters (although on one "maximum effort" raid there were 1800 bombers and 800 fighters). After a quick breakfast, we go to the "Ready Shack" for briefing on the mission details... then one last rush to handle personal matters; unload personal possessions that could give information to the enemy; some buy barter goods in case of being shot down; a room is available to meet with a Minister, Priest, or Rabbi; I pick up a "Mae West" and "escape kit": and onto a truck to my plane...my parachute and dingy are in

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the cockpit, and my crew chief and I make the preflight check...then off to 5 or 6 hours of flight.

We take off in pairs in the semi-darkness and get into squadron formation. In the distance I see flares signaling where the bombers are to form up in the bomber stream. When over the Channel we spread out into combat formation and climb to meet the bombers. At 12,000 feet we go on oxygen. The bombers are strung out as far as you can see, and we fly to our assigned groups identified by their tail markings. Our squadrons are positioned one above the bombers and one on each side of the bomber stream. The Luftwaffe, in groups of 40 or 50, can choose the time and place of the attack, giving them air superiority. They generally make one pass from above, causing us to drop our belly tanks for maneuverability, which in turn causes us to leave early. To counter, only the top squadron takes action, so the rest can keep their tanks.

As we get deeper into Germany we reach the limit of our radio reception with Fighter Control in England. A single fighter drops off to patrol half way to relay messages. When the bombers reach the "Initial Point" their bombing run starts, the bombardier takes over, and they cannot take evasive action. The German fighters leave, and the "flak" from ground batteries starts. We leave too, since there is nothing we can do to help. The "flak" turns the sky black and you can see bomb blasts and billowing smoke on the ground. At the end of their bombing run we meet the bombers to give them protection on the way home. They are staggering out of the "flak" trying to get back into formation. Many have unbelievable damage, dead and wounded men aboard but still flying. As we head home, planes that can't keep up are left behind with a couple of fighters for protection.

On reaching the Channel, the fighters leave and sweep back across the bomber route to pick up stragglers or attack targets of opportunity. The three giant air strips on the English coast, built for planes in trouble to land, are always busy after a raid. On our return we are debriefed and pick up our personal effects. We are authorized a traditional shot of liquor, but usually we let it accumulate for an occasional party.

On one trip, with lousy weather, we missed rendezvousing with the bombers and were released to strafe targets of opportunity. I went after a train and hit the locomotive. Ground fire was coming from one of the train's flat cars. As I pulled up my right engine lost power and began running rough. I sensed that I had been hit, but did not feel it. One of the other guys stayed with me as I nursed the plane home. As I was preparing to land the engine quit, the plane dropped short of the runway snapping off the nose wheel, and I knew I was going in. I grabbed to retract the wheels and cut the switches. Just as my "props" hit the ground my wheels came up, and I plowed to one of my smoother landings unhurt.

D-DAY, June 6th, was practically unbelievable. The day before, security had been tightened with everyone restricted to base, planes grounded, and guards patrolling the flight line. Our wings and fuselage were painted with black and

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white stripes for identification and then covered with tarps. Just before dawn we had a late briefing...our task to keep all enemy planes away from the middle of the Channel to just inside the French coast over a landing area with the code name "Omaha". We are to fly four hour shifts to provide continuous coverage. This is it!

That morning, as it got light we were over the channel. I was awe struck. There were hundreds and hundreds of ships strung out across the whole Channel. Tiny landing craft circled and then pushed toward the shore, some disappearing in a fountain of water. The water's edge was littered with landing craft and wrecked equipment. Although I was too high to identify individual bodies I knew they were among the wreckage. I can never forget this. The P-38 silhouette is so distinctive, we expected the gunners on the ships to easily identify us. Still, we saw isolated tiny flashes from below firing at us, but no one was hit. I flew a second mission that night...foggy, rainy, and pitch black. Fortunately, there were no mid-air collisions.

For four more days we rotated flights over Omaha beachhead in 4 hour shifts...lousy weather, rain, 800 foot ceiling. My parachute felt as if it were welded on my back. Our group flew 35 missions in those four days, averaging 10 hours a day in the plane. We didn't see "Jerry" all during the invasion. German radio announced, "The Allies are at last forced to fight in Western Europe. We will not be tricked into using our full strength, but will hold back our main force". With the beachhead secured, we were assigned to take out bridges, rail and road traffic, and harass German reinforcements. Our losses began to climb.



That July we were converted to the P-51, considered the best fighter plane in the War. Quick handling and fast, it could do everything the Luftwaffe fighters could do. When it was modified with Merlin engines and belly tanks, it could reach Berlin too, and the P-38 days were numbered.

A typical Ground Support Mission entailed strafing and bombing trains, road traffic, barges, bridges, and fighter fields. Giving our troops absolute air superiority in their march across France after D-Day became top priority. Enemy fighter fields were assigned to individual fighter groups, since they were too small

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for heavy bomber formations and their escorts. Usually an attack on an airport was very direct...just peel off on command and dive leaving one squadron aloft for cover. Alternatively, two squadrons would fly just above tree top level. Since it was hard to see ahead at about 100 feet in the air, the cover squadron would guide them until they reached the field from the best direction in the most favorable position. The best friend you have is surprise. Once the field is alerted, they could put up a cone of fire over the base, and attackers had no choice but to fly through it. Thus, you normally don't go back for a second pass. For low level runs you can trim the plane so that you have to put a little forward pressure on the stick to hold the nose down; then in an emergency it will want to climb by itself.

The 55th Fighter Group pioneered a new technique against enemy bases too small for bombers and too fortified for strafing without high cost. A P-38 was modified to house a bombardier and the new Norden bomb sight in the nose. This allows two squadrons to arm themselves with 500 pound bombs and drop them on the target from higher altitudes, while the third squadron provides cover. The Germans can either stay down and take the punishment or come up to fight. We hope they come up, for now we are free to engage without the responsibility of protecting bombers.

Along with various military vehicles, our Group compiled a record of over 600 enemy aircraft on the ground and in the air and 950 locomotives, the most of any fighter group.

One year after I received my wings I finished my 66 combat missions and was due to rotate back to the States. I had very mixed emotions...I survived, and yet feel kind of left out in watching the squadron take off on another mission, this time without me. These are my friends and comrades, and we had shared much together. I am not the same cocky pilot who arrived here eight months ago; there is a different person going home. I returned on the USS George Washington, a hospital ship. Seeing the wounded, I couldn't help thinking how different my war was from theirs. Mine was more impersonal while theirs was a very personal violence. Thankfully, I never had to find out how I could handle that.

Upon debarkation, I went through processing at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, and then given thirty days leave before reassignment. Returning home to my family in Winchester, Massachusetts, was a very emotional experience. In January I was assigned as a flight instructor and ended up at Moore Field in Mission, Texas, right on the Mexican border. It was good duty. Most of my students were previous cadets who completed a combat tour as bombardiers and navigators and now returned to get their wings as promised. While home on leave in March, I ran into Barbara, one of our high school crowd. I asked her out to dinner to catch up on what was happening with my old friends. One thing led to another between us, and over the next few months I fell in love with this girl from my kindergarten class.

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My days in the service were numbered with the dropping of the atom bomb in August, 1945. In early October I was released from active duty at Westover Field, Springfield, Massachusetts. I immediately proposed to Barbara, and we were married later that month. Two weeks later, after a short honeymoon, I returned to Tufts College on the G.I. Bill. My active military experience had come to an end, and I was on my way to my new life with my new wife.

Thinking back, I am struck how young and naive we were, and yet shared an experience that is beyond my capability to describe with justice. Our squadron destroyed 504 locomotives, 81 enemy aircraft in the air, and 105 enemy aircraft on the ground. Yet, between December '43 and December '44, of the 105 pilots assigned to the 343rd, 23 were killed in action, 12 were missing in action (4 returned as evadees), 17 became prisoners of war (most returned), 10 transferred out (wounded, new command, etc.), and 43 completed their tours and came home. I express my appreciation to whoever is in charge of those things for my being able to make it while so many others didn't. I learned that freedom is much too precious to be taken for granted.