

A Flight into The Past

by Kevin M. Pearson - 1992

Kevin Pearson is a young man in his 40's who's a friend of all airmen who flew in the bombers of WWII. He is an amateur historian, writer, and a contributor to the Newsletters of the 8th Air Force Historical Society of Missouri. This is a true story that Kevin sent to me some years ago and is reproduced here with his permission. The story is about one man's love of the B-17 and the realization of his life-long dream....to fly in one. Read this remarkable account and see if it does not bring back memories of times past.

Willard "Hap" Reese

The crisp, morning air in Midland, Texas, was abruptly broken by the thunderous, deep-throated roar of four, 1200 horsepower Wright Cyclone engines, belonging to the B-17 Flying Fortress named "Texas Raiders." Each engine coughed, sputtered and belched large quantities of blue, oil-laden exhaust as each of the nine cylinder Cyclones, one by one, roared to life with a sound reminiscent of a time long past.

It all started in the summer of 1991 when I sat down for a root beer float at Lou's Drive-In in Peoria, Illinois. On that day, I was wearing a cap bearing the letters and numerals "B-17G" and a T-shirt with a picture of a B-17 Flying Fortress on it. The owner of Lou's Drive-In, Louis LaHood, came up to me and asked in a skeptical and somewhat sarcastic tone what a young guy like me knew about the B-17 Flying Fortress. Lou had been a pilot with the Eighth Army Air Force, 91st Bombardment Group (Heavy) and had flown 30 combat missions over occupied Europe during World War II. We spent the rest of that day discussing such things as manual versus automatic turbo-supercharging, the magnetic flux-gate compass, stratospheric flight characteristics, and, of course, the inherent advantages and disadvantages of the Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress versus its major rival, the Consolidated B-24 Liberator.

During our conversation, I told Lou I was writing a book about this remarkable aircraft and this is what he said to me, "Before you can ever write a book about the B-17, you have to fly on one. No other plane flies quite like the 17." I took his advice to heart and contacted the Confederate Air Force (CAF) museum in Midland, Texas, and after several months, received permission for both Lou and myself to fly on their B-17, affectionately known as "The Raiders."

My photographer and I arrived in Midland at 10:00 p.m. on the night of March 28, 1992. We had been on the road since 6:00 a.m. that morning but before checking into our motel, before even eating dinner, we were overpowered by the urge to go to CAF Headquarters and see the "Fort." There was a certain magnetism in the air, something drawing us to the Fortress, a force so strong that we both had but one purpose and that was to see the B-17.

We walked into the main hangar at CAF Headquarters and were immediately greeted by the sounds of "Chattanooga Choo Choo," a wartime classic originally sung by Frances Langford in 1942. A party was in progress - one of many hosted by the CAF each year. There were many people in the hangar, some sitting, some standing, some dancing, their voices echoing in a muffled staccato in the vast and cavernous expanses of the hangar. I gazed about and saw a multitude of World War II aircraft. The air was thick with the smell of high-octane aviation

fuel and other assorted olfactory delights common only to a place where aircraft are stored. In the background I could hear the lead vocalist singing, "There's gonna be a special someone at the station, satin and lace, I use to call funny face." To my left was an F-82, a Siamese twin version of the P-51 Mustang, to my right a German ME-109. Straight ahead was "FiFi," a Boeing B-29 Super Fortress with all four engines detached from their nacelles, obviously undergoing what we in the aviation community call an annual. Where was the B-17? She wasn't in the hangar.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I spotted her and the distinctive shape of her Plexiglas nose. She was parked outside of the hangar on the "hardstand." The expansive hangar doors were only partially cracked, exposing only a frontal view of the fuselage.

We began walking towards the "Fort" as the band started its rendition of Glenn Miller's "Little Brown Jug." Actually our walk simulated a gallop, and the closer we got to the "Fort," the faster our strides became. I could hear one gentleman in the background, somewhat inebriated from the night's festivities, bellowing, "And there we were at 24,000 feet, one engine feathered and one on fire, when we began pitching like this and we started going down," (he made an arching motion with his hand) his story becoming inaudible as we breezed past him.

We had walked into a time warp. Certainly I must be having a dream.

We walked right by security, right by the band and slipped out through the hangar doors. There she was in all of her splendor, silhouetted by the glare of the hangar lights. We just stood there, mouths wide open and stared up in amazed delight. Before us was this huge, four-engine behemoth of an airplane, the type of plane I had studied for the better part of the last fifteen years.

We walked around her, peering into every window, sliding our hands over her smooth control surfaces until it seemed like we studied every rivet on that plane. We spent the next hour just hanging around that old bird. I felt a sense of awe just being in the presence of this time machine, a machine that had helped accomplish so much during those dark days of 1942 and 1945.

The next day we met Lou, who was flying in from Peoria, then with the Flight Operations Coordinator of the Confederate Air Force. We received our flight instructions - we would fly the next day and could spend the rest of this day photographing the Fortress inside and out.

We grabbed our equipment and headed for the hangar. The Fort was still outside, basking in the warm spring sunshine. We rounded the corner of the hangar and Lou spotted her for the first time. His eyes widened and in the two years I had known Lou, he uttered the first obscenity I had ever heard. He said, "Well, I'll be damned!"

Watching Lou crawl through "his" plane was one of the most unique and interesting experiences of my life. He spoke of his six foot tail-gunner, Robert Megechelson, and how his tail-gunner had "really wanted" that position; about the relief tube in the cockpit, how, if a pilot forgot to notify the ball-turret gunner of the impending flow, the ball turret's windows would freeze, rendering the turret useless. We discussed frontal attacks by enemy fighters, the oxygen system and the time Lou's crew had to "hit the silk" when the landing gear on his B-17 wouldn't fully extend.

Lou was such a unique fellow. I envied and respected this man in the same way I envied and respected my own father. Sharing Lou's stories about the war and what the war had meant to

him, I felt for a brief time closer to Lou than my own father, a sort of camaraderie unique to a person who has never experienced war. After much hero worship and rhetoric on my part, I finally realized that Lou was just the typical airman of the 8th AAF. He did not consider himself a hero, nor did he consider what he did anything out of the ordinary. As he once said, "We did what we had to do at the time; we never thought about the danger."

It's 4:30 a.m. and I am already awake, not that I slept any during the night. I sit up on the side of my bed, turn on the light, grab the telephone and dial Midland/Odessa Flight Service. The station operator answers, and I inquire as to the weather along our designated flight path. The operator responds with, "Cloudy and broken at 10,000, winds 274 degrees at 15 knots, gusting to 20." Perfect, no fronts, we'll fly today.

We arrive at the hangar at 5:30 a.m. and go inside to meet the rest of the crew. Pat, the pilot, hands us an insurance waiver and asks for our signature. In a nutshell, the waiver states we won't sue him or the CAF in the event we are killed or maimed during the flight. I pull out a pen and ink my name before even reading the document. My adrenaline is flowing at full throttle.

Pat informs us we may move about the plane once we are airborne, yet cautions there are many rough edges in the plane and air turbulence is unpredictable - so be careful. He also indicates the location of air sick bags and ear plugs. We board the B-17 from the waist hatch. Lou and I climb to the nose of the aircraft. I think to myself, this isn't real, this isn't happening. My mind is racing and can not yet comprehend that a lifelong dream is about to come true. I feel as if I am out of my body looking down at this young guy and this old guy crawling through this 50 year old aircraft.

I look out through the Plexiglas nose and see the fire tender, holding a rather large fire extinguisher, I mentally note, and hear him say in a muffled voice, "Start one first, Pat!" I look to my left and see the port outboard engine, engine #1, slowly turning over. "9 blades, mags on, mesh and start!" I hear the copilot as he instructs Pat on starting procedure. The engine catches and roars to life. The fire tender holds up two fingers. I see his lips move but can't hear him over the roar of the first engine. I see the inboard port engine, #2, turning over. Blue smoke pours from the exhaust manifold waste gate. For an instant I wonder if we are on fire.

I turn and look out the starboard window in time to see engine #4 firing up. All four of the Hamilton Standard, three-bladed, constant-speed, variable-pitch propellers are turning in unison, and I am absolutely overwhelmed by the blaring roar of the engines, even though I know the engines are at an idle speed.

The thick, acrid smell of burnt engine oil and high-octane av gas permeates every crevice of the plane's interior. The plane is vibrating so much that I can barely steady my video camera. A high pitched whine can be heard over the steady drone of the engines, and I realize the pilot is cycling the flaps up and down in a pre-takeoff test.

The plane lurches forward as the pilot releases those damn squeaky brakes. (Boeing never could make an aircraft without squeaky brakes!) We swing off of the tarmac and onto a taxiway, the Fortress gently rocking and swaying over the bumps and dips in the taxiway, as the bright Texas sunshine pours through every opening in the nose of the plane. I feel a trickle of sweat pouring down my neck and am surprised because I am not hot.

We reach the threshold of the active runway from which we will be departing and swing the nose of the plane into the wind. One by one the pilot runs up each engine to 1600 RPM. With each engine acceleration, the plane bucks and vibrates, wanting to leave the binding force of Earth's gravity behind. The pilot runs up number 3 and 4 together. The high pitched roar of the two Cyclones is music to my ears; no other sound in this world can ever simulate the deep-throated, guttural roar of a 1200 horse power Wright Cyclone at full throttle.

Lou turns to me and says, "Can you imagine 30 B-17s lining up on a runway?" In a far off place in my mind I hear myself answer, "I've seen it in the movies but can't imagine it in real life!" "The way it was!" Lou yells back.

We start rolling towards the active runway. The pilot turns the lumbering Fort so that the nose is pointed straight down the white-stripped centerline. The airplane pauses for just a moment and then, slowly, the pilot accelerates all four engines. I hear Lou, now yelling at the top of his voice, "He's got to go 110 before he can get up!"

The sound from the engines begins as a dull roar and progresses to an outright, ear deafening, rhythmic scream. The force of acceleration momentarily causes me to lose my balance, and I almost fall off of the bombardier's platform. We are rolling. (I secretly imagine we are taking off from an ancient, weed-choked runway in the swirling mist of the North Sea, laden with five 1,000 pounders, destined for the ball-bearing works at Schweinfurt.)

I am pointing my video camera down the end of the runway. We are moving faster and faster. I'm hearing the tires clicking over the expansion joints in the runway. The white striped centerline is now looking like a continuous white line. The massive wings are slowly becoming airborne. I feel a sudden jerk, the plane swings 15 degrees into the wind, and I realize we are off the ground. A life long dream has come true.

I turn around and point my video camera out the starboard window. Those magnificent Wright Cyclones have come into an element all their own. I see the runway growing smaller and smaller and can see the airport dropping away in the distance. I hear the pilot throttling back and synchronizing the engines. I'm thinking to myself, I'm in seventh heaven, it can't get any better than this!

I turn and look closely at Lou for the first time since taking off. The plane starts a steep bank, and I quickly look out of the side window and see the port wing dipping below the horizon. Lou is staring straight ahead with an intense, yet far off look in his eyes. I can tell by the expression on his face, that for him, he is again a twenty-four year old bomber pilot winging his way eastward for yet another bombing raid on the crumbling remains of the Third Reich. For Lou, the clock has turned back 47 years.

For a brief moment I transcend time. I see the well-groomed and manicured landscape of the English Midlands racing below us; the steep, contrasting walls of the White Cliffs of Dover; and white caps dancing on the English Channel. I wonder what it must have been like to see thousands (yes, thousands) of heavy bombers popping through the early morning cloud cover, lining up on designated Splasher beacons for force assembly. What was it like to see the first vapor trails streaming from your ship as you climbed to your best operational altitude? Mostly, I wonder what it was like to have hundreds of German fighters and thousands of German flak batteries trying to knock you out of the sky. (Lou once described this feeling as walking totally naked down a very busy highway. Think about it.)

I videotape every possible component of this remarkable aircraft during our 2 1/2 hour flight to San Antonio. I speak with the pilot, co-pilot and flight engineer. Before I know it, the flight is almost over, as the canal running through downtown San Antonio looms in the distance. An airshow is in progress, and I see CAF's B-25, "Yellow Rose," escorting us off of our starboard wing.

After landing, we taxi to our assigned parking area, stop, and power down all four engines. Even though the engines have stopped, I can still hear their monotonous throbbing echoing in my almost deaf ears. One of the ground personnel opens the nose hatch, and wanting to look "cool" to the many bystanders like Steve McQueen in the movie the War Lover, I casually swing out of the nose hatch and drop six feet to the ground. A resounding applause rises from the crowd, and I shed my best "awe shucks" expression.

So this is what it was like to fly on the "Queen," the "Queen of the Skies." No other airplane is as great and graceful in flight and it is no small wonder that large crowds gather wherever she lands, why cars and trucks screech to a stop in an effort to catch but just a glimpse of this awesome machine. She is a rich part of our history, our heritage, a flying monument for all those who fought and died over enemy skies to keep this county free.