

# WORLD WAR II COMBAT TOUR

*of Major Raymond Syptak*



The sixth of June, 1994, was the 50th anniversary of the greatest event that occurred in World War II, and perhaps the event which the success, or lack thereof, would change the course of civilization for years to come.

This event, referred to as "D" Day, was the beginning of the invasion of Western Europe by Allied forces to free the Western European countries from the control of Nazi Germany, and which led to the ultimate defeat of that country.

The 50th anniversary of that event was celebrated by the Allied participants, in the area in which it occurred, which was Normandy, France. Many participants who survived the landings and subsequent battles gave their accounts of the invasion. These accounts were interesting and informative, and received world wide news coverage. D-Day occurred almost mid-way in my combat tour in England, flying bombing missions in B-17s over continental Europe. It occurred to me that perhaps a resume of my experiences during that tour might be of interest to my descendants and others.

To give the proper perspective, I must go back far enough to show how it came about that I was in that particular situation at that particular time.

It goes way back to my decision to go to Texas A&M. This was in 1937. At that time, A&M was a college for men only and participation in the Army Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) was mandatory for all able-bodied students. The ROTC program had several military specialities, one of which had to be selected upon entry. There was the Infantry, Field Artillery, Cavalry, and others. I knew nothing of any of them, but my good brother-in-law, John B. Woiton, had finished A&M, and he advised me to take the Infantry.

The first two years of ROTC training was mandatory for all. At the beginning of the Junior year, it became optional. To continue in the ROTC required the approval of the Army staff at the college. If approved, you entered into a contract with the Army. One reason for my desire for continuation in the program was monetary. We were paid the grand amount of 25 cents a day. While that was not much, over the period of two years it just about paid for the required uniform. By completing the additional two years, and upon graduation, you became a Second Lieutenant in the Army Reserve.

I realized after experiencing some of the training that there were more desirable specialities in the Army than the Infantry. The Infantrymen were called "Paddle Feet". They were the ones who carried the rifles and did all of the walking and close-in fighting in battles.

A few weeks before graduation, a notice was posted on the bulletin board, stating that students majoring in certain subjects, mine being one, could request transfer to the Army Air Corps, non-rated. At that time, I didn't know what "non-rated" meant, but this seemed to be a great opportunity to leave the Infantry. So I applied for transfer.

The time was now the early part of 1941, and Hitler had already taken over a lot of Europe. Also, it had been announced that all ROTC graduates would go on active duty for one year upon graduation. My duty station was to be Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, where I reported on June 20, 1941 after graduating. After a couple of weeks of some rugged Infantry training, lo and behold, my transfer to the Army Air Corps came through, and I was to report to McClelland Field, in Sacramento, California. I immediately called my dear wife, Vera Mae, who was still working for the Agricultural Adjustment Administration in College Station. I told her to terminate her employment, and I would pick her up and we would be going to California to live.

While still at Fort Sam Houston, I remember listening to the radio, and the program was interrupted with the announcement that Germany had invaded the Soviet Union. Since Germany had been so successful in the past by taking over one country after the other in a very short period of time, seemingly invincible, and since the Soviet Union had had difficulty in taking little Finland, this was very bad news. If Russia (Soviet Union) were to fall, it meant Hitler would control all of Europe, except Great Britain. At that time, Britain was being pounded by German bombers. I thought if the Soviets fell, the British would probably give up. Things did not look very good.

In the next few months, Germany marched through Poland and Russia, and seemed to have little opposition. The German army was approaching Moscow and Leningrad (now St. Petersburg).

After a few pleasant months at McClelland Field, Pearl Harbor, was attacked by bombers from aircraft carriers of Imperial Japan. This was on a Sunday morning, December 7, 1941. We lived in a house in North Sacramento. That morning I went to the drug store to get a newspaper. While in the store, the announcement of the attack came over the radio in the store. I went back to the house, and received a call to report to the base immediately. All officers were issued pistols to be worn at all

times. This base, like all others, went on a war time alert. All leaves were cancelled and a seven day work week was put into effect.

As I previously said, I was non-rated, which meant that I was not a pilot, navigator, or any other aircraft crew speciality. After becoming acquainted with the pilots on the base, I started considering the possibility of applying for pilot training. As a non-flying Air Corps officer, there was no possibility of participating in any combat. It, like the Quartermaster Corps, was one of the best assignments to survive the war. However, like many others, I was interested in doing all that I could to insure victory for the United States. So I thought I should apply.

Physical examinations for pilot training were tough; however, I thought I could qualify, so I applied for pilot training and was accepted. Vera Mae, our nine month old son, Michael, and I reported to Santa Ana, California, for pre-flight pilot training in November, 1942. There were literally thousands of aviation cadets there, all with dreams of becoming pilots, navigators, or bombardiers. After six weeks of preflight training, I was transferred to Fort Stockton, Texas, for primary pilot training in the Stearman (PT17) aircraft. This was a bi-wing, open cockpit trainer. The instructors were all civilians.

The first ride in the airplane with the instructor was my second flight in an airplane. After about seven hours of training, I was allowed to solo. I passed the various check rides and finished the course with a total of sixty hours. Approximately one-half of the class washed out (were eliminated). Then to basic training at Pecos, Texas, in a single engine, low wing trainer, referred to by some as the "Vultee Vibrator". After another seventy hours or so, I finished this course successfully and was transferred to Marfa, Texas for advanced training in a twin-engine trainer, the AT-17. Upon graduation from pilot training, and receiving my pilot's wings, I was transferred to Moses Lake, Washington, for my first encounter with the B-17 bomber, the Flying Fortress. This was in August, 1943.

At this base, B-17 crews were formed and trained for eventual assignment to tactical units. After getting a crew, and, in retrospect, some sorry training, we were transferred to the 457th Bombardment Group at Ephrata, Washington. This was in October, 1943. The group had just been activated and we were among the first crews to arrive.

After additional training with the group at Ephrata, we were transferred to Wendover, Utah, for a short time, and then to Grand Island, Nebraska, our staging area. From there the group was transferred to England to participate in the war against Germany. This was January, 1944. I had gotten a brand new B-17 a couple of days before we departed Grand Island on the 23rd January, 1944. The flight to England involved a stop-over in Goose Bay, Labrador, where we stayed for a couple of days waiting for favorable winds. We launched along with other crews from Goose Bay about ten o'clock one night.

To put things in perspective against I now had about 700 hours of flying time, including student pilot time. The navigator had navigated only one flight in the B-17, since in the States, with all the radio stations, a navigator was not needed. So here we were, flying across the Atlantic where the successful arrival at the destination was up to this navigator. However, after several hours, during which the

navigator stated he was not sure of our position, we could see land in the breaks of the clouds. Now the only problem was to find the correct air base, which was in Ireland. The ceiling of the clouds was approximately 500 feet, which didn't help. Finally, after some "stooing around", we found the base and landed.

We were one of the few crews who landed at the prescribed base. One crew landed on the beach. Others were at various bases. There were instances when a crew missed the British Isles completely and landed in France or Spain. Such was the capability of the bomber crews at that time. After two or three days, we were led in formation to our home base-to-be, which was called Glatton It was near Peterborough, about 75 miles north of London.

The quarters were quonset huts. There were no closets. The latrine was in a separate building, which contained showers, with cold water only. The mess hall was initially manned by the British. The food was inedible. Fortunately, we had some "K" rations that we could eat. Later our Group mess personnel took over. Then we had powdered eggs and milk. It still wasn't that good, but better. Lots of Brussels sprouts.

Initially we had some training flights to practice assembling in formation over a designated radio beacon. The normal formation for target bombing was an 18 ship formation. The Group aircraft complement was 60 B-17's. Finally, on February 25, I flew my first mission with my crew. The target was in Augsburg, Germany. I saw lots of German fighters, B-17s going down, some blowing up. My co-pilot was hit in the knee with a piece of shrapnel from flak. He was hospitalized for ten days or so. After landing we were told that there were 35 holes in the airplane; however, fortunately none resulted in damage to essential functions of the airplane.

At this time, the policy was that if one completed 25 missions, this constituted a tour, and one would be returned to the States. After that first mission, I remember asking myself "How can you possibly get through 25 of these?"

The day time formation bombing by the American forces, with the ultimate goal of destroying the war making capability of the German and Italian forces in Europe, was unique in warfare. While it didn't quite accomplish its goal in Europe, at least, it reduced the enemy capability sufficiently to allow army forces to win their battles and eventually win the war. One reason it was not completely successful was the inadequate power of the bombs used. We didn't have the atom or nuke bombs then. Life, at that time, consisted of work and very little sleep for me. I went over as an aircraft commander with a crew of nine other people. Their duties on the crew were: 1 co-pilot, 1 bombardier, 1 navigator, 1 radio operator/gunner, 1 engineer/gunner, 2 waist gunners, 1 ball turret gunner, and 1 tail gunner.

The B-17 was equipped with 11 guns. There were three gun turrets with two .50 caliber guns each. One was in the nose and was controlled by the bombardier. There was also a gun there controlled by the navigator. Another turret was just back of the pilots and on top, and was controlled by the flight engineer. Behind the bomb bay was the radio rooms which had a gun controlled by the radio man. In the bottom of the aircraft was the so-called ball turret. This was a big ball, barely big enough for a man to crawl into and be able to aim and fire the guns. There were

two waist guns, one on each side, and the guns in the tail of the aircraft. These were controlled by individual gunners.

Shortly after arrival in England, I assumed the duties of Operations Officer of one of the squadrons (*751st Squadron*). In this capacity, I was responsible for the activities of the combat crews in the squadron. This involved assigning duties, scheduling training, and assigning crews to positions in the flying formations on the bombing missions. We averaged fifteen to twenty crews per squadron, and the number was dependent upon losses sustained and the availability of replacements.

The missions were scheduled 8th Air Force Headquarters.

Weather over England, and especially over Europe, was the primary determinant of whether and when and how many sorties would be flown on a given day. Most take-offs for the missions were usually around six o'clock in the morning. This required getting the crews to briefing by two o'clock. Breakfast was served before briefing.

We were usually alerted for a mission the day before by six o'clock in the evening. After such an alert, the crew composition and positions in the formation were assigned. Theoretically, I could go to bed after this and be able to sleep until one o'clock or so. However, many times there were changes in the number of aircraft to be scheduled. This required changes in the number of crews and their positions. This was all done at Group operations. That reduced the time for sleeping. After the bombers took off on the mission, there was crew training and other things to take care of during the day. Then the aircraft returned around two o'clock in the afternoon.

Later I was assigned duties as Squadron Commander (*749th Squadron*) which allowed time for more sleep. At one point, I needed sleep so badly that I thought if my plane was shot down and I could have a successful bail-out, I would take it. Nothing to do in POW camps but sleep.

The initial missions produced various results, mostly bad. On one of these, the group failed to get assembled, resulting in some aircraft returning to base while others joined other formations. We were still learning.

Formation assembly was accomplished over a radio beacon. The lead ship took off, went to the designated beacon, and circled. While circling, multi-colored flares were fired. The colors identified the group. With so many airplanes in the air, this identification was necessary. It also identified the lead ship. The other aircraft followed at 30 second intervals and joined the circling formation. At the designated time after the group formation, the formation departed en route to the designated target. With so many bombers in the air over England at one time, meeting designated times over checkpoints was critical, as was time over the target. There were some air collisions.

Initially, weather over intended targets determined how many formations would be scheduled, if any. About mid-way in my tour, radar bombing, though somewhat

unreliable and imprecise, was available. This considerably increased bombing and mission activity.

After two or three months, our bombing results improved considerably. Also, German fighter defenses diminished. This was due to shortage of aircraft fuel, fighters available, and pilots. Initially, the fighters attacked the bomber formations either singly or in small groups. Later, due to fewer fighters and inexperienced pilots, they attacked in larger group formations. With this tactic, the number of our planes attacked on any particular day was limited. However, the ones that were attacked suffered many losses. In fact, one group, the 100th, was almost completely wiped out on three different occasions. Our losses on missions varied. Sometimes we lost none. Sometimes two or three and up to five. There were nine losses on one particular mission. (Merseberg, Nov 2nd, 1944) We started with 60 airplanes in the group and by June or July had lost 60. Of course, replacements were provided.

The flak was intense at times, especially over prime targets. After D-Day, and as the Germans were pushed back, the flak was more intense because they moved their flak guns back to add to the defense of targets still under their control. However, I never sweated the flak like I did the German fighters. By the time D-Day came along on June 6th, I had flown about 15 missions. Some were rough (holes in airplanes), some easy, called "milk runs". I had no brakes on landing on one mission. The aircraft ran off the runway, but settled in the soft English mud with no damage.

I did not fly on the missions for D-Day. I had led the mission on June 4th, so it wasn't my time to lead. I remember listening to General Eisenhower announcing the invasion to the world and invoking the blessings of Almighty God for its success. It was successful, despite many casualties and losses. We lost no aircraft in the Group on D-Day.

As I have previously stated, the all-out bombing effort by the United States was unique in warfare. It was also unique, naturally, in the lives of the crew members who flew the missions. Reactions varied. At the beginning of a tour, most crew members assumed a fatalistic attitude of "I'm either going to make it, or I'm not". But, after completing half the required total, if successful, there was more anxiety. The thought then became, "If I have completed one half of the missions, I might make it". Then "sweating" the missions increased. Very few refused to continue and very few wound up in rest centers. The worst time for most occurred during the time between crew briefing and take-off. They then knew what the target was to be, and an estimate of the defenses that might be encountered. Also, after getting their equipment and going to their airplane, there was nothing to do but "sweat". I saw some vomit during this time, particularly on a rough target. Once the crew became airborne, there were crew duties to perform which required their concentration.

My seventeenth mission, flown on June 14th, 1944 was the roughest, from a life-threatening stand point. The target was the Le Bourget airport in Paris, which, of course, was being used by the Germans. This was not supposed to be a difficult mission because the distance was not great and it was in France, rather than in Germany. The assembly and flight to the target was uneventful.

I was the deputy leader on this trip. When flying as a leader or deputy leader, that individual occupied the co-pilot's seat in the airplane. The responsibility for the crew was the pilot's, who, in effect, was the aircraft commander. The leader was concerned with the success of the mission.

When we were on the bomb run we were attacked by numerous German fighters. Our aircraft received numerous hits, which resulted in the loss of one engine, all hydraulic pressure, all communication equipment, even within the aircraft, and all engine instruments. Additionally, there were explosions and fire in the cockpit. The explosions were caused by the flares that were to be used in the formation assembly, but were not used since we were the deputy lead. Apparently the fighter attack had ignited the flares. It was obvious that the three of us in the cockpit were going to have to leave that area. There were two doors, one in the back leading to the bomb bay and to the rear of the aircraft, and one that led to the bombardier-navigator compartment in the front of the aircraft. The aircraft was, at this time, on automatic pilot. I got out of my seat and went below. I told the people there that we were on fire and would have to bail out. Someone tried to jettison the escape hatch but it wouldn't jettison, which closed off that avenue of escape. By this time, things became real confusing. We were at 25,000 feet, and I had been without oxygen for a time. My instincts told me if I didn't get some oxygen soon, I would pass out. I started back to the cockpit. By this time, the fire had almost gone out. The floor of the cockpit was made of wood and it was still smoldering. I encountered the engineer, who had been fighting the fire. His clothes were smoldering, also, so I extinguished that fire with my hands. They got a fairly good burn, which I didn't notice at the time.

I finally managed to get back to the co-pilot's seat and grabbed the oxygen hose and started sucking on it. I don't know what happened to my oxygen mask. As I started to be able to focus my eyes, I noticed that the airplane was flying fairly level. I looked at the altimeter and we were down to 20,000 feet.

I asked the engineer (*Sgt. Paul A. Birchen*) where the pilot was, and he informed me that he had bailed out through the bomb bay.

Since the airplane was still flying relatively well, and since the fire was out, why not try to get back to England? But I had a very sick airplane. One engine was out and the prop was windmilling and couldn't be feathered. Another engine was smoking real badly but was still running. All engine instruments were out. We were all alone in the air now, since, with all the problems and confusion, we could not stay with the group. Also, with the bad engine, we couldn't have kept up anyway.

We were now in the situation, a lone bomber, that normally invited further fighter attacks. I moved over to the pilot's seat. I further reduced our altitude because, among other things, it was easier to maintain air speed at a lower altitude. There were some clouds around and I tried, as much as possible, to stay in the clouds to avoid additional fighter attacks. After considerable anxiety, we approached the English Channel with a sigh of relief. We saw no more German fighters. Eventually we approached our base. Since we had no communication equipment, we could not ask for landing information. With no hydraulic pressure, we had no brakes on landing.

I tried to make the approach so that I would land as near the beginning of the runway as possible. We landed, and one of the gunners released his parachute, that he had attached securely to a part of the airplane. This helped slow our landing roll. We stopped before reaching the end of the runway. The fire in the cockpit had been of such magnitude that they retired the airplane because they were afraid some of the aircraft structure may have been weakened.

Following that mission, I was sent to Scotland for several days, and later was awarded the Silver Star and the Purple Heart for the Le Bourget mission. (*Sgt. Birchen, the engineer, also received the Silver Star for his gallantry in action*). The remaining missions on my tour were relatively uneventful except one, in which clouds were such that the formation could not get above them. B-17 formation cannot be maintained in the clouds, so all planes scattered and it was again single planes returning to England. Fortunately, we encountered no fighters. I guess they didn't like the weather, either.

Upon completion of my tour, the war was going good for the Allies. I packed my bags and went by train to a base in England that provided air transportation to the States. After a few days wait, I finally got on an airplane and arrived in New York around the middle of December, 1944. After processing at a base there, I caught a train for San Antonio. Upon arrival there, I was met by my wonderful wife and two year old son. A fitting climax to the most eventful year of my life.

The war ended in Europe May 8, 1945. The 457th Bomb Group returned to the States in May, 1945, and was disbanded in June, 1945.

The Group flew 236 combat missions and lost 94 aircraft.

In addition to the awards previously mentioned (Silver Star, Purple Heart) I was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal with three Oak Leaf Clusters, and the French Croix de Guerre.