Staff Sgt. Art Dersham Ball Turret Gunner

(Ray Hann's Crew) © 2003 Combat Aircrews' Preservation Society

What was the name of the aircraft you usually flew?

Staff Sgt. Dersham: He didn't. He didn't want a name it, but I named it myself, and it was the Firefly. Does that sound interesting?

What were your responsibilities as ball turret gunner?

Staff Sgt. Dersham: Well, I believe that my main function was to look out for enemy aircraft from coming in either from the front of the aircraft or from the rear. And basically I guess that was it. But I could rotate the ball turret 360 degrees.

Give me a description of the ball turret.

Staff Sgt. Dersham: Well it's all electrical, of course, for the most part. And you would have to rely on electricity to reach the turret, because you had these controls that are right up in front of you. And first of all, in order to get into the ball turret, it has to be positioned at 180 degrees, which is straight down out of the bottom of the aircraft.

I opened the hatch and then in order to get into it, I just stepped down into it. And I let the radio operator take and drop the levers from up above to lock it. Then once I'm inside, I rotate the ball turret back into the position, either facing the front of the aircraft to start out with, and then I turned the controls to either left or right or rotate it completely around and see where all the other aircraft are at that are following us.

And basically that's it, but when we get near the target, of course, I rotate it back down towards the ground to sort of watch out and see how our bomb loads are being released. And as we go over the target, course I try to see where some of these bombs are hitting. But they're mostly on the target.

Was it hard for you to track the fire coming at you?

Staff Sgt. Dersham: Well, from below you wouldn't see anything from up above, so therefore, it would always be from my standpoint, that only see aircraft coming in from, down below or up. At the twelve o'high...12:00 high coming in I would not be able to see that. I could

only see something coming in from, oh, well, it'd actually be twelve – what we'd call twelve o'clock low, or six o'clock low from the rear.

I could only take care of any kind of any enemy aircraft that were coming in from the lower part of the aircraft. I couldn't see anything from up above. And no, right. And I might point out that sometimes anybody would perhaps think that if you were shooting at any...the enemy that you had a cutoff position for the guns when you got around to where the props were at, so that, the guns wouldn't fire and naturally shoot off your own engines or your props, actually.

Were you ever concerned about getting out if your plane was hit?

Staff Sgt. Dersham: Well no, I, you know, 19 years old, I didn't think too much about that. I...actually, I really felt safe in there, because – and that's no kidding – I knew that all I had to do if the plane ever was headed downward was to take and flip up the levers in back of my head and just roll out, because I had a backpack on just like the pilot and copilot did. I was the only elite person on board that had that type of chute. So I really didn't feel scared about it. I never give it a second thought.

Explain how the guys got out in some of the earlier models where they had chest-type packs.

Staff Sgt. Dersham: Right. Well, I believe that they would have to call upon the radio operator to, once...naturally, they'd have to crank or rotate the turret to about 180 degrees, and then he would lift the levers and let you out. But, however, if you didn't have any electrical power, his only way of getting out of there would to be to be cranked back out.

So that meant he had to take this crank and put it down into the gear and, rotate it back out. Which would take a couple of minutes, and if you were headed down, I doubt very much with the centrifugal forces against you, getting out of there would probably be a pretty good job and be very difficult.

Tell me about flack.

Staff Sgt. Dersham: Well, I took whatever came along, I guess so to speak. I was just...course I...in that ball turret I had a lot of armament around me actually. That was pretty heavy steel around the back of where the doorway is at. The only glass, or Plexiglas, it was on the front of the turret that I could see out of that would be the only place that any flack could probably enter the ball turret. So anything

that ever hit our aircraft never seemed...it seemed to bounce right off of the ball turret and never was a problem. I saw a lot of flack though.

Describe what flack looked like to you below the aircraft.

Staff Sgt. Dersham: Well, it just seemed to be just...as it was breaking out it would be just a black cloud and I never saw anything else other than that. It was...they were all over. It seems like it was pretty heavy at times, especially over Berlin.

Ray, the pilot there didn't mention that there was a maximum of about 1,500 guns that they had around Berlin. And, of course, Mersburg had the same deal there just about, but Berlin had, they were pretty heavy...heavily concentrated with guns there – 88's, of course. That's all they had.

Tell me about when you were hit with the 30 millimeter round and caught fire.

Staff Sgt. Dersham: Well, from my standpoint, being in the ball turret, I didn't see anything that, any kind of flame from the...at that advantage point there. but, of course, I was out of the ball turret when we get back over the channel, why, I get out of...back out of the turret, because there's nothing. We don't have to worry about enemy aircraft or fighters or anything like that over the English Channel, because they don't...they're all gone, because the P-51's, our escorts, usually chase them away or pretty well much take care of them.

What was the landing like seeing the big trail of flames (His B-17 had an engine fire)?

Staff Sgt. Dersham: Well, yes, I was back in the...course, I'd get out, when I'd get out of the ball turret, I'm right there in the waist, practically in the waist section there. And, I don't know, I guess I just followed the crowd. I didn't, uh...I waited until the aircraft really slowed down, which was at the end, pretty much at the end of the runway, and I just jumped out. And I didn't get bruised or anything; there was no problem. So I just got out and stood by...out along side the plane and watched the fire crew put out the, the fire. But it was pretty...lot of foam around there.

After seeing other planes that lost wings or exploded, were you concerned at all that you guys might not make it?

Staff Sgt. Dersham: Well, yes, especially in the areas of when we went over Berlin again, Mersburg, and Kassel. These were some of

the scarier type of missions that we were on, but I guess I wouldn't feel that it was any worse than perhaps any of the rest of the missions that we went on.

It could have happened any place, so you just had to take them as they came, I guess, so to speak. But, I, as far as getting out of the aircraft, I felt that if we had to bail out, why, I had the chute there to do it with. And I didn't have to look around for mine, because it was on my back. It was just a matter of just being able to get out the doorway.

What was it like seeing a B-17 spin out and counting chutes?

Staff Sgt. Dersham: Well that was rather traumatic, I guess, watching as planes were... Ones that we did see go down and roll over, why, that was mainly our duty to watch and be able to re...explain it when we got back and was debriefed, how many chutes we saw from our planes going down, and...

You know, you try to look, count as many as you could, whether it was six, seven, or eight, or even nine. Chances were that depending on how the plane was perhaps blown out, if there was a lot of debris around it'd be very difficult to see, you know, they're going down and at a pretty fast rate, and you wouldn't be able to maybe see all of them even though perhaps maybe they didn't pull the chute until they got further down. And flying at 27,000 feet as we were, but, of course, as we were going over targets we were on a... dropping a lower altitude maybe down to 22 to 24, something like that, I guess it was when your bombs were released.

Was there time enough for everybody to get out?

Staff Sgt. Dersham: Well, yes, I guess most part there...the one's that I'd seen, I didn't see them all, but the ones that I did see, it seemed like most of them got out.

Tell me about the time you ran off the runway.

Staff Sgt. Dersham: Yeah, right. Well, I recall hearing some hissing from the bomb compartment. I knew what that was; that was the bombs. And, of course, the pins naturally are not pulled at that point. You don't do that until you get over the English Channel. And, well, being...I was in either the radio compartment at that time or setting in the waist area, but we just walked back – walked, I guess we ran fast as we could to get out that side door.

And when I did, I went around the...we just...I ran around the side of the plane to look and was waiting for something to happen, but it never did. And, of course I looked straight ahead there, and what I saw was a tree. And we were perhaps anywheres from 50 to maybe 100 feet away from it, and it was a pretty good size tree.

But of course, all these stumps like Ray mentioned pretty well much slowed us down. But we were in this ravine there and, of course, I...where we were at, when we got out, well, it was just the ground was right there, cause we were pretty much low...

Tell me what it was like for you during the aborted takeoff, since you didn't have a seatbelt or anything to keep you from being jostled around.

Staff Sgt. Dersham: Well, I was just sitting between the bulkheads of course, I knew that there was...something was traumatically happening, but I just, I don't know, I guess I was just sitting around on the bulkheads. Mae Wests were nearby there. That's these things that you put on (). I just, I don't know. I didn't bounce around. I just...even though we were going 80 miles an hour for our takeoff.

Did physical size make a difference to a ball turret gunner?

Staff Sgt. Dersham: Oh, no, no. Well, I came on, actually we came on the crew, we had two flight engineers and, of course, I happened to be a flight engineer as well as the other one that was chosen, but, you can only have one flight engineer. And so Ray flipped a coin, and the other guy got the position. So really, it didn't...that really part of it didn't bother me, so...because of my size, I was really able to get into that turret a lot better than the other flight engineer.

What were the responsibilities of the flight engineer?

Staff Sgt. Dersham: Well, he'd call out air speeds. He'd change positions of the props, if they needed to be feathered, he would maintain and watch for fuel levels when they maybe needed to be changed from one tank to another. On landing he'd call out air speeds to the pilot or he could...on other things that he could do would be to feather the props if that was needed.

Well, then he also operated the top turret, which he had to climb up, which was right behind the pilot's and the copilot's seat. He would have to shoot at the enemy from up there. He would have to jump into that turret and watch for enemy aircraft coming in at 12 o'clock high and from all the other angles throughout the aircraft.

So he had to be familiar with all the systems of the aircraft, is that right?

Staff Sgt. Dersham: Well, the hydraulic system, the electrical system, the oxygen system, the deicer system on the aircraft, that, basically was it.

Was he like the crew chief of the air?

Staff Sgt. Dersham: Yes, exactly, right. He's watching most of the instruments and on takeoff, and I don't remember what else.

Did he hand crank the gear down, if the gear needed to go down?

Staff Sgt. Dersham: Yes, he could, yeah, he could do that. But, that, the copilot actually was the one that tripped the gear to come up when we were taking off that particular time. Yeah. (Editors note: In the event of a loss of power, the landing gear on a B-17 could be manually cranked down by hand. This duty would most like have fallen to the Flight Engineer).

Do you think the job you guys did was tougher in that your technology was not as advanced as it is today?

Staff Sgt. Dersham: Well what we had was perhaps at that time the best thing that had come along as far as technology. As the years had gone by, more guns were added to the aircraft. We had two side .50 caliber guns on either side to begin with, and then they switched over to a turret in the nose of the aircraft that could be operated either by the navigator or the bombardier. That was their position, to take care of enemy coming in from the front as well from a lower level or from straight ahead or getting some of the fighters coming in from maybe at 45 degrees up ahead of you.

How would you describe a B-17?

Staff Sgt. Dersham: Well, I think that we had a better aircraft because it was just a stronger built aircraft compared to the B-24. I had in my earlier days, or not earlier days, but just before I entered the service, I worked at the Willow Run on a B-24 bomber, so I'm familiar with a Davis wing and I knew exactly how that thing was built.

And it was rather a sort of a flimsier type wing, and it had a lot of flexibility, and I don't know, they seemed to come apart a lot easier than the 17. But I had a lot of faith in the B-17. I'm, I'm sure...I'm certainly glad that I had the opportunity to fly in a 17, because they

were just stronger, and I liked the Wright engine that it had. And they really just seemed to be a lot better engine, and it worked real good.

Is there anything else you can add about your experience?

Staff Sgt. Dersham: I don't know, but I was just glad that it was over when it was.

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