

Harold K. Hartell
1st Lieutenant
B-17 Bombardier

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What was your position?

1st. Lt. Hartell: I was a bombardier. My MOS was bombardier and after I lost my crew I filled in other positions and we'd had training as navigational training too. So I flew quite a few missions as navigator.

What were your responsibilities as a bombardier?

1st. Lt. Hartell: Over the target area is where the bombardier took over and the Norden Bomb Sight, which was the best at its time, controlled the plane over the target area through the automatic pilot on the plane. And the bombardier stopped the drift of the crosshairs on the target and if you had your elevation set properly, and killed all the drift in your crosshairs, you'd hit the target. It was good. It was a good sight.

How accurate was the bomb sight?

1st. Lt. Hartell: I found that it was very accurate. I had extremely good luck with it. You know, in practice in the states. In combat, 'course with flak bursting around you, you know, it's a little more hectic and, and sometimes you didn't hit your target, but you came close.

How did you lose your crew?

1st. Lt. Hartell: I trained in the states with Adelman's crew and we were in B-24s and we shipped across on the Queen Elizabeth and went through Stone and England and then on to Eye and the 490th Bomb Group. And there they put us in B-17s, which I was glad they did, but it took a lot of training and we were on a training mission.

My, especially my pilot, we wanted to be a lead crew, so we were on a training mission in B-17s and we had an instructor pilot with us and also an instructor navigator. And we had ended up with a mid-air collision over Bury St. Edmunds, England and I lost my whole crew and crew of the plane that hit us also. They all died.

Do you know what caused the mid-air?

1st. Lt. Hartell: No. Apparently the plane that was flying above us dropped down and their props hit ours about the radio room, cut it in half and I was

through for the day and it was crowded in the nose since we had an extra man up there as a trainer and so I'd...we were letting down in formation. We were about 15,000 feet and I'd gone back to the about the ball turret area with a walk-around oxygen bottle. I knew we had some magazines back there and I got out of the way of up in the nose.

So I was sitting there reading and when I came to (from being knocked unconscious), my helmet and oxygen mask had been stripped off and I was in the aft part of the plane, which was spinning down and from about my waist down was hanging out in the air stream.

And the only thing that kept me from going out was my suit caught on the torn aluminum. And didn't have my chute on. We had chest packs and we carried them with us always, but you couldn't work with them, so we carried them and have them right side of us. And so I didn't have my chute, so I knew I had to have that and everything, I could see the gunners in the aft part of the plane and, and the 50 calibers back there. Everything was in mid-air floating.

Well, to me, it was a miracle. It was like a beam of light focused on a certain chute and I knew that was my chute. We had a little yellow flap over the pins and it had your number painted on there and I knew that was my chute and I had to get to it. So I crawled back in the plane, jerked loose from the aluminum, crawled back up, it was very steep. Got to my chute and put it on, snapped it on. I didn't even look at the number, but it knew it was mine and I knew I couldn't make it to the door, so I crawled back out the open end of the chute. My suit...chute caught on the tin, the aluminum again.

Finally I jerked that loose and I slid right up over the vertical stabilizer and I was sure glad to get out of that thing. And about that time I could see our nose section going off at a pretty steep angle and it exploded about the time I looked at it. And I never did see the other plane, the one that hit us, but it ended up upside down in a small lake there in Bury St. Edmunds. And all 10 men were aboard in that. They, none of them got out.

After my chute opened, one of our guys came...I couldn't recognize who it was, came by me without his chute and I hit in a...everything was always wet in England and this was in January and I hit in a plowed field...Oh, when my chute opened, first, we had heated suits, you know, and I had over my heated boots heated socks they really were. Why, I had these sheep lined boots. Well when my chute opened my boots flew off. They were a little big and so I landed in the mud. I went about to my knees in that mud in my stocking feet, you see.

And from all the oscillation I was nauseated and once I was down I didn't really care and the chute was taking me across this muddy field, still had air in it, you know, and a little English kid, couldn't have been over 10 years old, ran up and he grabbed the shroud lines on one side and dumped the air out of the chute.

He knew what he was doing. And I started to get up and sort of struggling to get up, you know, and he jumped right straddled my chest and he said, "Don't get up sir. Don't get up sir. I know just how to take care of you." He said, "I've had training."

And at that time, you know, all the kids had been taken out of London and places like that and put in the countryside. Well I was so...he was...I had a few cuts, you know, and I was bleeding here and there. He grabbed out a handkerchief and he was starting to dab the blood off, you know. And about that time some English civilians showed up and took me into the hospital there at Bury St. Edmunds and, and I was real sorry I didn't get that little guy's name 'cause he really did a job.

How long did it take from impact till you grabbed your chute?

1st. Lt. Hartell: Oh, I think it must have been seconds. See, I was knocked out. I couldn't have been out very long, couldn't have been, because after I'd crawled in and got my chute and back out I saw the nose, or the front part of the plane pretty low, but it exploded so it wasn't down yet. So it couldn't have been very long.

What happened to the gunners? Did they get out?

1st. Lt. Hartell: No.

Were they pinned to the side of the aircraft?

1st. Lt. Hartell: Well, there was a lot of centrifugal force, and, but they were looking for their chutes too. See, none of us were wearing backpacks (parachutes), except the pilot and co-pilot, and the instructors. From then on I said I wouldn't fly unless I had a backpack, which they gave me one.

Did anyone else get out?

1st. Lt. Hartell: Major Blum got out. He was the pilot instructor. \The navigator instructor got out and I understand that he was the on...they were...those were the only two besides me. None of my crew got out. And I understand that when the navigational pilot went to pull his rip cord and he couldn't. And he looked down and he didn't have a hand. So he had to reach over and pull it with this one.

What do you think the cause of the mid-air was? Was it pilot error?

1st. Lt. Hartell: Well it had to be. 'Course, you know they got statements from everybody that lived, and they got one from me too and 'course it was all

classified, but I got a copy of the government report, you know, after 50 years you can get it. It was de-classified and it was essentially, according to the review, it was pilot error.

That was an experienced crew that hit us. They had only one more mission to go before they came home. And I don't know if our pilot went up and they went down or vice-versa or what happened 'cause I wasn't really watching when it happened.

Do you think weather was a factor?

1st. Lt. Hartell: No. We just had a few clouds, few cumulus clouds floating around, but that wasn't a factor at all.

Tell me about flak.

1st. Lt. Hartell: Oh yeah. We ran into very heavy flak. And I have a piece just like that gentleman, the past gentleman had, 'cept it didn't hit me. But it came awful close.

How would you describe flak?

1st. Lt. Hartell: Well the 88s were...you just see a black puff of smoke and then if it hit the plane well, you'd hear it hitting the plane like gravel, you know, hitting aluminum. The 155s you'd always, almost always see an orange flame. And the, the bursts were much larger. And we caught a piece from a 155 one time, well we caught several, but the biggest one that came close to me was about that long and about that wide and about that thick. It was a sort of a large chunk.

That one came through and went right in through the nose. I didn't know how it got past me, but it did, and landed on the, under the pilot's feet, broke all the hydraulic lines and we had to land at that big air strip in London 'cause we didn't have any brakes.

Did you ever have any run-ins with the Luftwaffe?

1st. Lt. Hartell: We got hit by two ME-109s one day, and at the time we were there the German Air Force had been beaten down quite a lot, but they made up for it with flak usually. But we got hit one day by two ME-109s and our gunners got one of them, or not specifically our gunners, but our group gunners and the other ME-109 went, he went through the formation. I saw pieces flying off of the plane and then smoke, but then he turned the plane up and it rolled it on its back and the pilot bailed out, but his plane went and took down another B-17. So he was an experienced pilot, I guess.

Did you ever hear that toward the end of the war they were ramming

planes?

1st. Lt. Hartell: No, I never heard that. The Messerschmitt 262s hit us one day too. And they came down from high out of the sun and came down through our formation and then all straightaway. Because if they tried to turn why that, that's when they got in trouble. So they ran straightaway and but they took down two bombers when they came through.

What was your impression the first time you saw a jet?

1st. Lt. Hartell: We'd heard about them you know, and I was amazed at how fast they were. They smoked a lot too. They put out a lot of smoke...out of the tail pipe.

Which position did you enjoy more?

1st. Lt. Hartell: At the time I was there, the lead crews were (the only aircraft) carrying bombardiers, so it got to where the lead crews were selecting or locating the target and getting on it.

Then we had what we called toggliers. When the lead crew dropped their bombs a smoke bomb went out and when that happened the toggliers would hit the switch and drop with it.

I rather enjoyed the navigation part. We had a British version of radar that they called G. We had G Boxes and I was checked out in that. You see, after I lost my crew I was a misfit. So if this guy needed a navigator, I'd fly with him. If he needed a bombardier over here I'd fly with him.

I was flying with Lutz one time, the pilot was Lutz, and we were in the vicinity of Munich and we caught a shell in the left wing right at the root and it didn't explode. It was a dud. Went right on through. And the gunners were yelling at us to...we're losing gas out of the wing tank.

So Lutz sent me back to check it out and the gas was just pouring out of that tank. It was a big hole and but the self-sealer that was in the tank was starting to swell and we landed at the nearest friendly field in France and by the time we landed there was a wad of that self-sealer about the size of a bushel basket under the wing, but it had stopped it. It was just maybe a drip, but it was almost...it really did its job.

What kind of tools did you have to navigate with?

1st. Lt. Hartell: That British version of the G Box, their version of radar was excellent. I checked (our course) out visually, you know, for I'd know where I was against the box and it was very accurate. But it was short range, like about

300 miles, that was it. We were flying much longer missions than that. In fact, we went to Berlin twice while I was there, which was an extra long flight.

Can you tell me how the G Box worked?

1st. Lt. Hartell: You had a scope and we called it grass or green grass coming across and there were two stations with a slave station and you had to pick out those signals and then you lock it in and get the coordinates, check it on the map where the lines crossed. That's where you were. And it worked real good. Other than that my navigation training had just been for dead reckoning. I hadn't been checked out in celestial.

Tell me about shadow aircraft (Germans flying captured B-17s).

1st. Lt. Hartell: Several times we'd notice a plane. You know, look like he's struggling along with a bomber stream, you know, and he'd be way out right at our elevation. We had that happen several times and everybody knew that's what he was doing, you know, 'cause they had gotten quite a few of our planes that had crashed, you know. That way he could radio down the exact elevation and heading and all that to the flack gunners.

Tell me about Little Friends (P-51 fighter escorts).

1st. Lt. Hartell: Oh, it was great. The only trouble was they were excellent. They really protected us within their range. But, when, when we got out of their range, then, of course the Germans were waiting for that, see, and both times that the fighters hit our group it was when I was along, when we were out of the fighter range. Naturally, they do that.

Anything else?

1st. Lt. Hartell: Well, I wanted to say too that all my crew are buried there at Cambridge in the cemetery there and I had problem with it. I knew a lot of their families and that was a hard part because you... I wrote all of them letters and most of them wrote back and said, "Well, why didn't so-an-so get out if you got out?" I, I don't know how you explain that. I just couldn't do it. And I felt real bad about that 'cause I, I knew them quite well. We'd trained together all through training.

We hauled k-rations over to the... when the Germans went out of Holland they flooded the whole country. And Amsterdam and Rotterdam were out of food, so they had us haul, had the 8th Air Force hauling food. Well the RAF did too, I think. I know they did. And we carried k-rations and our drop point was over a bombed out airfield and we went over the airfield at about 100 feet and just drop, you know. Some of the boxes went into the canals and so forth, but, you know, they got them out. And the people were so happy they were just

jumping and down and waving, you know. 'Course, they were starving.

Another thing we did was haul displaced persons back to their home country after the war was over. And they I know our plane was... we were real loaded and crowded and they were wanting to, some of them were pointing to the map wanting me to show them where we were. And when we crossed the border into their country they'd just start crying. Probably been gone for years, you know.

I, I really miss losing my crew because we had trained together, you know, crews are real tight and I never could get that way with... with other crews because I'd change too many times, see, they'd...I filled in where I was needed.

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