

George Gilbert
B-17 Bombardier

© 2003 Combat Aircrews' Preservation Society

Continued from 1A

What was your feeling about Paul Tibbets and one plane dropping one bomb?

Well, of course we had no idea in the world that we were gonna have the Manhattan Project and go ahead and drop a bomb on Hiroshima. It naturally was a great surprise to me, but my feeling was the same as the statement that he made (the previous interviewee) because people had asked me many, many times, "How did you feel about flying over a target and dropping bombs and knowing that maybe some of those bombs killed civilians?" I said, "Doesn't bother me in the least."

It was a job that I had to do and also many, many, many years later when I think about it, I ask myself the question, "God, what would have happened if we would have lost the war?" So actually, I mean, what we did and he did saved millions of lives, not only Americans, but Japanese also - if we would have had to invade that country.

Tell me your family's feeling about you joining the military.

Well, everybody was going. I mean, it was...fellows were leaving school and, and people were leaving families and there was a certain patriotic feeling and also in my family, my wife has an uncle that's on the U.S.S. Arizona, still on the Arizona.

So naturally we wanted a little bit of retribution, you know, to go ahead and come back and I don't know, it just seemed to be the normal thing to do. I don't think it was anything heroic or anything. It justseeing something that would have had to be done.

How safe did you feel on the B-17?

Well, everybody had a world of confidence in his pilot. If you talk to anybody today he'll tell you that his pilot was the greatest one that ever flew. And that seemed to be like a security blanket. I mean, you never thought about being in it. All we knew was that when we flew a mission and came back we had a bed to fall into and we had a warm meal to eat and maybe we flew two missions in a row and then maybe we were off a week or so, you know, so it was almost like a job like getting up in the morning and going to work.

Did you ever see any mid-air collisions?

I never saw any over England. I saw some over the channel when we went ahead and we started crossing to make landfall. But over Germany no. I sweated them out. I mean, we came back on missions where fog set in and darkness was starting to come down and all the fields intersected one another. The landing patterns, you know, you saw airplanes all over the sky and to me it was always a miracle that there weren't more collisions. But somehow or other they all got on the ground. We landed them.

Did you ever remember seeing any near misses?

Oh yeah, we had...in fact, we had an incidence where we came back with bombs on board. We were flying an old airplane that had mechanical racks (Editor's note: as opposed to electrically released racks) and these bombs piled up in the bomb bay, and we couldn't get them out.

So we went ahead and we called in and they landed all the other aircraft first and they left us for the last one to go ahead and come in, in the event they came out and bounced along the runway. Naturally, I put the (arming) pins back in and defused them and as we came in for a landing we had a plane cut in front of us and his prop wash hit us and threw us up in the air. And the nose went up in the air and when it came down the bombs came out. They landed in a farmer's field, fortunately, and went right through the bomb bay doors. Tore them all to pieces.

So none of them exploded?

Yeah, we went ahead and we put the cotter pins back in. They carry two fuses, one in the back and one in the front. And in the event that the one in the front didn't go off, by the time the one in the back hit it would explode. But in order to engage them there was a cotter key that had to go in.

So, in other words, we had 10 bombs on the airplane. We had 20 cotter keys. When you came back from a mission, you had to turn those cotter keys in to show that you had fused the bombs and that the bombs exploded over the target. We got on the ground we turned 16 in, 'cause the others were in the in the bombs and they recovered the bombs. They were in the farmer's field. (Editor's note: only 2 bombs were hung up, and consequently ended in the field).

Were there any times you couldn't see because of fog?

Yeah, we had that and many times we'd, we would be diverted to other airfield. The British had one right on the coast and what they used to do is they used to take oil drums, fill them with oil and put them on fire, which would go ahead and diffuse the fog a little bit and allow us to land and trucks would take us back to our base and the next day we'd come back and get the planes.

Did your plane get any significant battle damage prior to being shot down?

Nobody in my crew nobody ever got wounded. Nope, we were fortunate.

Did you ever hear the statistics about being killed or hurt on a B-17?

'Course as far as percentage of losses are concerned, we had more losses in the Air Corp not in total numbers, but in percentages than any other branch of the service.

How would you sum up the B-17?

I think it was a wonderful airplane for its time. I mean, I saw airplanes come back on one engine with battle damage, I mean, that you couldn't believe that airplane would be in the sky. It was a wonderful airplane.

What was the difference between a bombardier and a Toggileer?

Well, the bombardier was fully trained. I mean, he went all the way through. He took gunnery school the same as the togglier did. He also received navigation. Many instances he flew as a navigator and all the togglier did was taught to hit the toggle switches, sends the bombs out.

I mean, he wasn't qualified to make repairs or adjustments to a bomb sight; he didn't use one. He wasn't trained in the repair of the intervolumeter or other small things that could happen in the airplane. He probably went through training at gunnery school for six weeks and maybe got a week or two course in how to toggle bombs.

The bombardier spent, outside of preflight school, once he got to bombardier school, 18 weeks. So he was fully trained, and of course the training showed up in the fact that your bombardiers were commissioned officers and the toggliers were not.

Tell me how the lead bombardier dropped a smoke marker.

Well, the lead bombardier actually controls the mission and I never saw anything in the smoke bomb go out. What happened, you just kept your eyes on that plane and if you weren't using a sight that day when you saw that first bomb go out you hit your toggle switch and you released your bombs with him, because they wanted the greatest concentration of bombs that they could get together.

And I've never seen statistics. I don't know what the accuracy rate was because probably half the missions that I flew I never even saw the ground. I mean, we were closed in and we bombed on, on radar, Mickey Sets or whatever we were using that day.

Tell me about the importance of a tight formation.

Well, the tight formation went ahead and gave you the greatest concentration of bombs; and as far as a tight formation, once you dropped them, that was also protection against fighters. You had 12 airplanes with 12 machine guns on them. You had 144 guns that were shooting at fighters. And fighters had a tendency to stay away from you.

Was the pilot able to toggle bombs from his station?

In the event that you had a hang-up of bombs in the bomb bay or something happened in the nose, the pilot had a switch where he could go ahead and hit them and get rid of them.

Could the pilot toggle the bombs for a regular drop on a target?

Well, he could drop them, but as far as the accuracy there was nothing there. I mean, he had nothing to gauge his accuracy by.

Tell me how the bombs dropped out.

Well there were two ways of dropping bombs. One was in salvo where they all went out at one time. And the other one was by the intervalometer where you set them maybe 25 feet apart. As a rule we dropped them in salvo. Unless we were going to a small target that was difficult to hit then we would go ahead, set them on a intervalometer and take a chance on some of the bombs hitting them. But as a rule, I mean, the large targets we went to we dropped them in salvo, all at one time.

Tell me what a typical bomb compliment might be.

Well as a rule, we carried twelve 500 pound bombs. If we were going on a longer mission we carried 10 to make up for the gas consumption.

You were the armorer also?

I was in charge of the armor on the airplane.

Tell me about the maintenance of the guns.

The gunners, after briefing, pilots, navigators and bombardiers would go to their own briefing and the gunners would go to the airplane. They would go and pick up the barrels and before we got to the target, when we crossed the channel, we would test fire the guns.

When we came back they would take the gun, not the complete guns out, but just the barrels and go to the gun shop clean them and oil them and put them on the racks again. One of my waist gunners had been to armor school and I gave him the responsibility of checking the guns to see that they all went in and he put my guns in. I never put my own guns in. Never misfired.

Never had a problem with guns then.

Never had a problem.

Were there any other responsibilities as armorer?

Well we were responsible to see that the bombs were hanging correctly in the racks, that the fuses were all intact, that all the fuses had pins on them and also the responsibility that the bomb sight was functional was mine, to make sure that it was working properly. Also to check the bomb bay doors to see that they were working properly. That was a responsibility of mine.

Tell me about pulling the pins.

Well these, as I said, the fuses had cotter pins in them with a tag on them, number on them. And when we would get up to just as we were at the English Channel, we didn't do it over land in the event that they might fall out of the bomb bays by mistake. When you got over there, before you got up to altitude you went in the back and you bent them and when you got close to the target you went ahead and you pulled them out where they're easy to pull out.

And you hung onto them and when you came back from the mission you turned them into the briefing officer to prove to him that you had dropped armed bombs, that you didn't take a ride over for nothing.

© 2003 Combat Aircrews' Preservation Society

Combat Aircrews' Preservation Society reserves all rights to this transcript, and no part may be edited, duplicated, bartered, exchanged, sold or reprinted without the expressed written consent of Combat Aircrews' Preservation Society.