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What was your position?

I went over as lead pilot with the squadron and after I had about 8 or 9 missions, became squadron operations officer.

What were your duties?

A lead pilot primarily training the other pilots and learning formation – how to effectively use a B-17.

Talk about flying a steady air speed.

Well actually if the lead pilot is not properly maneuvering the plane then the tail-end Charlie has to push the throttles up, bring them back constantly on the move and so it was important that the leader would maintain a constant air speed as much as possible and altitude so that the people behind him could maintain their position.

Wouldn't the aircraft flying towards the end of the bomber stream tend to run out of fuel if they jockeyed their throttles a lot?

Generally there was enough fuel that one would be able to continue with a mission without having to worry about it. Generally we have our tanks topped off before we even taxied out so that fuel on a normal mission was not a problem. We had one mission, though, to Regensburg, which was the first shuttle mission that we performed and which it took off from England, through Germany, flack, fighters, the whole bit and flew on, instead of returning to England, flew on to North Africa, and landed at North Africa.

By the time we got to North Africa most of the aircraft were pretty much out of fuel and the operation generally called for a plane which had to come in and land would shoot off red-red flares, meaning you had wounded aboard or you had a problem with your plane or needed to come in. By that time nearly everyone was shooting off red-red flares and it was a problem of who was trying to come in and who had the right-of-way and it was a matter of pretty much of ability to get down. And sometimes the planes were so out of fuel that they couldn't taxi off the landing strip and another plane would have to come in and we lost several planes on the ground just due to collisions.

What do you remember about collisions and having no radar?

I think it was one of the scariest parts, perhaps of the whole operation, was to be able to take off in weather the birds wouldn't even fly in, and to climb up to 25,000 or 30,000 feet in the clouds and try to get up on top.

I think we lost a lot of ships due to mid air collisions because the air fields were so close together and there were so many planes taking off at the same time that a real problem was trying to stay on course to form up on top and then go on out to the mission.

Did you ever witness any mid air collisions?

I never saw one myself, but we certainly in the squadron I was with and the group I was with had a number of planes that would collide.

What do you remember about the fighter attacks?

Fighter attacks – frightening. You could see them forming up ahead of you. I remember on the, especially on the Regensburg mission, it was a beautifully clear day; you could see the airfields ahead of you for miles. You could see the planes take...the fighters taking off, forming up and attacking the aircraft, the bomber wave and then going back and another group of fighters would get ready to take off. So as far as you could see you saw fighters swarming up, looked like a bunch of angry bees that you had disturbed their nest.

What do you remember about their tactics?

Generally they would see about coming up from on top and just diving right through the formation. I didn't see much in the way of acrobatics or much in the way of anything that fancy. It was just a matter of them lining up and coming after you, sometimes head-on, most of the time they would just come right through the formation with their guns blazing.

Did your aircraft see much damage?

On the Regensburg Raid the plane was pretty badly shot up. We lost one engine. We lost our oxygen supply and two of the gunners were wounded, so we were very lucky in order to get to land at North Africa.

What were the losses like?

The loss, we got over in June of '43 and I think that I had counted that we lost about 60% of our original crews.

What was morale like?

Well I think that it was something that most of us felt that we had something to do and got it done. I don't think that most people, at least that I worked with and flew with, were really that fatalistic about it that they knew they were gonna go down. You just...at the...if your number was up it was up.

Did you realize how high the mortality rate was?

It was always a real sad thing. But I don't think most of us dwelled that much on it. Some of the people did really refuse to fly anymore and were either reassigned or put in some other branch.

What do you remember about the B-17 as a dependable ship?

We were very lucky. The B-17 was, I think, a marvelous aircraft and it could stand an awful lot of punishment, often coming home on just two engines. It couldn't really maintain much altitude (with one or more engines out), but often you could at least bring it on home, but it was a wonderful ship.

Did you fly 25 or 30?

I put in 28 missions and then after I had finished my 28 missions after a year I went into P-51s and flew Mustangs. I had the opportunity to form what was known as the scouting force. Each air division had a scouting force, weather scouts really is what it amounted to. But we were fully armed and we had the provision that after we had reported weather over a target we could then attack any aircraft we saw. We were prohibited from doing any ground strafing because we only had eight aircraft and eight pilots and so they told us that we couldn't do any ground strafing, but we could engage in contact...in combat if the occasion arose.

Did that occasion ever happen?

It had a couple of times. I think the scouts I was with and my third scout said I had credit for five enemy aircraft. And I damaged one, but did...never got credit for a kill.

What was the attitude with the bomber crews towards the P-51s?

Oh, I think that we adored them. They were the best thing that happened to us. When we first went over we had English Spitfires, which would carry us across the channel, give us escort once we got into enemy territory. Their fuel would run out and they would have to go back. So, the big difference, I think, in the bombing was when we got long-range escort. Certainly made a great deal of difference.

How important was the box formation?

Well I, yes, I think certainly the tighter your formation the better chance you had of not only make a successful bomb run, but also protecting yourselves and it was certainly the stragglers who were picked off. As long as you could have a good formation, a good tight formation, it would really make a difference as far as your losses were concerned.

When you had to pull out of formation, what was going through your mind?

I think the main thing that was going through our mind was survival. We hoped that we could manage to get out and get on the ground.

Did you ever see any German's flying captured B-17s?

I never saw any myself. But we heard stories about that happening, but I never witnessed that myself.

What were you told about egress (escaping the enemy)?

Well I think we all had escape kits with us, which contained silk maps that wouldn't be destroyed with the rain or water. We had, most of us had at one time anyway, a photograph in civilian clothes that we could use if we went down so that we could get a false passport.

Anything else?

I can't think of much except we had on the Regensburg raid we were to land in North Africa on the steel mats down on the sand and any aircraft which needed to be repaired could be repaired at that time and if they were air worthy would go on another mission. So then we were out, sent out to the desert where we refueled and reloaded, went back and hit Bordeaux.

Over Bordeaux my plane was attacked by fighters and we lost two engines, so we couldn't...and the weather was really bad, so we couldn't maintain air speed or altitude and finally had to ditch in the channel and were picked up by air/sea rescue. Lost four men that night in the bad weather.

Did you lose the men because they were drowned?

They were drowned. Two of them were unable to swim to the life raft we had and two of them during the night were unable to stay afloat and we couldn't keep them up.

What was the water like?

Actually it was favorable because, I think, this was early September and the water hadn't really gotten that cold yet. Had it been colder, we would have probably all perished because we were out 24 hours before the air/sea rescue came after us. The area...they knew where we were and they had us spotted, but the water, the seas were so rough that they didn't want to lose their patrol boat, so they put back in and waited until the weather got better and then came out the next day after us.

So everybody survived the ditching?

We, we lost four people that night. The rest of us survived.

I meant the actual airplane hitting the water...

The actual wing leader, very nice landing actually. And the airplane stayed afloat for at least 25 minutes, which was unheard of. Of course we were out of fuel, so it was more buoyant than if we had been full loaded.

Tell me about the men who drowned.

Two of them were unable to swim to the raft. Actually the...we were supposed to have two rafts, five-men rafts, one on each side of the top of the bomb bay. When our plane got down we found, for some reason, there was only one life raft that came out and there was actually 11 of us aboard 'cause we were leading the mission and we had an extra navigator. So, two of the men were unable to swim out to the life raft, and, of course, the sea, as I say, was running very high and two of them during the night slipped away.

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