

Chief Master Sergeant Wendell Ray Lee
B-17 Radio Operator/ Waist Gunner

© 2003 Combat Aircrews' Preservation Society

Tell me what you did in the war.

Chief Master Sgt. Lee: Well, I made the military a career. I really didn't intend to. But I gave it all to my country and attained the highest rank as an E-9, Chief Master Sergeant. But in World War II, I wanted to become a pilot and I washed out. And I probably had one of the longest runs as Buck Private. I did not make corporal for almost two years and I got letters from home. My mother couldn't understand, you know, why that I was still a Private.

But I washed out of cadet training and they told me that I had chosen radio and that I had to go to radio school, that I couldn't go directly to gunnery. So, I did. It took me six months to go through radio school in Sioux Falls, South Dakota and I went from Sioux Falls, South Dakota to radio gunnery school in Yuma, Arizona.

And I spent approximately two months, six to eight weeks of gunnery and they had been promoting people to Staff Sergeant. I received Corporal out of gunnery and they gave us a 10-day delay in route to Omaha, Nebraska to form a crew. I went to Omaha, Nebraska and met the other members of my crew. My pilot was Patrick Keech, couldn't have found a finer man, really.

Anyway, we were sent to Dyersburg, Tennessee for OTU overseas training, which took I think three months or more. And then we went back to Lincoln to either take an airplane and go overseas or go by boat. And we went and came over on the (INAUDIBLE) France. And I started, you know, receiving indoctrination training and we got here (England) around Christmas of '44.

On our first mission we got lost. How we could get lost, I tell you, being a radio operator I flipped over to the command frequency. I heard the command pilot tell the rest of the pilots to spread out a little bit, maintain the same indicated airspeed and altitude and we'd be

out of the clouds within five minutes. And we were. We come out of the clouds. Not another aircraft in sight. We're all alone. And scared to death – or at least I was.

The pilots flipped over and to the navigator he says, "Mic, what heading do I take to get to our next rendezvous point?" The navigator says, "How the hell do I know? Only the lead and deputy lead is navigating. We're just playing follow the leader." So the pilot says, "Well, what do you suggest?" The navigator says, "I suggest that we find someplace to get rid of these bombs or we're not gonna have enough gas to get back home."

So the pilot dropped down to the top of the clouds. We kind of hid in the clouds for awhile, then we dropped below the level of the clouds to find a suitable target to get rid of our bombs. And we did and headed for home.

The pilot, after we got back, got his you-know-what chewed for doing that and the reason being we were told that George Patton was on his way to Berlin, that we could have dropped bombs on our own troops. He was told to not never do that again. You either do it on your primary or secondary target or you bring them back to the English Channel and that was it.... an eventful mission.

Do you know what you hit when you dropped your bombs?

Chief Master Sgt. Lee: I have no idea. I do recall in Germany people they live in little villages...they don't...not like in America in a farm here and a farm there and whatever, you know, little villages like. And I really never found out exactly.

Tell me about being a radio operator.

Chief Master Sgt. Lee: We learned Morse code. We had to have learned to receive and send 20 words a minute. And we also learned to send by light and I, really and truly, I never cared too much for sending and receiving Morse code. I would have preferred, you know, voice transmission.

And when we got in combat we were restricted...we had to copy

our ground station transmitted a signal ever so often and we had, as I recall, a ground station was 1TL. I'll never forget it. And we used to have cue signals that meant certain things and some were not repeatable, you know, and that we would give when other radio operators didn't send very well or whatever and it's difficult to send in an aircraft, especially if you had gloves on and we had radio silence during the mission and never or at least I didn't make any transmissions. The first time that we were hit with fighters, I'll never forget that.

What happened?

Chief Master Sgt. Lee: Never will forget it. Well, I fired from the left waist. They did have a gun in the radio room because it proved to be unsatisfactory because the radio gunner shot the vertical stabilizer, there wasn't a stop on it, on the B-17.

And the first time we were hit by enemy fighters I think it was Messerschmitts, ME110s and I grabbed my .50 calibers and wheeled them around, got the guy in my sight. I pulled the trigger and the damn things was on safe. I never got a fire on. But I had a lot of holes in my airplane. And I said, "Self, that ain't never gonna happen again." And I tell you, religiously I went and put those things ready to fire, even when they were in the stowed position, 'cause you know, you don't have much time to make decisions.

My job as a radio operator was to push chaff out. Chaff was the things to jam the enemy radar. Our aircraft, in addition to that, we carried what they called a carpet operator that scanned back and forth picking up signals to jam radar. And the Germans had, once they could get your altitude down, their flak was very accurate and you had no choice but to fly through it.

Tell me about the Carpet operator.

Chief Master Sgt. Lee: We did have a carpet operator on our aircraft and the fellow, or at least the one on my plane, he get airsick and I recall I used to keep him awake by reaching over and kicking him. And at any rate I said, "You ain't sleeping on my plane. If you can't stay awake, well you better get...stay on the ground."

And one time we got a direct hit. I don't recall now. My ball turret gunner chronicled most all the missions and I used to take my radio frequency meter in case I...the radio room was, was a fair sized room. Had a lot of room on a B-17 and the transmitter sat on the desk and you had a key on the right and you also had a receiver, BC310 receiver, as I recall, or 315, 191 transmitter and I would take the frequency meter, which I used to tune it up, and I stowed it underneath the table.

And we always had a story going around, you know. We used that as added protection for your family jewels. We'd take it from underneath the table and put it underneath your chair and the chair would swivel, you know, around and once day we got a direct hit with flak and I looked around, you know, and there was flak all over the floor in the radio compartment, small pieces. Fortunately I didn't get hit.

And on the way home afterwards I'd always take my frequency meter and put it back where it was stowed under the table. So this particular time I reached to get it from under my seat and I, "Whoa, whoa." Here's a hole about this square underneath that, you know, where it sat, and I could...would have dropped clear right straight on through to the ground. And I said, "Boy, how lucky can you get?" You know, but it happened, so (MUMBLE)...

Another thing as I recalled, when the war ended we got credited for 20...22 or 23 missions. The other crew that was in our hut, all of them got killed on the 21st of April. And we were ahead of them in flying our missions. We had more than them and they complained to their pilot that we were like (INAUDIBLE) bad boys. So our pilot says, "Well, you know, the best thing to do is split your guys up. You...we're gonna have to move."

So that particular mission we stood down and, but it's a true story. We were angry, very angry 'cause we had to move all of the stuff out and we cursed at them, you know, "We hope you get your you-know-what, blah, blah, blah, blah." And mostly it was just through anger. So about 3:30 in the afternoon when the aircraft come back we were always interested in how many planes did we lose. Well the 490th

that day lost four aircraft. I verified this with Eric and one of them was, I think the...we...the pilot we called him Little Red. He was a little short red headed guy, but I think his name was Schoenfield or something like that. And they got a direct hit with a 262 and, you know, they...I, I, I...none of them...they were all killed as far as I know.

After the war I wrote a piece up for the *Bombs Away* newsletter, two weeks ago we lost our engineer. He was the last one named today on the list and we went to Rotterdam and Amsterdam to deliver food, now you gotta figure, you know, this was in '45. In 1987 I belonged to the Rotary Club in California and a lady wrote a book about the food drops and it's called "Give Terry a Bone". And at the Rotary luncheon we always have a half hour for program and she gave her bit and was selling this book "Give Terry a Bone." And it was about the 8th Air Force delivering food because the Germans had, you know, flooded their land and they desperately needed it.

And the first one that I went on included the radio operator, the engineer, pilot and co-pilot and I think the bombardier. I don't even think the navigator went along, but my job was to, if any boxes hung up in the bomb bays, they had a pole and the engineer would assist me in pushing those boxes out so that they fell free.

We were supposed to drop our food on a golf course outside of Amsterdam or Rotterdam, I don't recall now, at 500 feet, come in at 500 feet and drop these boxes. Well I had the radio room door open. I had my headsets on and throat mic and the engineer and I were shooting the breeze and he was kneeled down on the catwalk in the bomb bay 'cause we coming over the target. And he started to get up and go back, you know, to where he was gonna stand when we dropped the food.

Lo and behold all of a sudden the bomb bay doors come open and we looked and the boxes started falling on all the people that had lined the streets with American flags. They were waving them like this. They looked up and they see all these boxes coming, you know, and they started running, getting the hell out of the way, and the pilot yells over the intercom, "Who and the hell pushed the salvo switch?" The bombardier says, "Well it wasn't me." And I said, "It wasn't me

Pappy,” that’s what I said.

And later we discovered that the engineer...there’s a salvo switch in the bomb bay of the B-17 that his parachute harness caught on, you know, and when he raised up it tripped the salvo switch and released those boxes. We laugh about it now and the lady that wrote this book, I told her the story and she said she wanted me to have the book. She autographed the book and gave me one and I was gonna bring it, but I’ve got it misplaced, but I’m gonna find it somewhere. We moved 10 years ago, you know how it is.

© 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.