

## Ray Hann B-17 Pilot

**Jon: What were your responsibilities as a pilot and to the 10 men on the crew?**

**Ray:** To get us there and back – that's pretty much it. Well, we started out ten, and then they dropped one off for some reason or other. And we only went over with nine.

**Jon: Tell me about the October 2, 1944 mission on which you were hit.**

**Ray:** This was my second mission. I flew the first mission as a copilot and an indoctrination mission, and it was my crew's first mission. We got hit over **Kassel**, Germany and took number three out; it was on fire. So we dropped it down four or five thousand feet, opened the cowlings and put the fire out. Managed to get back with group, and I guess just about the time we hit the English Channel, one of the boys noticed a blue flame coming up on the top of the wing off of the gas tank - I suppose about six or eight inches. It wasn't big, but it was scary. So we called the mayday and got away from the group, not knowing whether we were going to explode or just what would happen.

So we're about 10 or 15 minutes from the field when we're starting across the channel, but as I let down, the flames were fed – of course by more oxygen, and the flame just got bigger, until I suppose we were at about 5,000 feet and the whole wing just went up. Well, we had a choice then, to try to take it in or bail out. So I elected to take it in – right, wrong, or indifferently, but I knew we didn't have time to go around the field. So I took the first runway in, 1500-foot runway downwind. We plopped that plane in, and we managed to stop it at the end of the runway. And I told them on the way in that (they should) get out of this plane as fast as you can, or I'll beat you out. So that was our indoctrination into combat, and it was pretty rough.

**Jon: Tell me about the incident where the fog was so thick that you ran off the runway.**

**Ray:** Christmas morning, 1944 – I'll never forget it. We had to line the plane up by sight, and my engineer went out and lined the plane up so it'd be straight down the runway. And we were taking off strictly by (compass) indicator and got about, oh, 70 mile an hour, and you need at least 80 to 85 to lift the plane. And it was so foggy that you couldn't see the wing tips. It was that bad, and they had that, what do they call it over there, hoarfrost? It was just ice on the runway.

So we got up to about 70 miles an hour, and I felt the plane (go) off the runway. And it had been cut out of a forest – the runway, and there was just stumps all along the edge of the runway. So I yelled to my engineer to fire a flare and let them know, and my copilot to pull the wheels. We pulled the wheels out from under the plane, throttled back, and next thing I knew I felt the ball turret, belly turret, hit a stump. It helped to stop us.

It stopped the plane. We managed to get out. And I don't know about the rest of them, number two was on fire at that time.

Now we had a full load – 3,280 gallons of gasoline or fuel and bombs, and I didn't know what would happen. I knew that plane was gonna blow. I jumped down through the nose of the plane, and of course with the wheels down, it's not far off the ground, right into a little pond – ice on it, just enough ice that it would break when you tried to get your way out. One of the boys, and I never knew who it was; one of the boys came and helped me out. And we hid behind a big mound of dirt until the jeep came and got us.

They canceled the mission after that. They took me out – I was sent up to talk to the CO, Colonel **Baustum**, and he sent us on a R&R about a week later to recuperate, I think. But it was quite a Christmas morning.

### **Tell me about the weather in England.**

**Ray:** Sometime, uh, oh, I guess after about the third or fourth mission, I had an opportunity to...or they sent me down to talk to Ben Line and B. B. Daniel. Now this won't mean much to you unless you're a pretty old-timer; these were silent days movie, or screen stars.

But Ben Line headed up the, what do you call them, the publicity for the Eighth Air Force over there. And they asked me what was the most traumatic thing in going through a mission, and I explained - now this was over the radio where it was supposed to be broadcast to the States. And my comment was that if you fly for 15, 20 minutes through cloud, fog, and what have you, you're flying out so many minutes, making a 180 (degree turn) and then coming back, meanwhile climbing. And if you do that and everything works out perfectly, it's fine.

But when you're at 10,000 feet, you can't see your wing tips, and you hit prop wash, and there's 1,200 planes in the air; it's a little bit scary. So we would, we'd climb through that stuff every now and then. The weather was horrible over there. It was always raining, cloudy. How those people ever get suntans is beyond me.

### **Jon: Other than the weather, what you were concerned about?**

**Ray:** Oh, do you want an instance? We were coming...we got hit, no, no, we aborted. We couldn't go in to the target. Just before the target our number three engine went out, and we were flying a flak plane. That's a plane that drops silver or metallic slivers (chaff). When you dropped it - you're on the lead plane when you're doing this - when you dropped it, it had an effect on the radar of the Germans. Anyway, we lost number three, and we aborted before we actually got in to the target, so we were not with the group.

So we were coming back alone, and this is something you don't like to do too often; running through clouds in order not to get hit by fighters. And we hadn't gone any more than 15 minutes, and my navigator called and said let down – start letting down. We were at about 26 to 28,000 feet, but I'd call Jimmy, my navigator, and said there's no way that we could be there (home) by now. He said we must have one God-awful tail wind. So I looked down. Next thing you know, there's firecrackers going off alongside of us, and we cursed those Limeys. There's no way that they gonna shoot us down. We're over London itself. We finally let down. We were in a cloud deck, all this time, and we got down to around...well, you could see people on the street, so I'd say maybe 2,000 feet.

And I looked down, and I put the wings on a church steeple and just flew around – did a 360 around the church steeple. And my God, I could swear we saw wooden shoes on them. We were over the **Zuider Zee**, the Hague (in the Netherlands). So, they were shooting at us, so I called to the boys and told them to get behind the metal bars, or heavy metal that protects you from flak. To get behind, stay behind, not to shoot, and I put it down at about 10 or 15 feet above the ground, and got out of there as fast as we could.

I knew that they couldn't lower those 37 millimeters, antiaircraft; they couldn't lower them that fast. I'd been in the infantry previous to my experience in the Air Force. So we were hit, we were hit a lot, but we were hit by 50 caliber machine guns rather than antiaircraft.

So I took it out...now remember we had just three engines at the time, took it out to, oh, I guess four or five miles and then chandelled on up into the clouds. But then the number two engine started acting up, so I called to my radio operator to get his beads out – he always carried a rosary. Every time we got into trouble, I'd call back to Mike and have him say his beads, which was rather often. But, we called in to Brussels, Belgium, I believe, to try to land there, because we were in trouble. And they wouldn't let us land.

We called the air/sea rescue and let them know where we were, and we were trying to make it home. They wouldn't give us any alternate choice, and we did get back to England, but just barely. On the way in on the approach, we were fortunate. It was a 10,000-foot runway, but on the approach we lost number two. And we got out of that plane at the end of that runway, and I'll tell you we kissed old Mother Earth. But that plane was marked up with black, like a crayon from these 50 caliber machine gun bullets ricocheting off of the fuselage. It was a mess.

**Jon: Earlier you had mentioned the poor weather conditions. Were mid-air collisions fairly common with the poor weather situation?**

**Ray:** Oh, yes, we lost probably, I'd say, 25 –30 percent of our planes were lost in mid-air collisions. You put 1,200 planes in the air in a given area at one time and you're gonna have some collisions, particularly if they are mingling if the weather's bad. But you have 10 -12,000 feet of clouds, it's rough, believe me. It's getting that many planes and being perfect in your maneuvers.

**Jon: Tell me what it was that hit you that time when you got hit on October 2.**

**Ray:** Flak, and it was bad. As a matter of fact, I think I saw the burst that got our number three engine. It was so bad that, I mean, so close that when we got back there was a powder stain on the nose of the plane. And it had hit the number three engine and put it on fire.

**Jon: What was flak like as you approached a target?**

**Ray:** One instance in particular... now I didn't see nearly as much as my crew saw. I'm flying the plane. In fact, I had the easiest job on the plane. I was busy all the time. They just sat up there and prayed. But, going into **Merseberg**, which was very, very difficult...it was an oil refinery, and let's say 50 miles before we got there, you could see those black puffs of smoke. It looked like you could get out and walk on it, and you know you were going into it.

And you get on the IP – that's the Initial Point of your bomb run, and I'd turn the plane over to my bombardier, and I'm just sitting there looking out.

That flak, it just looked like you could get out and walk on it. That's the one time that I really saw it. Later on they took the bombardiers... now this was, oh, I guess about the first of December (of 1944). They took most of the bombardiers off of the plane and supplanted them with toggliers, which was a staff sergeant, and he just flipped a switch. They were dropping the bombs on cue of the lead plane.

**Jon: Tell me about the importance placed on staying with your group and not becoming a straggler.**

**Ray:** You can't be by yourself. The reason for a formation is the ability to have so many guns available to shoot down intruders, or your enemy fighters. And the closer formation, I can say we were very fortunate, we saw very, very few fighters, because the 490<sup>th</sup> bomb group, they had a good bunch of pilots. They flew a close – good close formation, and when you're that close, and have so many guns ready to knock them down. The Germans weren't too anxious (to attack).

But if you were a straggler, you were dead... you were a sitting duck. All you had was your guns, and they'd come in at you from any angle. And they'd get three or four Jerry fighters in on you, and you're gone. Now I didn't see much of it; I was the pilot, and my time was taken up just flying the plane. But I know my crew would come, and they'd tell me that this one went down. And I only saw one B-17 go down, oh, two, the whole time that I flew. But they saw lots of them. No, you couldn't be a straggler and get away with it.

**Jon: If you B-17 was seriously damaged, did you make a decision that you would stay with the aircraft as long as possible to let the rest of the crew get out in case you had to ditch?**

**Ray:** Oh, my, I don't know. Anybody can pilot an airplane. I mean, it's like driving a car. There's nothing to it. You're not a pilot until you're in trouble, and then you've got to make up your mind. And nobody knows what will happen until the time comes. That determines whether you're a pilot or not.

The 100<sup>th</sup> bomb group had a reputation – the “Bloody 100<sup>th</sup>” they called them. They were only five miles from us, and had quite a number of the people, the officers, that I had gone through training with. They were quite a number of them lost. McNab, close friend of mine – he was a cadet, I think the pilot just got too frustrated or something, did something too fast, and the two planes crashed. Two planes went down just like that. No, you don't know what you're going to do until it happens. And you don't know whether you're a real pilot until you're in trouble. Like I say, anybody can fly a plane; it's when you're in trouble that you know whether you're a pilot or not.

**Jon: Tell me about the time you and the men were going to Sweden because of your critical situation.**

**Ray:** We, we were over Berlin, and number three engine had cut out. I don't think we were hit; I'm not sure, I wasn't flying the plane. My copilot had requested that I let him fly it, and we got over the target area to drop the bombs, and all of a sudden the plane just went in the vertical, and I took the plane over. We dropped down maybe 6 - 7,000 feet before I could right it.

And then we found out that half the bombs hadn't gone out. And I later I was told that my radio operator was in the bomb bay trying to kick the bombs out. Well, rather dangerous, but they finally got the bombs loose, but by that time, our group was way ahead of us, and we couldn't catch up with them. And this was a rather rough place to be, over Berlin, outside of the flack area, cause that's when your German fighters show.

So I tacked on to another group, held it as long as I could, but we just couldn't keep up. So we got into a cloud, found a cloud deck, got into it, and started trying to get home on our own. I don't know where we were, but it was just before we got to France, the prop wouldn't feather on number three. The prop wouldn't feather, and it was shaking our ship to the point where it just felt like it was coming apart; no oil on the shaft (which prevented the propeller blades from feathering), so I dove down, oh, maybe four or five thousand feet, got as much speed as I could and I pulled it up fast, and the prop was going around so much faster, it broke the shaft, and the shaft spun up over the top of the fuselage.

And we were in trouble then, because we were really alone, and there wasn't even any cloud deck to get into. My navigator gave me coordinates for Sweden. We were closer to Sweden than we were to home. But by then we had, oh, I think, about 23 or 24

missions, and we didn't have too many to go to get home, so, I elected to bring it on home. And we managed to make it on a teaspoon of gas, I think, by the time we got back. I don't think Jimmy talked to me for a week. He wanted to go to Sweden so bad. But we made it.

**Jon: Switzerland was another option when airmen got into trouble. What happened to airmen if they went to Switzerland?**

**Ray:** Oh, I don't really know. We had one group, I don't know, was that Spiegel? (Editor's note: It wasn't Spiegel—he crash-landed safely in Poland) I don't remember the name of the crew, but they wound up in Sweden. But we didn't hear anything from them. I don't have any idea what they did. We were told if we couldn't make it back to go on into Sweden, neutral country.

**Jon: If you went to Sweden, were you interred and prohibited from going anywhere?**

**Ray:** When you were interred, you couldn't go anywhere. No. As a matter of fact, they paid you a certain amount of money, a small amount, but something to exist on. I don't know anything more about it than that. Yeah, they were a little upset with me. But we got back okay.

**Jon: How would you describe the B-17 as far as its' ruggedness and dependability?**

**Ray:** I can't say anything about any other plane. I don't know any other plane. Well, there's not a B-17 pilot ever flew one that wasn't happy with it. It was a workhorse. It got you back. I've seen a complete engine that fell out, and that plane got back. No, it was a honey of a plane, though it was slow. Our bombing missions went in and out at about 150 miles an hour. That's not much. Think about it. You could put a B-17 under the wing of one of these transports or your passenger planes today.

**Jon: How would you describe the B-17 as to its survivability and airworthiness?**

**Ray:** Well, of course, I'd have to say that it's by far the best bomber that was in the sky, including the English Lennox, Landcasters, or the B-24. A B-17 could go higher. The Davis wing on a B-24 was long and slim, and it just didn't have the altitude. But, I can't answer your question, because I've never flown any bombers except B-17's.

**Jon: Were your feelings toward the B-17 positive?**

**Ray:** Obviously, because the 490<sup>th</sup> bomb group was a B-24 group, and it was later on supplanted by B-17's. So, yes, I think that the 17 was...of course, you'd never get a B-24 pilot to say that...

**Jon: Did it take a special kind of person to do the job you guys did back then?**

**Ray:** Oh, without question. That's why they washed out so many of them. I was a student officer...I was an officer in the infantry before I went into the Air Force. I'd been in the infantry as a second attempt for about a year, and I was small arms fire instructor, settled in the States at Anniston, Alabama, and I just got fed up. I wanted to get in the war, you know. I was young enough not to know any better.

But I didn't know a B-17 from a P-51. I had no idea. I tried to get out of the infantry, which I did by going directly to the Air Force (Army Air Corps-Editor). They'd tear up my request before it ever got to battalion in the infantry. But I could go direct to the adjunct general of the Air Force, so I was allowed to transfer to the Air Force. And I was already an officer. We had 18 officers, started out. Eight of us finished. And of the eight, four of them were fighter pilots, and four of us were bomber pilots.

No, it took a certain kind of person. I have no idea what their criteria was, but it took a certain kind of person for any airman. You have no idea, unless you've been there and know what it means to get up at 2 o'clock in the morning and not just for the missions. We had stand-downs - scrub missions - three times as many as we had missions. And if you don't think that's bearing on your mind, let me tell you, you don't know every time when you get up that morning whether you're gonna come back or not. And you don't get out and walk (if your plane is shot down).

**Jon: Did you ever do anything to improve the survivability of your crew?**

**Ray:** About my third mission, I called back to the crew, told them to clean the plane up. Now you bear in mind, I was an infantry officer. There's a lot of difference between infantry officers and Army Air Corps cadets. When we got out of the plane, officers included, I walked through. They hadn't cleaned up - chewing gum wrappers, candy wrappers, spent shells - place was a mess. I let 'em eat dinner, called them all together, put them out on the ramp with gasoline and rags - officers, too, and told them to clean that airplane from top to bottom.

They weren't very happy with me. Matter of fact, for a couple of days I don't think they even talked to me. But they learned that in the air, it was Sir, and when I said something I meant it. When we were on the ground, it was Ray, and we were a happy bunch of kids. But I had a bunch of 19-year-old kids. I was an old man; I was 22.

**Jon: What did Cooper say about the cleaning?**

**Ray:** Heavens only knows. They weren't happy with me.

**Jon: How many missions did you fly?**

**Ray:** We flew 28, and about the first of February, I was approached by the CO. And I didn't find out until later because it's now in the material from the government, they took the best crews. And I don't mean to blow my own horn, but they took the best crews and put them into a scouting force.

We were assigned, or they...Colonel **Baustrom**, came to me and asked me if I'd like to go to a scouting force. And I told him that's the end of the war for me. I'd be happy to if my crew could go with me. Well, then there was a decision to be made, because the essential crew, that is, the pilot, co-pilot, navigator, engineer, and radio operator are essential, but my gunners, it was questionable. So I told him I'd go, I'd love to go, but I'll go only if I had my whole crew.

Three days later, they called me up and told me I could take my whole crew. So we were assigned to photo and aerial recon.

**Jon: What did that entail, and what type of plane were you flying?**

**Ray:** I checked out in a P-51 later, but initially, we had brand new B-17's, no armament. These were relay ships. The 51's would go over somewhere in the target area, check the weather, and they would relay, or send the message to us in the relay plane. We were somewhere over France, and we would relay it on back to England where they were getting ready to take off for a mission. Then later on, of course, I think any B-17 pilot would like to fly a P-51. So I went to Colonel Powers, asked if I could, and I think they gave me two landings, and next thing you know I was flying a P-51.

**Jon: What did you think about flying a P-51 as opposed to the heavy four-engine bomber?**

**Ray:** Oh, there's no comparison. One is a truck; the other is a racing car. It was a lot of fun, there's no question about it.

**Jon: What was it like after the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, knowing that this new technology would eliminate the large bomber formations you were accustomed to?**

**Ray:** I don't know. I didn't think about that so much as I did when I got back to the States and was flying in my work, and they had these prop jets, or turbo props. And they were so much better than what we had – so fast. They could reverse their props - slow it down. It was so much better than what we had over there, and it was only a year or so later. It just seemed like, oh, boy, I wish we'd had that then.

But, no, I have several friends that flew B-29's, and it must have been quite an airplane. But I knew nothing about it. I was requested, or not requested, but asked that if I wanted to check out in B-29's when I got back. And we put a quietus to that right off the bat. We'd rather stay over there and fly air photo recon and weather photo recon rather than going back to the States and going over to the Far East. No, thank you. We'd had a belly full by then.

**Jon: Was there anything else interesting about your tours?**



**Ray:** I tell you... when we were flying weather in the Third Scout Force, one morning we got up, and it was foggy. You couldn't see the wing tips. And after crashing on Christmas morning, of course, we had a different plane that was light, no armament. It took an awful lot of guts to take that plane off, knowing what had happened before. That was a little traumatic.

And then, of course, while we were Third Scout Force, we had the opportunity to go to Paris. We flew the generals around, and we went to Paris and Ireland. Went up to Scotland once to pick up some booze. Uh, we a good time, and I got to fly the P-51's.

**Editor's note:** Ray Hann passed away on November 13, 2000. His legacy and story lives on...