

## **MY WWII EXPERIENCE**

### **Albert Sanders, as a 1st Lt., pilot, flight leader of B-24 squadrons, 448th Bomb Group, Eight Air Force in Norwich, England**

So back to being just out of school, the United States had been in the war for over a year at this time so I started examining my options. At eighteen years of age the draft was sure to be in my future shortly and having no desire to serve in the infantry I looked into the Army Air Force Cadet Program one more time. To my surprise I found that two years of college were no longer necessary for admission--something I had always wanted to be, but thought it out of reach. Bob Harbaugh, my best friend in high school, said he, too, was interested so we both went to San Antonio to see if we could pass the entrance exam. I had only taken general science thinking that college was unlikely because of the cost and instead of chemistry and physics, had taken shop and typing which were the only practical courses offered. This made me quite apprehensive about the test, but as it turned out, math, logic, and quickness was what they were looking for and I was good in math, thanks to Miss Hatley who taught Euclidian Geometry and pushed me to excel. Bob and I both passed, took the oath and were told that we in the Army, but to go home and wait for a call since all classes were currently filled. We went back to Corpus and worked for the Post Office for over 3 months before being summoned (our names are now on a plaque in the Post Office as local postmen who served in World War II).

We went to basic training together, where a number of future cadets from all over the U.S. were mixed in with a larger number of draftees and by this time the program was down to the bottom of the barrel. Most of these draftees were men between 30 and 35 years old who for some reason had been passed over before. It seemed to us young squirts that these were an ancient bunch. They virtually uniformly could not do all the callisthenics, run the obstacle course, or make the 30 mile hikes. Besides that, some of the poor bastards seemed to cough all night and closed all the windows after the young guys went to sleep which made the air so damn stale that some youngster always woke up and opened a window which was immediately closed again the minute he was asleep. You can't win that fight with old, coughing insomniacs.

Basic training is a procedure created by the military to change a thinking human being into an unthinking automaton. They try to do this by humiliating you at every opportunity and by keeping you so busy and hurried that there isn't time to think. But you did think and mostly you thought--that the god dam military and everyone that endures it voluntarily is stupid beyond belief. Now after 3 years in Service, that thought is unchanged. But it was quite a relief when basic training was over and we future cadets were sent to Austin College in Sherman, Texas --located about 60 miles North of Dallas. I've since wondered if the old draftees didn't end up as cannon fodder in the infantry on "D" day. But on second thought it's not likely for they were wiser in the ways of the world than we were and probably found some safe niche in which to ride out the war. Most of the guys who experienced real combat, with the

terror of shooting and being shot at, were too young to know better until it was too late. Oh, and we were introduced to the famous flying cockroach. It was about two inches long and preferred to land on a face. The resulting screams were not inducing to good sleep.

While at Austin College, just to experience flying, we got six hours of flight time at the local airport in some antique 40 horsepower Aeroncas. The first time the instructor let me take off, the plane started veering off the runway and I not only corrected this, but over corrected, and continued zig zagging in this manner until finally as the plane headed at a looming hanger at about 60 mph, I frantically pulled the stick back and we cleared it by about five feet. The instructor didn't comment, but I think he just let the event get out of control. Anyhow the next time I took off I was much gentler on the controls and didn't have such an interesting experience.

I was scheduled to be in the first class that was shipped out to flight training, but became sick and while in the hospital, my group was sent out. I was then put in the last class that was to be sent out and on complaining to the commanding officer, I was essentially told the old army statement of TS (tough sxxx). But, I bumped into the President of the college on the campus one day and mentioned this to him and he somehow, probably with charts, convinced the idiot commander that I should be in the next class to go. What a nice guy.

So after about 4 months of college classes I was assigned to Muskogee, Oklahoma to learn to fly PT-19's, a low wing, underpowered (about 90 HP) relic that had a gravity feed carburettor which caused the engine to quit every time the plane was upside down. This made acrobatics very frustrating, but interesting because when the engine quit, the silence was awesome and the sensation was probably a lot like flying a glider, upside down. I had a really crusty old drunk for an instructor, but as they say, with a heart of gold. I became sick the first four times he took me up. The upchuck never got on him, as students flew from the rear seat, but since these were open cockpit planes it did make a mess of the tail section which of course I always had to clean up. After I had been sick he invariably asked me if I wanted to land the plane and I always said yes and did an acceptable job of it. This probably impressed him for on our fifth flight he turned the plane upside down at about 3000 ft. and made me dangle my hands, so that only the seat belt was holding me in the plane. Of course this was damned scary, but obviously effective as I was never sick again.

In fact I was the first of his 6 students to solo. As luck would have it, from that time on, flying seemed to come easy for me. I mentioned his being crusty, but he was just always hung over. On our cross country flights to learn rudimentary navigation procedures, he would frequently become bored and take the controls and perform some acrobatics. Once after I had become rather cocky about my ability, we had just completed a long cross country flight without his once taking over the controls when during the landing approach he must have thought we were a bit too high for he popped the stick

forward and back. This action causes a rapid drop of 10 to 15 feet, and you experience the weightlessness sensation of a very fast elevator going down. Usually this didn't bother me except as an affront to my flying ability, but this time when he popped the stick forward, only my feet stayed in the cockpit, while from 6 feet above the plane, my eyes had a view which I had never enjoyed before or hope to ever again. Fortunately when he popped the stick back my rear hit the seat with a noticeable thump. Instantly, he looked into the rear view mirror only to see me industriously engaged in landing the aircraft. On the tarmac, as he walked away, he grumbled, "You lucky bastard, what if I had felt like a few acrobatics today?" I don't believe I ever forgot to fasten my seat belt again.

I've got to mention that the food there was truly outstanding. The base had been a commercial airport until shortly before we arrived and the Army just hadn't had time to screw it up. The cafeteria was still operated by civilians and they must have ordered the supplies also, for the food was out of this world. At breakfast you walked down a cafeteria line ordering eggs, any style, bacon, ham, pancakes, cereal, juice, coffee or all of the above. Lunch and dinner were just as good. The taste of the food guaranteed that no army cook had ever desecrated it. Oh, and you could come back from an evening in town, drop by the cafeteria, order a steak sandwich and have it served in minutes. This paragraph certainly can't sound very important, but you must have served in the military to appreciate the novelty.

I was unbelievably gullible at this stage in my life, but it's not too painful to look back on now. On base, we marched everywhere we went--classes, mess, callisthenics, you name it and we marched to it. We tallest cadets were always at the front of the ranks so I usually had the same people in the row behind me. One of them, a really "good" friend, noticed one day that my left shoulder was lower than my right and politely informed me of this. I made a correction, but couldn't seem to ever get it as high as the right one, though at his urging, continued to try. When we came to a halt the Sgt. in charge took one look at me and said, "Cadet Sanders, why in the hell is your left shoulder in your ear?" There was considerable coughing in the row behind me at this point--my friends were coming down with some kind of bug, I'm sure.

Another time we had four hour passes and had gone to a Red Cross sponsored dance in town. In spite of my never having danced before, I was pushed out on the floor by my "friends" who said that anyone could dance, all you had to do was bounce up and down. The girl who consented to dance with me was very nice to put up with my bouncing around like a kangaroo and we somehow got through the dance. But when I returned to the table, the fellows were uniform in their belief that I wasn't bouncing nearly high enough. I asked the same girl again and she showed her true spirit of charity by assenting. But part way through the dance just as I had alighted from a terrific bound, she mentioned that if I would just try to glide instead of bounce, things might go better. Well, didn't this just show how some people try to fool you. I certainly didn't ask HER to dance again, but as luck would have it, every other girl that I asked, was either promised or had to go powder her nose. I still don't dance a lot, never having completely mastered the bounce.

At this point ,in reading this, my wife said, "No, he still hasn't mastered it."

Those who graduated from this stage went on to Basic Training at Coffeerville, Kansas where we flew the BT-15, more popularly known as the Vultee Vibrator. It had a much more powerful engine(450 horses) and a carburettor that didn't quit when upside down. We learned a lot of acrobatics in it and eventually took up night flying. Before taking off on our first night flight a Major talked to the entire squadron emphasizing to a bunch of semi-listening students that a common misconception at night for first timers was the thought that their plane was on fire. The reason for this is, he explained, that the exhaust pipe is just outside the plane's cockpit and during the daytime the only knowledge of its existence is the satisfying constant roar (no muffler, of course), but at night, a 4 to 6 foot long red flame is disturbingly evident. The flight had been airborne for only a few minutes when a panicky voice on the radio reported a fire. The tower asked him what was burning and on being informed that it was the fuselage just outside the cockpit, assured him that he wasn't on fire, that it was only the exhaust and asked for his identity. There was a slight pause and then the same, but very relieved said, "Thanks tower, but never mind".

I got my only near experience of fighter against fighter when a very cocky little cadet challenged me to a dogfight. This was a strictly forbidden pleasure, punishable by washout and of course this was a fate worse than death and the fear of it was with us constantly. Well, like a fool I did meet him at about 5000 feet, far away from where we usually practiced and I don't know how, but I got on his tail and hung there while he tried everything in the book to shake me. Eventually, he put his plane in the tightest possible turn and when he continued to lose altitude, he came in on the top rudder which he remembered too late is how you put an airplane into a powered spin. He flipped over spinning violently toward the earth which by now was only about 500 feet below. The value of our training was instantly evident as he pulled out of the spin just a few feet above the trees. He never spoke to me again which didn't hurt my feelings for my thought as he was spinning down to splatter was, "This son-of-a-bitch is going to get me washed out".

The skilled and/or lucky that graduated from this level went on to Advanced Training and for me this was in Pampa, Texas which is up in the panhandle. We big guys went to twin engine training in (AT-14's)while the runts got to train in hot single engine planes(AT-6's)--these were the blessed among us for they were destined to go on to fly P-51s which was everyone's dream. Another disadvantage of being 6' 3". We had to make the best of it and hope to get assigned to some of the hotter twin engine bombers or night fighters, but our most immediate problem was passing Advanced Training. The At-14 had a closed cockpit with side by side seats, retractable landing gear, and more advanced instruments. Instrument flying was the most difficult part of the training as we had been flying by-the-seat-of-our-pants up to this point.

An interesting event happened less than two weeks before graduation in April, 1944 at Pampa, Texas. We had already been measured for our officer's uniforms and were really beaming, but I got a respiratory infection with an

awful phlegmed filled cough (must have been flu) that put me in the base hospital. It just wouldn't go away and the only treatment was bed rest and aspirin. After a week with no improvement in my coughing up my innards, they wouldn't release me so I just put on my uniform and reported for assignment and miraculously was almost instantly well. But the instant assignment was a test ride that night at about 8:00 P.M. We all knew that the Army had a quota of the number of students to graduate per class-no more and no less. So when I reported with trepidation at the flight line, a Major (a !demi-GOD! for I had never had a test ride by anyone higher than a 1st Lt) appeared and brusquely ordered me to takeoff.). He was extremely cold and impersonal, but I was in great form and feeling good about the way the flight was going. He showed no signs of approval however and I felt he was getting angry with me because I wasn't making his unsavory chore easy ie. to wash out a cadet days before graduation, who had successfully completed fourteen months of harrowing training. Then, he finally found something to find fault with. Looking over at the altimeter, he saw that I was climbing at a rapid rate and furiously asked me what in the hell I was doing.

Now we had experienced severe hail storms already, the hail penetrating the canvas wings of the At-14's and then bouncing off the tarmac. Mechanics pasted canvas patches over the holes and we continued to fly. What I was doing was: at full throttle and diving at near red line speed while trying to make a sharp 180 as we were being buffeted maliciously while the rate of climb indicator was at 10,000 feet/minute. We were obviously in the updraft of a cumulonimbus cloud that might in Texas reach 30,000 feet. He never said another word, but at about 22,000 feet as we gasped for oxygen, we suddenly hit a downdraft and plummeted at a rapid decent more chilling than our ascent. I put the nose up, full throttle, and at near stalling speed we plummeted toward the ground. I'm sure we both thought that the end was unavoidable, but at about 200 feet before death we stopped suddenly with a thump and as I levelled off the Major spoke the last words of the flight. "Take me to the base." After landing he walked off. I couldn't help thinking, why he didn't take over, but maybe it was to see if I was capable or he could have just been frozen. So, they didn't wash me out, but did a poor devil who, in Primary Training a few months before in Tuskegee Oklahoma, had ground looped his plane. The Army has a memory like an elephant. A few days later getting my wings, 2nd Lt bars, and dress uniforms I felt no pain, but I did wonder if the Major had possibly thought that God had spoken to him, "DON'T WASHOUT THAT pilot, THE ILLNESS WASN'T HIS FAULT!"

The abrupt change in status took some getting used to, for in one fell swoop we were transformed from dog meat to officers and gentlemen, not mention pilots which was what we really wanted. There's no doubt that I was really proud; an officer, a gentleman, and a pilot and my 20th birthday was the following month. The enlisted men who had been giving us hell the day before were now saluting and yes-siring us. WHAT A SENSE OF POWER! And, oh yeah, now we are dressed nattily in officer dress uniforms, pinks and greens. Take it from me we looked GREAT. From here we were sent to various fields to be checked out in the specific plane we would fly in combat. Some of us

were to become 1st pilots and some co-pilots--who knows what criteria were used to make these decisions--not very rational in all likelihood.

I was sent to Liberal, Kansas to become a first pilot of a Liberator (B-24) which had a wing span of 110 ft.--the largest plane in the world at that time. It had four 1200 horsepower engines which allowed it to carry about 8000 lbs. of bombs and enough gas to remain airborne up to 12 hours. It was a mind boggling change from the AT-14 which was just a gloried twin engine Piper Cub. Even though, we were all certified pilots everyone had some trepidation about learning to fly this massive airplane. Following about 6 hours of flight time the instructor got out leaving me and another student pilot, a Lt. Sanderson, on the plane with a terrified flight engineer. The instructor told me to make the first three touch-and-go landings and told Sanderson to make the next three. As we taxied to the runway the engineer asked me in a quavering voice if I could do it and though I was probably as scared as he was, lied, tried, and by God, did it. Each landing was better than the preceding one and then it was Sanderson's turn. He levelled off at about 30 ft. above the runway the first time and just before we stalled in for a crash, I pushed the throttles forward and we went around again. The engineer had almost fainted but Sanderson did much better the next 3 times. That poor flight engineer would go through the same kind of terror with each new set of trainees. I suppose it was preferable to combat, but not much.

Our food was usually not too awful in the Army, but I complained like everyone else just to act like I, too, was accustomed to better food. There was one notable exception however. One day they served a cold salad with turkey bits in it with lunch and not liking the smell, I declined it. Later in the day, on a long cross country flight, everyone else on the plane became nauseated and incapacitated, and vomiting blood. I had to fly the plane without much help, back to the base and land it. The ambulance met us on the runway, but since the hospital was already full of patients with the same symptoms, our guys were put in beds out on the lawn with the rest of the overflow. I'll bet a few hundred people never ate turkey salad again.

Things were fairly uneventful after this until graduation from this stage of the training, at which time most of us were sent to Pueblo, Colorado to pick up the rest of our combat crew, to learn to work together, and especially to learn formation flying in these huge hulks. The crews were composed of four officers, pilot, me: co-pilot, Wallace Grimes, navigator, Joe Nathan: and (bombardier, Bill C. Ehrman and six enlisted men, nose turret gunner, Bob F. Eldridge, upper turret gunner and flight engineer, John R. Royski, two waist gunners, Gilbert A. Matthias, who was also the radio operator, and Irvin F. Alvey, the ball turret gunner and tail turret gunner, Pat J. Terranova. More about the crew later since when we were sent overseas we were scheduled to be together the better part of a year, the three officers living in the same quarters getting to be a lot like brothers and I'm sure the enlisted men experienced the same. The reason we were down to only three officers is that all bombardiers were eliminated from the crews just before leaving for overseas. That was because unless you were a lead crew, the navigator toggled our bombs when the lead crew dropped his. He had a big smoke

bomb that made this easy. But more about training. First a quick word about our radio operator, Mathius. He was almost twice as old as most of us at 35. He wasn't the first to be assigned as our radio operator, but the first one got sick and at the last moment, Mathius who was an instructor at the base was pushed into the gap. He was very quiet and apparently gave the other enlisted men hell about being so noisy in crew quarters. At my current age I can feel for him.

I'll now relate a hair raising tale that never did have a firm solution. This is out of order for it happened in training in the States. After an uneventful night instrument flight with an instructor aboard, I was just levelling off to touch the wheels down, pulling the throttles all the way back when the plane slued sideways even as I instantly applied full rudder to correct this and when it didn't respond, applied full power and went around again; this time with the instructor at the controls. The petrifying results were repeated so we went around one more time. I asked the instructor if I shouldn't come in hot and then cut power after the wheels were on the ground. He never offered to take over. We did this without incident except that touching down at 130 miles/hr uses every inch of the runway. With a trembling hand I wrote this up in the flight log and the next morning confronted the crew chief who denied there was anything wrong with the plane. Fortunately I never had to fly that plane again.

Later, cogitating about this incident, I thought that probably one throttle linkage was malfunctioning and this engine did not idle back at the same rate as the others. Now you would think that one of the pilots would have noticed this, but place yourself hurtling down a runway at over 100 mph just a few feet off the ground in an airplane that has suddenly decided to turn sideways. No one would think clearly at this time or look at the instruments. This would also explain why my decision to land very hot, worked. A somewhat similar incident occurred later and I handled it differently. After an uneventful takeoff, an outboard engine began to vibrate rather severely. We landed and the crew chief came aboard and ran it through some checks and pronounced the engine perfect. I called the tower and told them to change my crew manifest, that Sgt. Shithead was going to shoot a few landings with me. This brought about a remarkable change in his attitude as he quickly said that a much more thorough test of this engine was indicated and we were assigned another plane. I continued throughout my service to have some real doubts about the ability and candour of some of the maintenance departments though the better ones were undoubtedly in combat zones and rightly so.

Shortly after this I was landing a plane after a night flight when upon contacting the runway, the plane veered violently to the right and off the paved runway into the mud in spite my having instantly applied full left rudder. I applied the brakes hard upon leaving the runway because the tarmac where other planes were located was very close and we were doing about 100 mph in a broad sweeping turn. The brakes seemed to make little difference since the wheels were sliding in the mud and we could see that our path was directly at a B-24 and a gas truck. We were probably still going 70 mph when at no more than 20 yards from this plane and it was obvious that no power on

earth could save us from destruction. Well, I'm sorry to say my life did not flash before my eyes, but I do remember thinking and maybe shouting a fervent, "Oh shit".

Now, since we obviously survived, you may think that this powerful prayer did the trick, but instead it was a drainage ditch about 10 feet across and about 4 feet deep, just 20 yards from the edge of the tarmac. When the nose wheel hit this, it collapsed as did the right main landing gear and with two props spinning and two jammed into the mud, we slid almost up to the gas truck and the B-24. I yelled to Wally (the co-pilot) to hit the switches (he started to go through the normal kill engine procedure, but I reached across and hit the emergency power off switch) and I punched the abandon ship button. No one was slow to obey, and luckily no one was trampled. In fact, the only injury sustained was to the grease monkey who was gassing up the plane that seemed to be our target. He twisted an ankle jumping from the wing.

They immediately assigned us another plane and we flew around for about an hour, virtually in ecstasy over being alive. This is the old business of getting right back up on the horse and it must have worked. The next day however my co-pilot and I had to meet with a kangaroo court to establish blame. First the maintenance Major said that the tire on the right main gear had apparently blown on contact with the runway because I had dropped the plane in from an excessive height. Fortunately, the guy who injured his ankle had been called and he testified that he saw the landing and said it was very smooth (of course it was, all my landings were). Then Major Ground Pounder then said that the co-pilot must have jammed on the brakes after takeoff thereby locking the right one. Well, it is true that standard procedure was to gently stop the wheels from spinning prior to lifting the gear thereby preventing strut damage due to gyroscopic torque, but Wally had been properly trained and had already performed this numerous times. Besides even if he had jammed them on, there was no excuse for a brake locking.

I suppose the maintenance major would have called in the FBI to question us as possible saboteurs if the base commander (a pilot) hadn't been there. He shut the maintenance Major up abruptly and dismissed us. We were all sorry that the plane was totalled as it only had about 20 hours on it and still smell new. Anyhow we never heard anymore about the loss of it, but it wouldn't surprise me to get a bill someday. It cost about 200,000 dollars then, which is a piddle today when the so called Stealth Bomber runs a billion dollars without white sidewalls.

Just a few nights after this, we were on a flight and fortunately very near the base when the Royski, the flight engineer, yelled that we were on fire. Sure enough the inboard right engine had about 20 ft. of flame pouring out of it (not the exhaust). Wally did all the right things, cut off power, feathered the propeller, and activated the extinguisher mechanism, which, of course, only seemed to infuriate the flames. Meanwhile, I put the plane in a panic dive for we had been taught that the fire wall between the engine and the wing gas tanks was a reliable barrier for only 5 minutes. Frantically dropping gear and flaps and trying to hold the airspeed to under 300 mph, we plummeted toward

the base for a straight in approach while calling ahead for a welcoming party of fire trucks and ambulances. As soon as we hit the ground, I told the crew they could abandon ship at any speed they chose, but I for one was going to wait until it stopped. The prompt firemen readily put out the blaze. but I was a little mortified on being hailed by the fire chief as an old friend. He had recognized me as the pilot who had only a few nights before completely demolished a brand new B-24.

A few days later I was eating lunch with an eastern intellectual snob (an ivy league graduate) and he was telling me how he kept discipline on his crew by being aloof and didn't I think that was a good idea. While I was thinking, "What a snotty prick", along came three of my enlisted crewmen. One of them, Royski, said in a loud sotto whisper, "Look, it's Crash Sanders!" Well, to my everlasting regret, being somewhat cowed by my luncheon companion, I stared Royski down and they continued on their way with Royski muttering, "He didn't like that". So for the time being I was spared a nickname that I richly deserved as past and future events confirmed. I ought, here, to give my entire crew credit for, not at least to my knowledge, losing faith in my flying ability. There's no doubt that they had some room for doubt, but from my point of view all of the accidents we had in training and even the flak damage that we suffered in combat (landing twice in Belgium and flying across the channel with three engines a few times) were not my fault. My crew never knew about my earlier experiences with the small plane at Austin College or the thunderstorm that proved to be so providential. And they never knew how close we were to a really serious crash on the last landing that I made with my crew, but I'm getting ahead here—more on this much later.

I had my first truly traumatic experience just before graduation from this base. They taught us to fly formation here and it was back breaking labour in those days of completely manual controls, though it did get easier with practice. On the last day of formation flying before leaving for new assignments, there were still 13 crews needing 3 more hours of formation time. Unfortunately, only 12 could conveniently fly in the standard pattern, so in order to squeeze one more plane in, someone had the bright idea that a plane could be flown directly behind and above the leader of the upper right segment of four planes. The captain of our squadron called me aside and assigned me this position and informed me that another crew would be late joining the formation in the lower left position of this segment. But he assured me that I was to fly this made up position--not the late arrival. He tried to convey that this was due to my superior flying ability. I thought, "What a crock?"

Well, I tried and it was the most nerve wracking thing I had ever done. Trying to fly formation on someone that you can see clearly is hard enough, but I was flying on a plane about 50 feet ahead of me and 30 feet below while directly beneath me, maybe 60 feet down, was another plane. B-24's are like big ships--they don't speed up or slow down very fast and they don't dart when you try to manoeuvre them. A slight error could have caused a mid-air collision. I flew like this for the better part of an hour (seemed like an eternity). Finally assuming that the other crew had aborted, I slid into his slot with a great sigh of relief at the ease of flying there.

About a half an hour later my tail gunner, Terry, excitedly reported that a plane in trying to join our formation, had gone into a spin, plunged into the ground, and exploded and burned. He said he saw no parachutes. Even in my shock, I knew what had happened. The tardy pilot had tried to fill that awful slot of mine since his was already occupied and upon closing, he had overshot and probably lost sight of the entire formation. Then chopping the throttles in panic, he approached stalling speed just as he dropped down through the propwash of the other planes. This undoubtedly threw him into a stall and out of control. His spinning in just reinforced the rumour that 24's couldn't recover from a spin. After this I used to dream of how I would try to recover from a spin in a 24, Cut throttles, wheel back, rudder all the way with the spin, then wheel full forward, and reverse the rudder, pull back on the wheel as the plane recovered from the spin. This was effective on all the training planes that I had flown, but in combat no one I know ever saw a B-24 recover from a spin after being hit by flak.

I felt really awful about the deaths of those men (still do) and shamefacedly reported to the captain as soon as we were on the ground. He insisted that it was in no way my fault, that he had told the pilot to ask for his slot if it was filled and besides the really guilty party was the idiot who thought anyone could fly safely in that position. I have never decided if he was just mollifying me. One thing for sure, they had already lost three crews out this class so if another crew hadn't graduated because the first pilot was court marshalled or mental stress did him in, then they would be one more crew under their quota. Who knows how the Army thinks?

I can't vouch for the veracity of the next story, but the big brass always tried to keep us from knowing such things. The rumour was that there were two other planes lost who were staffed entirely by Chinese personnel. Both were practicing landings with simulated two engines dead on one wing. This takes great strength to keep control as the airplane wants to roll over toward the dead engines. No one lived to tell what happened, but the rumour was "loss of face". Many of our instructors were in the habit of shouting their displeasure (and not in the best of the Queen's English) if your performance was deemed to be lacking. This was accepted by most Americans, but could have been a mistake with Chinese who may with 'loss of face' had just said, "To hell with it" and turned loose of the controls. The instructor may not have recovered them in time to avoid a catastrophe. Some credence was given to this theory when this manoeuvre was discontinued (I never had to perform it).

We survivors were pronounced combat fit and since most of us preferred the European Theatre to the Pacific we got what we wanted. Not that we were asked. If we had been privy to the casualty figures we might have been happier with the Pacific Theatre. Anyhow, we rode a troop train to New York city in ancient coaches. Apparently for the war effort, the railroad had de-moth balled cars that had not seen use in decades--one guy swore he had found an arrow imbedded in the panelling in his car, but he'd been known to lie before. It seemed longer, but I think it only took two days and nights to get to New York City where the powers that be, allowed us one night in the Big Apple before embarking. Since my navigator, Joe, was from New Jersey; he was on

home grounds and took a bunch of us sightseeing and then to Club 18. Quite a treat for a 20 year old kid from Corpus Christi.

Early the next morning a ferry took us to our Liberty ship. I became seasick in the harbour and stayed incapacitated in my bunk for the next 10 days before disembarking in western England. I subsisted on peanuts and Clark bars supplied by my ever faithful navigator, losing 10 lbs. of muscle as I had no fat then. I lay in my bunk leaving it only to crawl to the head when everyone had gone to eat. Once during an abandon ship drill an inspecting Major (a Ground pounder) came down, saw me, and opened his mouth to blast me topside when he noticed the death mask of my face, my burning eyes and my hand caressing the 45 calibre automatic on my hip. He left without a word and if his later decisions were as apt, he probably survived the war. I wasn't bluffing and would have shot him rather than comply. If you don't understand this, then you have never been seasick for a week. After all, the worst they could do was execute me and that seemed like a welcome alternative to seasickness.

When we finally disembarked and I walked down the gangplank with my crew, I was so bent over that even my 5 ft.6 inch belly gunner towered over me. Well, one good meal and I was ok, but swearing and meaning it, that I would either fly home after the war or live and die an Englishman. I say, "Thank God old chap, that we got to fly home." We were taken to a base near Norwich (meshed in with a tiny village called Seething) where the three officers were put in a Quonset hut in officer land and the enlisted men shared quarters about 1/2 mile away. There were 4 happy warriors also occupying it in our first night. They had encountered engine trouble on a mission and found Sweden to be their nearest haven. Since Sweden was neutral, their fighting days were over. Sweden would release them only if our government promised they would fight no more. And for lagniappe, they had discovered Sweden was far ahead of us in some ways. Trial marriage was not frowned on, and being stuck there for several months, two of these guys had availed themselves of this presumed delight. I have no idea if they and their trial mates (they still seemed enamoured) ever tied the knot, but I can tell you that on every mission we flew, my navigator could quote the heading to Sweden at a moment's notice.

After a few practice missions, we were assigned to the real thing and were subsequently aroused from our bunks at about 4 A.M. in order to get breakfast, don our flight gear, go to the briefing, and get hauled to the hardstand where our assigned plane lurked all fuelled up and loaded with 12 real 500 lb. bombs. We were scheduled to takeoff at dawn, climb to 20,000 feet through an overcast 15,000 feet thick, find our group of 36 planes, and take our assigned position. Then the Group leader would edge the group into position with our Wing (72 more planes) and the Wing leader would move into his position in the bomber stream that usually extended as far as you could see ahead and behind (sometimes as many as 3000 aircraft participated in a single raid).

That first morning we took off with a B-24 more heavily loaded than I had ever flown before. The plane seemed to lumber reluctantly down the runway. At the

very end, we were only doing 120 mph and that was 15 mph less than desired before lifting into the air, but having no choice I pulled up and narrowly missed the trees strategically placed near the end of the runway to encourage you to get airborne. It took over an hour to climb to 20,000 ft. at 300 ft/minute which is the maximum rate in a fully loaded B-24. We began to appreciate our electric suits under the heavy fleece outer wear as temperature drops 2 degrees centigrade/1000 ft. and this was November in England so it was near freezing even at ground level. The usual problems you had to watch out for was a hand or foot slowly losing feeling for that meant the glove or sock had become disconnected.

It was a long uneventful flight to the target as by then, (November, 1944) beautiful P-51's with their disposable wing tanks escorted us all the way to the target and back. The poor devils who had earlier flown the bombers without this escort had the highest casualty rate of anyone in combat. When attacking the bomber formations the Folke Wolfe's and Messerschmitts had to face an enormous volley of 50 calibre bullets but it was pretty ineffective compared to their 20 and 30 millimetre cannons which could be aimed so accurately. It was only after the war when I saw a German ace on television describing his fear when attacking bomber formations that I realized the effectiveness of tight formations. He said it was not easy to concentrate on one target when as many as 100 machine guns from thirty six B-24s were spitting hot lead at you. His face was a grotesque mask—obviously burned.

Earlier the captain who briefed the new pilots told us it would help the morale of our crews if, prior to flying into the heavy flak that was always encountered on the bomb run, that we just reassure the crew in calm tones. I certainly had good intentions in this regard and as we neared the target, puffs of heavy black smoke were everywhere. I pressed the intercom button to speak. But just then an unbelievably large black cloud with a fiery red centre materialized just ahead and right at our altitude. Well, only a weak squeak came out of my mouth, but since no one knew it was their pilot's scared shitless voice(as we used to say),there was no harm done and my image as a strong silent Texan was undamaged. Incidentally, we never got over the fear of flak. Every so often I would have to check the waist area to eliminate wall to wall carpeting made of flak jackets. I didn't blame the guys for trying, but too much extra weight could have caused a crash on takeoff.

FLAK --- the word doesn't look so terrifying to someone who hasn't experienced it so let's have a little flak education here. While you're fifty miles from the target, you can see the dense black haze at your level from the flak aimed at the flights ahead of you. As you turn on the bomb run, the flak gets more personal. Like giant black pansies, the bursts with black smoke (as large as a B-24) and a short lived red centre begin to blossom. With each near miss, you are reminded that about 10 pounds of high explosive has hurled out (at high velocity) an great amount of hot metal fragments. And you and your plane are as soft as hot butter to them. And of course, you are a sitting duck when the plane is on bombsight control, which means flying in a straight line at constant altitude. The occasional sight of a burning B-24 spinning earthward brings fear and empathy. The older pilots, who flew before the

beautiful P-51's escorted, said the only time they were completely safe from enemy fighters was on the bomb run. Those German bastards were as afraid of their flak as we were.

Lesson over, back to the mission. After we opened the bomb bay doors, the added wind resistance caused our plane to drop further and further behind even with emergency power applied. We found out later that new crews were always assigned the oldest airplanes as they were least likely to bring them back. Obviously a self fulfilling prophesy. We dropped our bombs on target and thought that we had come through the flak unscathed, but then the Navigator reported that his entire compartment was covered with fluid. Royski, found on examination, that a hydraulic line had been severed by flak. Much of the interior of the plane was covered with the fluid and the fumes were starting to trouble us. In addition this meant a lot of our controls would have to be manually operated so we began to look for a field in Belgium. Joe knew the precise heading to Sweden, but sad to say, it was well out of our range.

All of the maps were covered with the fluid so Joe had a tough time deciphering one and finding us a landing strip. When he finally did, Royski had to crank down the main gear, kick out the nose wheel and crank down the flaps (he earned his money that mission). The B-24 designers were very thoughtful people having installed a small amount of fluid for the brakes that was independent of the main hydraulic system. Its main flaw was that you could only push once on the brakes for when you let up all the fluid was gone. The landing went well and I held the brakes full down, but suddenly there was no runway left and we were still doing about 60 mph. We plunged off into what appeared to be a grassy muddy field, but to our pleasant surprise there was more of the metal grid runway extending another 200 yards or so. It just wasn't used by the planes that frequented the field and shortly we found out why. As we began to taxi off the runway, we found the ramp was only a foot wider than our wheel spread and we couldn't stay on it. Finally a little tractor attached itself to us and pulled us ignominiously to the tarmac where we were informed that we were at a temporary fighter strip in Liege, Belgium.

No quarters were available there so they took us into the city to a hotel. Fortunately we had money with us because the authorities, other than notifying our base that we were alive, essentially ignored our situation. We were there 3 days before our hut mates flew in to a nearby larger field and took us back to Norwich. The most startling incident of our stay (to a Texan) occurred when I was using a urinal in the hotel and a woman calmly walked in and proceeded to go into one of the stalls. That, we discovered, is the way it is there.

On the next mission, we had an engine shot out and landed at a bigger field at Brussels, Belgium. We were better prepared this time having brought shoes along, but were picked up the next day by our same but mates. We found our reputation growing as a crew that wasn't going to be around long, one way or the other. (On looking at the diary that Joe kept at the time, I find it was on missions 3 & 4 that we landed in Belgium so I was undoubtedly mixed up and

missions 1 & 2 that were probably semi-uneventful).

We flew another mission that was memorable. Our takeoff was delayed for about 30 minutes due to mechanical problems so by the time we had climbed to the staging area, our group had left. We found an open slot in the 389th Bomb Group and flew the mission with them. On returning to the base we found that the lower left in the 448th, where we supposed to fly, had been hit by fighters and three 24's went down. How lucky can you be we thought and how much longer could it last?

Things settled down though and we accumulated 10 missions without further major mishap. But our hut mates, on the other hand, flew a mission and never joined our Group. Thinking that they also had joined another group to complete the mission, we didn't worry a lot. Finally we decided that they had probably landed in Belgium just as we had twice. We gloated a little, thinking we were going to get even with them for the ribbing we took when they brought us back twice to the base. But, our friends never came back. It took a long time for us to accept the fact that they were not coming back. The consensus was that they probably had some kind of equipment failure while climbing to altitude and went down into the North Sea. Finally, we were asked to pack up their gear and once while we were at mess, it was picked up. It was very lonely after that as no other crew was ever assigned and we wondered if the hut's number, 13, had discouraged others.

Contrary to popular propoganda, praying was little indulged in, but luck rituals were common. Our co-pilot became frantic before one mission when the navigator forgot to knock on the four leaf clover symbol tacked to our door. Wally jumped on his bike, ran him down and brought him back to complete the ritual. Though we laughed at Wally's voodoo belief, we couldn't argue with its possible effectiveness since we continued to make it back. One crew, on the other hand, was much into kneeling and praying on the tarmac before each mission and even in the mess hall (must have been forerunners of the born gainers). As it turned out they had entered Lead Crew training about the same time we had. For unknown reasons the Col. in command of the Lead Squadron had asked me to take lead crew training and after some thought I had agreed to. The advantage being 15 fewer missions were required before going home--the disadvantage being that fighter planes always tried to shoot down the lead plane in order to disrupt the formation and louse up the bombing results.

Its time for a little aside concerning my co-pilot. When I first met Wally, my feelings about him were neutral. He was a big Okie with a smattering of college courses, but more of a frat rat than a student. Unlike some, he was not openly incensed about being a co-pilot instead of a pilot, so that was a real plus--some pilots had significant trouble with their co-pilots not being satisfied with their status. Part of Wally's acceptance probably was due to his being overawed by the B-24. From the beginning he was very reluctant to fly it and he had to be really encouraged to make his first takeoff. After he had done so, though, he had little further fear of this procedure. Landing was another story altogether. When I turned the controls over to him for a landing,

he always had a problem. If he saw out of the corner of his eye that I had moved my hands from the wheel, he would become frantic and scream for me to put them back on. Then after the landing was accomplished and I truthfully complimenting him on the landing, he would always insist that I had helped him. I was never able to solve this dilemma so I foolishly let it ride assuming that time would solve it before we got into combat.

Well, it didn't and we became a cohesive crew with Wally eventually becoming the enlisted men's favourite officer. he fraternized a lot as did Joe and I saw no harm in it. His continuing belief that he couldn't land a B-24 was a serious problem in combat for if I had become incapacitated, he would have had to land it and the lives of the everyone would have depended on his ability. He had another problem and that had to do with flak. He could fly formation as well as I could, but on entering the final leg to the target where we always encountered flak, he would insist that I fly and he would hunker down with his flak helmet pulled down so that the instrument panel was all that he could see. His fear of flak was not different from mine or probably anyone else's, but his inability to function in spite of it was different. Once when we were encountering rather heavy flak on a bomb run and I needed to get his attention, he was switched to outside communication and I was on the intercom. I reached over and tapped him on the shoulder and he almost lost it, thinking that he had been hit. His problems were a factor in my deciding to accept lead crew training as formation flying became much less of a problem. The lead pilot generally puts his plane on auto pilot and makes extremely gentle turns and changes in airspeed. It was just a matter of holding the proper distance, vertical and horizontal, from the group lead. I could do that without any help from Wally.

His knowledge of his shortcomings, though only he and I (and Joe who stood between our seats when landing) knew of them, probably had an effect on his personality unfortunately. He started to become somewhat like an obstinate child toward me. I tried to ignore this, but some of his traits finally got me riled. Ordinarily when The orderly awakened me for a mission, I would call out to the other officers and all except Wally would start to rouse themselves. He would play possum and finally once in a rage, I jumped from my cot all the way to his cot landing on and scaring the holy crap out of him. After that all I had to do was quietly call his name. Another time when we were scheduled for leave and he refused his turn to get our passes from the orderly room so I went, but only got Joe's and mine. When Wally asked me for his pass and heard that I hadn't picked it up, he raced off to get it and from then on he took his turn on little chores. These two events showed me how I should have handled his other problems, but it was too late by then. I did have one other problem with him when he learned that some first pilots were sharing pilot time on the log book with their co-pilots. After some consideration, I informed him that when he showed me that he could land unassisted and fly formation in flak zones, I would share pilot time with him and I never heard anymore about that.

Well, back to the story of lead crew training. It took more than a month plus the addition of three bombardiers to our crew(they were called Visual, G8 and

Mickey and the latter two men depended on signals from England to guide them to the targets). We somehow flunked our final check ride, but never knew why. So the next day our lead position was given to the praying crew while we flew another practice flight. When the group returned, his squadron was short 5 planes, one of them being his. He had let his squadron lag behind the rest of the group and the German jet fighters, liking stragglers, had broken through the fighter protection and decimated his squadron before our fighters could drive them off. Praying didn't win any converts that day, but the importance of keeping alert and flying tight formation was further emphasized.

Not too long after this, something happened that I didn't understand for about 20 years. I was the leader of the lower left squadron and so placed my 12 planes about 200 ft. behind and to the left and 200 ft. below the last planes in the lead squadron. The upper right squadron's position was similar only above and to the right. On the bomb run, both squadrons fall directly in behind the lead squadron while maintaining the previous altitude and horizontal intervals. We were only a few minutes into the bomb run when my tail gunner noticed that the upper right squadron was creeping up on us and I called it's leader's attention to this. His response was that he had already cut his airspeed to near stalling, but was still closing the gap. I looked out at my squadron and could see that two planes (new crews), who had held their positions properly before opening the bomb bay doors, were now lagging and remembering the puny engines on my first few missions, I was sympathetic, but did encourage them to try to close it up. I closed up as much as possible on the Lead Squadron, but looking up could see that the Upper Right was directly overhead.

I sweated this situation out until about a minute before bombs away, at which time I took control of the plane (overriding the bombsight) and slid my squadron over about 200 ft. and we all watched the upper right's bombs fall right beside us to the target. I radioed my squadron to close their bomb bay doors so we could keep up with the group and notified the Group Lead that my squadron still had its bombs. His suggestion was for us to hit a target of opportunity while staying near the bomber stream. We chose a railroad marshalling yard in a much smaller village and our bombs demolished it.

I wondered then and since what an awful surprise that must have been for those unsuspecting Germans who had undoubtedly seen the bombers going over them many times on their way to more important targets. I have always believed that no children were killed as the bombs fell right on the target. But, be that as it may, we did our duty which was to help destroy the Nazi war machine and at that time, we couldn't concern ourselves like decent human beings or we would have all gone crazy. Needless to say there was hell to pay when we returned and attended debriefing. They always gave us a double shot of scotch to loosen our tongues and Lt. Tallifero, our visual bombardier always refused his. So on this day I drank mine and his, before the inquisition began.

It began with, "What possible excuse could I have for not bombing the prime target?" When I said that the high right's bombs would have gone right

through our formation or at a minimum would have destroyed our stragglers the Major who was conducting the debriefing yelled, "To hell with the stragglers, if they can't keep up that's their problem". So I, with my scotch imbued courage, said, "The lives of these men were my responsibility and no ground pounder sitting on his ass safely back at the base can tell me differently". It was a very cold session after that, but no repercussions, perhaps because I was already scheduled to lead again on the next mission. I'd like to think that upon reporting my recalcitrancy to the Base Commander and recommending disciplinary action, the son-of-a-bitch was told "OK Major Shithead, we'll discipline the bastard, you take his place leading the low left squadron tomorrow!" Then the SOB would have eaten crow with or without relish. Though I don't know this for a fact, I suspect that the debriefing of the high right squadron leader probably confirmed my story.

Ok, I began this saga with the statement that it took 20 years to understand what happened and here is the explanation. In 1960 or 1970, I read a report concerning high velocity winds aloft, called jet streams. Pilots over Japan reported that by changing their altitudes a few hundred ft. they could sometimes pick up significant tail winds. So it wasn't too hard to deduce that the high right squadron may have picked up a twenty mph tail wind that I, only 200 ft. below, didn't and there wasn't anything either of us could have done to change things.

I didn't give the stragglers on that day further thought, but on a following mission, some of them showed they remembered the incident. With only 45 seconds to the target, one of our engines sustained a hit and the oil pressure dropped precipitously. We relinquished the lead to the Deputy Lead as Wally feathered the prop and we began our lonely journey home. I should explain that a 3 engined plane is too slow to stay in formation. As we dropped out of formation, a pilot who had been in my flight that momentous day volunteered to accompany us. Instantly some other pilots began to radio agreement. These offers were courageous, but probably short-sighted for it could have resulted in many losses. A lone airplane probably has a better chance of eluding observation and is not a SIGNIFICANT LOSS if spotted. Surely you don't believe that we thought we were insignificant! We called for fighter cover, but saw no results. Looking for a target of opportunity, we spotted a small town that had a substantial railroad marshalling yard and plastered it with our bombs.

With fear and trepidation we continued on until the dreaded report from Terry(our tail gunner) and others, that 3 fighters were approaching in a pursuit curve. I asked if anyone could identify the planes and no one could make a positive identification. Reluctantly, I ordered them to fire warning shots and when they did the radio instantly sounded out, "Do you guys want fighter support or not"? Needless to say my apologies were profuse, but in hind sight I still can't understand their approaching, in such a provocative manner, a single terrified B-24 crew, without first identifying themselves. It's only fair to say that it's possible that neither Wally nor I had informed the gunners that we has asked for fighter cover. All of us had learned in training to identify friendly and enemy airplanes in 1/100 of a second on overhead projections, but when

the real thing came along it wasn't that easy and the ME-101 and the P-51 do look a lot alike from head on.

Well, our happiness was complete with our little friends sitting a few thousand feet over us just asking for some Germans to come up and try something. But while we were still 100 miles inside Germany the fighter leader informed us that they were needed in a fierce dogfight about 50 miles away and left us. A baby being abandoned by its mother could not have been more desolate, but about an uneventful half an hour later we were again over Belgium and by this time the 3 engine rules had been changed so we flew on home over the North Sea.

After landing, one of our bombardiers confronted me, furiously asking why I could not have waited the 45 seconds before feathering the prop so that he could complete his bomb run. I explained to him that only recently a plane had a similar rapid loss of oil pressure and had not feathered quickly enough. All of the oil was lost and hence the ability to feather which resulted in a sudden lockup of the engine, a broken crank shaft, and the prop breaking away and slicing the plane in half. Even this didn't mollify him and Joe told me later that Rupnick (this bombardier) had Jewish relatives in Germany and was rabid on killing Germans. I guess the rest of us never took the war that seriously, but of course we didn't have as much incentive.

I found out in a strange way that Joe was Jewish also. He was my best friend on the crew and when granted leave we always went to London for a change of scenery, better food, and girls. Once at a dance Joe had met a couple of sisters and asked my help. I wasn't all that interested in nice girls because what most of them wanted was marriage to a rich American (they thought we were all rich) and would not do any more than neck. But Joe enticed me to take one of these sisters, saying that I could have the pretty one. She was tall and willowy while the other one was short and dumpy--they didn't look like sisters. But as we paired up I always seemed to be with the wrong one and when I mentioned this to Joe, he, in amazement, contended that I had the pretty one. Still gullible? Well, it was too late to change, the pretty one was unalterably attached to Joe. We double dated a few more times at Joe's urging and the last one my date whispered to me, "Did you know that Joe is Jewish and that the Jews had killed Jesus"? I wasn't that much into religion, but it had been pretty obvious for some time that she was jealous and wanted Joe also (the little bastard was cute and a good dancer), but anyhow I told her that I was Jewish too and never told Joe why I didn't date her again. Isn't that something, he risked his life numerous times in her behalf and all England and she was concerned about something that his forebears have been falsely accused of for 2000 years.

Somewhere back when I was describing our training, I should have related one flying incident concerning Joe that wasn't serious. Our procedure during final approach, since both pilots are quite busy with landing gear, flaps, prop pitch, etc. not to mention lining up with and not crashing into the runway, was to have Joe stand between us and call out the airspeed. We normally cruised at 160 mph and began the approach at 140. We could touch down at any

speed from 110 down to about 90 where power off stall occurs. For the really uninformed, I should explain that if you aren't on the ground when your plane stalls, there are only two scenarios and both are bad. The plane either drops like a rock the remaining distance to the runway or it begins to spin in. Well, during one landing with Joe calling out the airspeed like, " 140, 140, 135, 130, 120, 115, 110, 110, 100, 100, 90, 90, 85, 85, 80, 75, 70." Joe's voice had risen in volume and pitch from the 90 on down, ending in loud scream of 70. Wally interrupted at this point to say, "For Christ's sake Joe, we've been on the ground for ages." We had not realized before that Joe never took his eyes off the airspeed indicator for even a glance at the ground, just waited to feel the wheels touch, to end his job. Well of course, he took quite a ribbing about this, but tried to get in the last word by saying that usually my landings were more like semi-controlled crashes so he just was not accustomed to one being "greased in."

I only flew the group lead one time (leading 36 planes instead of 12) and found it to be quite different from the squadron lead. The biggest difference was that a Major or higher rank was the group leader and sat in my co-pilot's seat. I had not previously met the Major assigned for this mission, but I had heard that he was an old test pilot. He appeared to be about 35 to 40 years old (ancient) and rumours had it that he was an alcoholic. He never touched the controls but was constantly on the radio, I presume to other group leaders or possibly to wing or division leaders. I stayed on the intercom and never listened in on him. We made the bomb run without any problem other than extremely heavy flak, but were hit as we again had an outboard engine failure(why is it always outboard) shortly after turning for home. This was not a mission deep into Germany so we had no problem getting into safer air space. With an engine failure especially an outboard, a B-24 is very difficult to fly. The pilot must apply hard, almost full rudder on the other side to keep the ship on course. After a while even when you are young and strong, the leg starts to tremble so your co-pilot spells you periodically. When I asked the Major to spell me, he seemed reluctant to do so, but finally did so for about 30 seconds before saying, "Lt. you'll have to take over". The old bastard was pooped. Well of course I wasn't at all rested and told him so, but he was adamant. So then I told him to get out of the seat and let my co-pilot help. This really made him angry and he said, "I am the group leader!" My response was "I am the aircraft commander". I was glad that he relinquished the seat before I was forced to get Wally to throw him out. He complied because I was within my rights, but I thought there might be some repercussions in debriefing, but he apparently reported nothing.

I suppose I ought to propound my beliefs at that time concerning longevity. There seemed to be only two reasonable choices, luck of the draw or a malignant deity. I've already talked of the praying crew, but I probably didn't mention that our but mates who never returned were truly upstanding men. The two that were married wrote letters to their wives every night and none of them participated in any of the high jinks that our crew was involved in. On their periodic leaves they went to various historic sites, museums, and art galleries. I'm afraid that most of my crew never saw any of these. We spent our free time drinking and looking for loose women and today, since I

survived, I somewhat regret it. However, in retrospect I know that I'd do the same thing again under those circumstances. We faced imminent death every mission that we flew and so lived life to the fullest, as we saw it, at every opportunity.

On days when we hadn't been scheduled and our group was returning from a mission, we and virtually everyone else met them. It wasn't sick rubbernecking, for most of us were concerned about friends and acquaintances. We knew how many planes left and we counted them as they landed. It was frequently fewer and many of those returning fired yellow flares for serious mechanical difficulties and some fired red flares signifying wounded on board. Then we saw terribly injured men loaded into ambulances and others lying on the tarmac with faces covered who didn't have to be rushed anywhere. But basically we fought such a different war than did the grunt in the infantry. We never saw the enemy's face and seldom saw the dead. If we saw a B-24 turn belly up and plummet toward the earth, we could only imagine the terror of the men as they struggled to clip on their parachutes while fighting to exit against the paralyzing force of acceleration. Frequently only a few parachutes were seen to open.

We came back from 8 to 10 hour missions, some routine, but always with flak at the target, fear on takeoff with a heavily loaded plane and frequently landing with ceiling and visibility problems that no civilian airliner would land in. But then we had a warm meal, whiskey, and a decent cot in a semi-warm Quonset hut and every two or three weeks, a three day leave that we could enjoy in London with girls and civilian cooking. This probably would have been an infantryman's dream of heaven. But then, back came fearsome reality and another 8 to 10 hour mission with apprehension filled moments--what a strange sudden contrast. I knew of no one who considered himself a hero or even courageous, but everyone just continued to do what he was trained to do. I suppose one incitement to do so was the rumour that those who had to awaken the crews for missions and pack up the belongings of those who didn't return were men who had refused to fly again.

I didn't know until after the war that the bomber crews had the highest casualty rate (50%) of any of our forces, but even then we were better off than the British bomber crews who had a 60%. And of course, since when we were there after the P-51's covered us all the way, we didn't have the awful casualty rates of the other earlier crews. We were terribly frightened of German fighters, but after the war the military released the information that Flak had downed more bombers than fighters.

I suppose it was for our own good, but the ground pounders never told us what our losses were or who was killed or wounded so unless you personally knew someone who stopped showing up, rumours were all we had to go on. Some took to drinking too much even if they had a mission to fly the next day. I never drank before a mission as I thought it wouldn't hurt to give luck a little help. It was obvious though that luck was more important than skill in avoiding death -- the flak bursts hit the skilled and unskilled without any partiality. And compared to praying, luck was the clear winner. There was just no evidence

that those who attended chapel before a mission were statistically better off than those who followed some silly ritual like we did. And some pilots talked of their luck at being distracted and losing their place in formation for a few seconds only to see a giant burst of flak occupy that spot. I never knew of anyone who said a voice told him to get the hell outa there.

On the bomb run on one mission while Flak was heavy, Joe put his head up into his little star-observing bubble, located about 10 feet in front of the pilots, and stuck his tongue out at us and maybe fate. He may have just been showing us that he was no longer so terrified, but as he pulled his head down a chunk of flak pierced the bubble and lodged noisily in the console between us pilots. Shortly his head reappeared but his eyes were about twice their previous size and his tongue was not in sight. If that was luck it was certainly fortuitous, but if it was God, He could have made it a little less dramatic. One morning I was awakened out of an unusually deep sleep by the orderly and must have gone through all the routines of a mission almost automatically for in no time at all we were in the bomber stream at 20,000 feet at deputy lead position in the lower left squadron. We all knew the war was almost won. The Luftwaffe had been virtually decimated by our superior numbers of fighters, especially the P-51 with its Rolls Royce engine and wing tanks that allowed it to escort us to any target in Germany. So our fear of fighter attack had certainly been lessened, but always just there. We were nearing our target when three Focke-Wulf 180's came out of nowhere in their favourite manoeuvre-- an upside down head on attack. I saw that they were concentrating their fire on us and effectively too for smoke and fire began to pour out of our Lead's number 3 engine. At the last split second before a head on collision, all three dove earthward at top speed exposing only their heavily armoured bellies to our gunners.

Instantly our P-51 fighter cover dropped their wing tanks and dove after them. As Deputy Lead, I called the squadron to form up on my lead, but since the sudden attack had caused some chaos, we were a badly scattered formation and at just this moment we were hit from behind by at least a dozen ME-109's and FW-180's. Terry was screaming that they were coming in from six o'clock high and the plane began to vibrate as guns from the upper turret, waist, and tail turret began to fire. Soon the vibrations were joined by jolts and loud explosions and I realized that we were being hit by 20 and 40 millimetre cannon shells. The intercom was filled with screaming and shouting as the assault continued. I knew our fighters from nearby groups would quickly come to our aid, but two minutes of air combat is an eternity and the enemy made the most of it. I saw several of our 24's burning and one plunging earthward just as I realized that the intercom had grown deathly quiet.

When I got no response to calls it became apparent that only my co-pilot and I were alive. Our coffin like seats of one inch armour had saved us in this rearward attack, but then a 180 came at us from head on where our protection is minimal and since there was no comforting sound from the nose turret's guns, I knew we were defenceless. The 180 bore in with its 40 MM cannon blazing. The windshield in front of Wally disintegrated and he virtually exploded. Just when the 180 had to dive to avoid a collision, I pushed the

wheel all the way forward and to the left, putting my left wing in his path. He had not allowed for this manoeuvre and could not avoid colliding with my number 1 engine which shredded his plane just before he exploded. The wing came off my plane and as it began plummeting downward, I struggled from my seat to get my chest chute, but it wasn't behind the seat where I stored it. Just as I found Wally's chute and started to buckle it on the view out the front windshield froze me -- the ground was only about 500 feet away and closing at 400 miles per hour--death was inevitable.....

"Lt. this is the second time I've awakened you and you've got the assignment of flying the stripped assed ape before your three day leave". I asked the Sgt. how long it had been since he first shook me and he said about five minutes. Well, we flew the "stripped assed ape" firing red, yellow, red flares until the entire group had formed. Then we raced back to the base and off to London. I never told anyone about my dream, but I did ask a fighter pilot friend if they ever got suckered away from their positions and he allowed that no one had fallen for that in a long time.

Later I read that the head of the Eight Air Force, probably Doolittle at that time, had instructed our fighters to concentrate on shooting down enemy fighters and not to be too concerned about the plight of bombers. Well, I suppose it worked as I also have read that the day before D-Day as bait, a great armada of bombers went sent to bomb Berlin our fighters were ordered to destroy German fighters not to be concerned about bomber losses. It worked, they shot down over 300 enemy fighters that had risen to meet us. I think 64 bombers were lost, 640 men, but perhaps thousands of lives were spared on "D-Day".

We were scheduled for our 19th mission when the Germans surrendered and the joy and relief we felt would be hard to describe. Maybe the best way is to relate a little conversation I had with someone who should have known better. He asked me if I wasn't sorry not to fly two more missions thereby earning my captaincy and a Distinguished Flying Cross. It wasn't difficult to say that the chance of being killed on one of those missions far outweighed the questionable value of those two trinkets.

This is the time to recount my favourite joke. I can't remember who told it, but I can remember that he did it with a marvellous Polish accent. It seems that a free Pole had become quite a decorated hero while flying B24's over Germany and was sent to the States to facilitate war bond sales. He was speaking before a ladies group and recounting one horrifying mission that he had survived. " Der I vas at tweedy tousand feet ven all at vunce I vas surrounded by fakkers -- fakkers to de right, fakkers to de left, fakkers all around. I" -- but at this point the chairwoman broke in to say, "Major Stevkanzoski, I'm sure you mis-speak yourself. The Fokkers were WWI airplanes." The Major furiously replied, Dese fakkers vere all in Messerschmits." Sorry about that!

We counted ourselves lucky having survived the crash incident and engine fire in training and then never having really severe flak damage and though losing numerous engines over Germany, but never once being attacked by

the enemy fighters while returning alone. And of course the delay of our first lead crew assignment when the replacement crew had such a bad day. If God had a hand in all this, come judgement day He will certainly have some explaining to do. His taste in who he saves seems questionable. As it turned out we did fly three more missions, but they didn't count. No one shot at us. Someone decided that the ground pounders on our air bases should get to see the destruction in Germany now that the flak wasn't so bothersome. So we left our gunners (except for Royski, our flight engineer), bombardiers, and bombs, loaded up our planes with the non-combatants and flew very low over a number of the cities that we had bombed. Most of the damage done to dwellings were due to the RAF's saturation bombing at night for I don't believe they made too much pretenses of hitting only military targets. Who could blame them?

I see that nowhere in these wanderings have the English people or especially the English pilots been given the kind of credit they deserve. We colonists were probably always treated with more courtesy and respect than we deserved for to a great extent we WERE ugly Americans. We were paid about four times the amount that the equivalent English rank was and far too many English girls thought we were all rich. The English were brave in face of death and patient in the long food lines and severe rationing. And in addition to their pilots winning the battle of Britain, thus saving mankind from Hitler's eventual control, they continued to fly night bombing missions in spite of heavy losses due to flak and the deadly radar equipped German night fighters. I must though, at this point, describe an addiction of the English that we Americans could not understand. Now we drank coffee, but we could live without it (then, not now). On the contrary, the English probably would have surrendered to Hitler if their tea supply had been cut off. No wonder The Boston Tea Party made them so furious.

I'll describe one event that above all others shows how, for the English, the world must stop when it is tea time. We were returning from a practice flight, a common occurrence when we had been "stood down" for a few days, and were within seconds of touch down at near stalling speed when a truck, literally overflowing with English workers appeared, crossing our runway in an obvious collision path. Yelling at Wally to lift the gear, I simultaneously applied full power and lifted the nose gingerly to avoid stalling and glimpsed startled white faces as the truck disappeared under the nose. The next thing to grab my attention, as I urged the plane to gain some altitude, was hysterical laughter over the intercom from Pat, the tail gunner. When he was finally able to control himself, he described the chaos that occurred after we skimmed over the truck. Numerous bodies had been blown off by our propwash and the truck veered crazily before the driver regained control and continued on to his destination while the fallen bodies picked themselves up and ran or limped after it. As we landed the control tower got our attention and reported with some regret that no one had been killed or even badly injured and even more important, that the tea they were racing for had not gotten cold.

Shortly after we had flown the sightseer missions over Germany we were on our way home, by way of the Azores and Gander Field, Newfoundland. After a

short hop into Maine where we said goodbye to our faithful old B-24, we were greeted by Red Cross girls who gave us doughnuts and milk. It's heaven: home, doughnuts, milk, and American girls, but perhaps not in that order. And contrary to the belief of some disgruntled Vietnam veterans, that was the only parade that we ever got, or wanted.

I've got to expand a bit on this last landing in Maine. I believe I mentioned that we had a large number of ground pounders on board with all their luggage. They presented no problem on the flight, but on this landing some of them just about did us all in. I had landed in the Azores and Newfoundland without any problem, but this landing was different. I had made the approach at the usual speed, but when I chopped the throttles at about ten feet above the runway the nose would not come up and we hit the runway hard. The nose wheel is not designed to contact the runway until the plane is rolling on the ground at 60-70 mph. The huge main landing gear absorbs the shock of landing. But I pulled the controls back with all my might and all three wheels hit almost simultaneously. The good ol' strong B-24 nose wheel did not collapse. If it had at about 110 mph the men in the nose would have been crushed and if the rest were lucky the plane would have skidded to a stop in few hundred yards, but it could have caught on fire. Obviously a number of our passengers wanted to be first back home never thinking how they unbalanced the plane. I was so shook up and grateful to be alive that I didn't even ask the commanding officer who also hitched a ride with us to chew some ass as those men evacuated the nose compartment. As I have written, my moniker was

'Crash' but the crew never knew how close we had been to having final one. My crew was broken up at this time and sent to various training schools preparing for Japan. This was a traumatic thing. We had been together for about a year enduring fears and joys (every time we landed safely) and we went on our separate ways with hardly a goodbye. It certainly was not right for the powers to not give us a day and a night to celebrate our being alive and our gratitude for the support we gave each other. Many times later I wished that I could have treated my entire crew to a steak dinner and told them that the reason that I never unbent much with them was that I was afraid if they got to know me too well they would find out that I was also just a 20 year old kid and I didn't know what that would do for their confidence when we got into a serious situation. Anyhow we went on our separate ways, but we had already lived the most interesting part of our lives.

I went to Long Beach, California to learn to fly the B-29 which had replaced the B-24 as the largest airplane in the world. I was just beginning to fly these when the atomic bombs were dropped and Japan surrendered. The Japs, too, heard I was coming. This made everyone deliriously happy, but in the Army way, it was several months before I was discharged. While we waited, a pilot friend of mine bought a car and we played a lot of golf. At that time anyone in uniform could play any of the fantastic California private courses for a dollar and a half. Most of these cost from 200 to 400 dollars today if you can get an invitation. What a shame that I was such a sorry golfer at this time that I didn't fully appreciate these bonanzas.