

Heroic Tale of a Tail Gunner

By Robert Porter Lynch 2014

I thought I'd better write this story before it slips into lost and forgotten stories of WWII heroics.....

Twenty five years ago (1989) my wife and I owned and operated the Saxton's River Inn in Vermont. It was built at the turn of the century. We had an old Victorian style bar. Every afternoon about 4 pm the locals would wander in and tell colorful stories, mostly mundane, many idiosyncratic (we had some very unique old Yankees in town), and sometimes a truly memorable story would be told. This is the one I remember most vividly:

Dick Abbott lived several miles away, toward Grafton. At the time he was in his mid-sixties (and has subsequently passed away). He had just retired from being an engineer, Dick was also very mechanical, and could fix just about anything. His son and he had raced stock cars as a hobby; we often traded stories about cars. Not a man to tell tall-tales, Dick was generally a reserved but likeable old Yankee who always had a twinkle in his eye and a friendly smile.

One afternoon we were trading war stories (I had served in Vietnam and my father in WWII in the Pacific so I have a keen ear for military history. He told me of his experience in WWII.

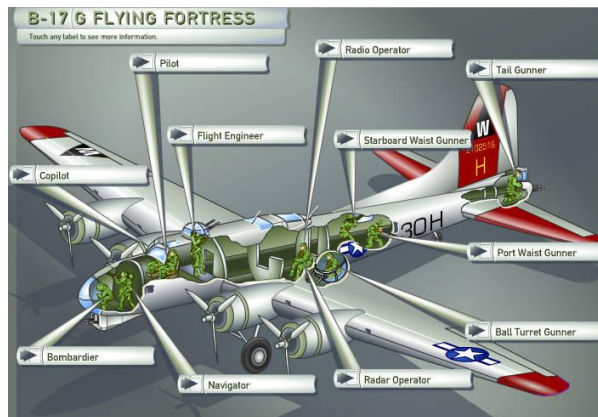
Dick was just a farm boy, only sixteen when he signed up for the US Army Air Force. (I don't recall if he got his parent's permission or lied about his age.) Dick knew tractors, but the idea of being an airman was alluring. He was trained as a tail gunner for B-17s, becoming adroit in the firing of its pair of Browning M-2 .50 caliber machine gun. Each of the thirteen machine guns aboard had enough ammunition to last about one minute. (the .50 caliber has a



During wartime operation, the crew of a B-17 consisted of four officers who were responsible for offense (pilot, copilot, bombardier, and navigator) plus six enlisted men who operated the defensive guns and radio.

The average age of an Eighth Air Force bomber crew in Europe was 22, and the unfortunate truth was that their life expectancy in 1943 and 1944 was only 12 to 15 missions.

Because of the high attrition rate, there was a high likelihood of being captured after being shot out of the skies. Every enlisted man, regardless of earned rank, wore the uniform of a sergeant. Because the German command was oriented to respect hierarchy, it was believed that, if a crewman was captured and thrown into a prisoner of war camp, the extra sergeant stripes would merit more favorable treatment.



bullet that's ½ inch in diameter, powered by ¾ inch cylinder cartridge.)

The stories of B-17 missions are legendary. The airplanes got shot up quite badly, and many were lost, suffering heavy casualties. For example, one of the Bombardment Groups lost 35 of its original 36 aircraft after only the sixth mission.

The Yanks flew the more dangerous daylight flights in their Boeing B-17s; the Brits flew the night flights in their Lancaster bombers.

Dick was flying one of those dangerous missions in the "stinger" position in the tail when his plane got attacked by a swarm of heavily armed Messerschmitt Me-109s. The B-17 was soon riddled with bullets. Tail gunners protected the plane from attacking fighters from the rear. The first objective of those attacking pilots was often to eliminate the tail gunner, then the pilots.

Dick, in his isolated position, fired relentlessly at the attackers, trying to protect the plane and its crew.

After warding off the attack, Dick called via the communications system to the rest of the crew. No response from the waist gunners, nor the belly gunner, nor the radioman, nor the navigator, nor the bombardier, nor the pilot, nor the co-pilot. A lump swelled Dick's throat.

Dick crawled out of his wedge-fit battle position and was shocked.

Everywhere the Flying Fortress -- an airborne battleship -- was riddled, the wind whistling through the bullet holes. But worse: blood and bodies were littered inside the plane, draped over their guns and equipment, still at battle stations.

Shocked to see all his buddies riddled by machine gun bullets, suffering agonizing deaths, Dick scrambled forward to the cockpit. Same thing -- pilot and co-pilot slumped over, dead, blood and bullet holes everywhere. But the plane was flying on automatic pilot, engines still running, headed straight into



View inside the fuselage of a B-17 looking aft toward the tail gunners position. They lay on their stomachs to fit into the narrow section of the rear, known as the "stinger."



Swarm of German Messerschmitt ME-109 Fighters



Cockpit of a B-17

deadly Nazi Germany!

Still just a boy, and scared stiff, Dick knew doom was destined, unless he took action right away.

Dick pulled the limp officer's body out of the pilot seat, took his position as self-appointed commander, and sat stunned while he gathered his senses. Dick had no time to feel sorry for himself or his dead buddies. He needed to save himself, and maybe the plane. But Dick had never flown a plane before; he was just a farm boy.

He donned the head phones and was able to call in the clear for help. Miraculously the radio was still functional.

Quickly two friendly P-51 Mustang fighters arrived, bracketing him, one on each wing. The pilots told him how to use the rudders, ailerons, and how to throttle the engines.

Dick managed to get the lumbering Flying Fortress turned around, heading back to friendly territory. The Mustang wing-men protected him from any more Messerschmitts. They told him to dump any remaining bombs scattershot over enemy territory -- if Dick brought the plane in for a crash landing, the extra bombs were dangerous cargo.



P-51 Mustangs escorting a B-17

But the journey was far from over. He still had to cross the English Channel, and then the next real excitement was to happen -- landing the big bomber. (Anyone who has ever piloted a plane knows that landing safely is the most difficult part of flying.)

He could have chosen to ditch the plane over the channel and parachute the rest of the way, but Dick wanted to save the plane and enable an appropriate burial for the crew.

As Dick approached the English Channel a new voice came over the headphones -- he described it as the "Voice of an Angel." Flight control knew that Dick was just a teenager and rather than having a gruff battle pilot "talk him down," the gentle voice of an English woman would be far more soothing. Immediately comforted by her tender words, like a mother nurturing her son, she guided him down, instructing him on the complex maneuver of landing one of the biggest planes ever built: air speed, lining up with the runway, altitude and attitude, flaps down, and making a 3-point landing.

Apparently there were three bases from Kent to Yorkshire in England devoted specifically to aiding crippled aircraft returning from combat. Here's what I found:

"Each had three unusually long and wide landing strips enabling damaged aircraft to recover safely when their chances of reaching a conventional runway were marginal at best. The single 9,000 ft strips were built at RAF Manston in Kent, RAF Woodbridge in Suffolk and RAF Carnaby in Yorkshire. At 750 ft wide, they were more than five times the width of conventional wartime runways. Divided into three lanes, the northern and central lanes dealt with aircraft returning under flying control, while the southern lane was reserved for more serious emergencies" (read: crash landings).

As he approached the airfield (I don't recall if he told me the specific airbase), the Mustang pilots reassured him. And the Angelic Voice told him everything would be fine, after all he had gotten almost all the way back. He believed them, which eased his mind. He wondered if the Angel that was guiding him was a premonition of a future wife.

Dick's heart raced as he saw the approaching airfield, deeply concerned that he would have to master the most difficult part of any airplane experience without a seasoned co-pilot.

Despite never having flown a plane, Dick brought the airship in for a perfect, if not bouncy, 3-point landing. He and the plane were both safe.

Only then did he look out the bullet-ridden windshield to see the fire-trucks and ambulances lining the runway. Everyone was prepared for the worst that didn't happen. Dick only thought of his crew mates -- they would never see another day. Dick was blessed, but why was he selected to live, while his buddies and officers died?

At once he was shuttled back to Flight Control, where he yearned to hug the Angel who guided him to safety. Of course he had imagined a Marlene Dietrich or Diana Dors as the "Angel." Instead she was just a matronly captain in the woman's auxiliary airforce, but she was still his savior and guiding light. He took her out to dinner that night in gratitude.

After a little R&R, Dick returned to the air for more combat missions. At the end of the war, now a man, Dick returned to America to live the simple country life in Vermont.

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Military records list Sergeant Richard Abbott as a B-17 gunner.

He's also listed as having been wounded and awarded two Purple Hearts and an Air medal.

I can't find his total number of missions, at least 18.

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One commentator responded to the story with:

My Great Aunt was Squadron Leader Nurse with the PMRAFNS at Manston and she used to tell me of the times she had to go in the Ambulance to pick up the casualties from the crashed Aircraft.

I have some buttons she was given by one pilot she rescued (Or more likely she cut them off his tattered uniform as a souvenir)

THE 26 BRAVE MEN ON THIS LIST GAVE THEIR
LIVES ON THE SCHWEINFURT MISSION OF APRIL 13th, 1944,
WHILE SERVING WITH THE 384th BOMB GROUP, 8th AIR FORCE.

NAME	POSITION	HOME TOWN	CREW
2nd Lt. Morris (NMI) Kantor	Navigator	Syracuse, NY	Poole
2nd Lt. Sidney L. Bush	Copilot	Honolulu, HI	Fioretti
S/Sgt. Cecil C. Morton	Radio/Gunner	Adrian, MI	Fioretti
T/Sgt. Walter E. Stuhl	Top turret	Paulsborough, NJ	Fioretti
T/Sgt. Charles H. Eyre	Ball turret	Seaman, OH.	Fioretti
2nd Lt. Max J. Miller	Pilot	Bakersfield, CA	Miller
2nd Lt. James E. Dent, Jr.	Copilot	Jackson, TN	Miller
2nd Lt. Theophilus E. Beinar	Navigator	Worcester, MA	Miller
T/Sgt. Henry O. Watson	Radio/Gunner	McKeesport, PA	Miller
T/Sgt. Elvie L. Rodden	Top turret	Tulsa, OK.	Miller
S/Sgt. Saul J. Schelberg	Ball turret	Bronx, NY.	Miller
S.Sgt. Albert P. Krizner	Tail Gunner	Uniontown, PA.	Miller
S/Sgt. Howard R. LeConey	Waist Gunner	Riverside, NJ.	Miller
2nd Lt. Dexter H. Warren	Navigator	Beulah, MI	Briley
S/Sgt. James H. Young	Top turret	Los Angeles, CA	Swanson
2nd Lt. Verlyn C. Tollison	Pilot	Greenwood, SC.	Tollison
2nd Lt. Dana C. White	Copilot	Princeton, WV.	Tollison
2nd Lt. Willis R. Fitzsimmons	Navigator	Meta, MO.	Tollison
2nd Lt. Roy (NMI) McGinnis	Bombardier	Alhumbra, CA.	Tollison
1st Lt. James R. Lavin	Pilot	St. Croix, IN.	Lavin
2nd Lt. Louis A. Bendon	Copilot	Philadelphia, PA.	Lavin
2nd Lt. Calvin L. Anthes	Bombardier	Knoxville, TN.	Lavin
S/Sgt. Lloyd G. Brady	Ball turret	Dorsey, NE.	Lavin
S/Sgt. James W. Malone	Tail gunner	Loganport, LA.	Lavin
S/Sgt. Raymond R. Marz	Waist gunner	Woodcliff, NJ	Lavin
1st Lt. Joseph L. Bedsole, Jr.	Copilot/Mission Comm.	Mobile, AL.	Stearns

LET US NEVER FORGET....