EIGHTH AIR FORCE MEMORIES

INTRODUCTION

This is a brief attempt to augment my 56-year-old mission diary with some additional material, responses and details as urged by some – especially my Cousin Red. Massive descriptions will be avoided, given the enormous written background histories available.

PEARL HARBOR

This shock occurred while I was a 17-year-old high school student in a commuting town on Long Island. This event stunned the world and infuriated Americans and set the stage for the massive war acceleration that led to deaths estimated as high as 50 million in the coming years. I immediately asked my parents for the necessary approval to join the Marine Corps. They responded that they would approve my joining the Air Corps after high school graduation in June '42. I waited restlessly for this time to pass, with worry that I would be too late for service. I passed the stringent Army Air Corps exams and was inducted on July 30, 1942. To my dismay, I was not called to duty until February '43, delayed by the need for aircraft and facilities.

TRAINING

Thousands of healthy young men aged 18 to 26 reported to classification centers like the huge one at Nashville. We were tested for weeks regarding our physical assets and our abilities and aptitude for service as bombardier, pilot, or navigator. I had average marks for pilot and high scores for the other two. Through chance, I was assigned pilot training and was sent to rigorous training with cadet disciplines at Maxwell Field in Montgomery, Alabama. I was then sent to Primary Flying School at Camden, South Carolina. Policy then was to wash out about 70% of the pilots – training was impatient and not complete in my opinion. I did have the excitement of solo flying, but ground looped upon landing, breaking a wing. I was sent to Navigator School at Selman Field in Monroe, Louisiana, fitted in well, and was commissioned and given silver wings on February 5, 1944. I was able to steer my training as an officer to Rapid City, South Dakota, with a motive of being assigned to B-17's, which I much preferred as an airplane, and also because of my preference for the European theater. I was quickly assigned to a fine bomber crew of ten and sent to an 8th Air Force replacement depot near London via a huge convoy and a 13-day crossing which featured a u-boat attack. In May 1944 we were assigned to the 351st Bomb Group as a replacement for one of the 12 planes lost in the previous two weeks. Our new base was called Polebrook and was fairly near Peterborough. There were probably about 36 bombers stationed there at that time. D-Day occurred about two weeks later, and we started our combat tour on D + 6, or June 12, 1944.

GENERAL DESCRIPTIONS OF MISSIONS

At this time, the 8th was swelling to huge proportions as bombers, fighters and crews were arriving daily from the arsenal of democracy. New bomber bases were opened all over East Anglia and missions began to number around 1,000 four-engine bombers, each with a crew of 10 men and 13 heated .50-caliber machine guns bristling all over the airplane and staffed by everyone except the two pilots – hence the "Flying Fortress" designation. The strategy was to fly daylight missions and hit strategic targets with the aid of the Norden bombsight. Huge fleets flew in carefully planned tight formations designed to meet attacking fighters with a curtain of bullets and to make the bombing pattern accurate. The British thought this strategy of daylight bombing was foolish, and there were violent arguments on this subject for many months. The RAF did night bombing, usually seeking to destroy cities after the Luftwaffe began this practice in 1940.

The cold temperature at 25,000 feet was cruel and deserves special mention. Even in summer, the cold was about 25 below C. and there was no effective heating. Missions lasted up to over 10 hours, and the numbness was accompanied by oxygen masks, which were often frozen to the face and provided lethal risk, in that a malfunction of the system led to death from anoxia in a few minutes. We had frequent frostbite and also found that the sheepskin stuff we were issued started a sweat at the ground level, which became ice as we went up to altitude. We were also equipped with a mae west, flak suit, parachute, steel helmet revised so it would fit over our ear phones mounted in sheepskin helmets, and a throat mike. We carried maps, edible charts, a .45 Colt, and cigarettes.

We had perhaps three kinds of missions. The usual was to hit large and distant targets at cities usually deep in Germany – aircraft factories, refining plants, railroad yards – and some cities when clouds were difficult. A second kind was launch facilities for V-1 and V-2 missiles – usually in Calais, and short missions which were not too well defended – and thirdly, support missions for our ground forces. We supported the St. Lo breakout, the famous Bridge Too Far mission, and some others near the battle line. The first category was the most dangerous, and the chance for huge clouds of German fighters picking on our Group was high and sometimes led to 200 fighters shooting down 30 out of 36 Group B-17's in two minutes. This didn't happen to us! We had one Purple Heart and one ME 109 claimed.

Flak was our chief and pervasive enemy. We were hit in over half our missions. During one we had over 90 holes; in another we had a tire shot out; there were many where we were showered with shattered plexiglass, and one where I found flak in my map case – I still have it and the case. There were 2,000,000 flak gunners at the end of the war – including thousands of 88 millimeter artillery pieces which could be used against ground forces as well. Flying into flak barrages like those at Berlin was numbing – there seemed to be many hundred black explosions for over 30 minutes, and bombers could be seen falling,

smoking, flaming and disappearing during what seemed to be a hopeless eternity. Parachutes were on, and the question was whether you would be able to get out at 29,000 feet to try to save your life – not a fear of jumping itself, although there were risks of anoxia, but of gunfire by fighters, and pitchforks by angry farmers on the ground. With 20 more missions to go, survival seemed almost impossible in the months ahead.

LEAD CREW

Lloyd Leland was a wonderful pilot, and Earl Maxwell was a highly rated bombardier. We were thought to be the Model Crew in South Dakota since everyone performed well. Late in July, we were singled out to become a lead crew. I was still 19 and was surprised by this development, but Lloyd and Max assured me I could handle it. The responsibility turned out to be massive – we had Generals on board to lead formations of as many as 1,000 planes. We trained and practice-bombed incessantly. There were always two navigators on board the big missions – I became the senior. A radar (mickey) operator was also on board frequently to provide help when cloud cover demanded. Now I found that sleepless nights were caused more by the responsibility of establishing the formation, leading to all points, finding the targets, evading the flak and fighters, etc., than it was by self-preservation. We typically were roused around 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning anyway and took off around 5:00 or 6:00 – with maybe another mission the next day. I felt the great weight of all of this. Investment management has been much easier. We were basically successful – I was asked to stay after my tour ended and train lead navigators – I declined.

CASUALTIES

The book says the Eighth had 350,000 members over its combat existence from the summer of ’42 until May 1945. 210,000 of these were aircrew members, the number killed totaled 26,000 (more than that of the whole Marine Corps), and another 21,000 were captured and put in POW camps. Over 6,500 bombers and 3,300 fighters were lost. Estimates are that 35% of the flyers survived their tours in ’42 and ’43, 66% in ’44 and somewhat more in ’45. Tours were initially set at 25 missions, then 30, and later 35. Lead crews got some relief and I finished with 29. One of the great fortunate developments for me was the arrival of quantities of revised long-range P-51 Mustangs about the time I started. Until then, bomber formations could not be escorted very deeply into Europe, and FW 190’s and ME 109’s swarmed on us as the friendly fighters left because of fuel problems. In ’43, losses became really heavy under their attack with cannons and machine guns. Planes were lasting for about 8 missions for a stretch, with two raids on Schweinfurt suffering losses near 20% each. It became doubtful if the daylight bombing idea was valid. In ’44, Doolittle took command and told his leaders that the new goal was to use the bombers as bait to get the Luftwaffe up. There they would be attacked by new fighters, and the ground was to be softened up for the invasion of Europe, then scheduled for May ’44. That is what happened. The invasion met no air opposition – which would have been prohibitive to success. The Eighth gained supremacy and probably 90% of major

German targets were mostly destroyed – I rarely saw a city or site which had more than a few walls standing. We flew huge missions every day, numbering perhaps 1,500 bombers and over a thousand fighters escorting us all the way and shooting up anything that moved on the ground on the way back. The 15th Air Force based in Italy was also active in southern Germany. We did have a lot of ways to die through fire, decapitation, drowning, flak, explosions of 2,700 gallons of gasoline and 6,000 pounds of bombs, as well as millions of bullets.

A FEW MISSION NOTES

1- Worry started long before take-off when a delayed action bomb fuse became misthreaded and we waited for a sergeant from Armament to fix it. Thousands of pounds of bombs were a few feet away – but nothing went off. The really amazing thing not mentioned in the diary was the sight of over 5,000 ships of huge size lying off the coast of the greatest invasion that will ever be done. Staggering to see!…. The other great shock was to be shot at for the first time and to suddenly realize we had volunteered impatiently for this risk for many months ahead. I later read Churchill's statement that there is nothing more exhilarating in the world than to be shot at – unsuccessfully!

2- At a reunion in 1999, I saw a fellow member with a name tag of Dixey, and I stunned him by telling that I had seen him go down off my wing. I telephoned him on 6/14/00 and learned that he had stayed in the Air Force for 33 years and had become a colonel. He hid with the French after bailing out. We talked for 30 minutes and I may call again next anniversary.

12B- Diary should have paid more attention to the shot-out tire – a very risky proposition in those days. It is another of many occasions when Lloyd's flying skills saved our lives.

14- We diverted from Munich to Stuttgart just as the fire engines had raced from the latter to the former.

15- This trip to Schweinfurt was nothing like the harrowing two in 1943. Flying as a replacement for a killed navigator was not too comfortable. I still remember being dispersed by clouds at target and the strange pilot asking me which way to turn – I advised a right, and when we broke out, all hell was breaking out on the left, including flak and near-collisions.

16 & 17 were related to the St. Lo breakout of the U.S. ground forces and considerable friendly fire damage from the bombers, including the killing of General McNair. Bradley approved this raid, and the second one was probably very effective in carpet bombing the German infantry and armor.

18- I think this is the mission where I slept for 15 hours stretched across the cot fully clothed. Crew guys told me decades later they had called for the flight surgeon, who simply pulled aside an eyelid and said I was ok. I think I made a trip to the latrine while asleep – this trip to Toulouse I learned later was to help with the American landings in southern France. We had a great view of the peaceful Pyrenees a few miles away. We came home around Brest and over water to avoid Nazi radar, and the low altitude made for the high fuel consumption. We went over Wales and raced for home and landed without enough gas to fill a Zippo lighter, Lloyd said.

22- This mission was controversial and had some publicity in our press to which I contributed. I still stand by my version. Note that Earl was decorated for this mission. Decades later, I asked Lloyd about why we did not bail out with an engine on fire, and he replied that he was confident it was an oil fire – black smoke instead of white – from his experience as a farmer.

25- This is the Bridge Too Far mission – there is a book and a movie. Monty mistake. The sky was filled with hundreds (?) of gliders and C-47's as we left the area.

26- This was one of our best – Max put me in for a DFC. We smashed target.

27, 28 and 29 were huge lead missions for me – sometimes a thousand bombers following me. The jet plane I saw in #28 was a ME 262, and if Hitler had given it a greater production and range, it could have perhaps destroyed the Eighth and won the war. #29 – As I was helped out of the nose hatch I went to my knees and kissed the tarmac – I HAD SURVIVED THE TOUR – FINISHED MY MISSIONS!