

306th Bomb Group, Station 111
Thurleigh, Bedfordshire, England
January 11, 1944

Charles W. Smith

Weary Bones, a B-17 Flying Fortress is waiting in a long line of other B-17s for a green flare to ascend from the control tower.

Earlier, a precise taxiing plan told the pilots of Weary Bones when to leave its hard stand, (a circular paved parking area) and to follow a particular B-17 onto the perimeter track, which encircled the entire airfield. The the perimeter track led to the takeoff runway. Every B-17 had to be in the correct order, so that the assembly of the more than 600 hundred bombers from other bases could be controlled with precision.

Soon, Weary Bones joined this ponderous procession that was slowly moving around the perimeter track. Each B-17 was traveling nose to tail with their unique expander tube brakes squealing loudly. The pilot was briefly transported back five years, to when, for six months he worked as a "prop boy" and tractor trailer driver for an elephant act, headquartered in Ghent, N.Y. The elephants had paraded nose to tail and they squealed like B-17 brakes. Here in Bedfordshire, England, there had been days when he wished he was back in the United States shoveling elephant manure.

The combat crews had been awakened long before daylight by an enlisted man, who tried not disturb the airmen who had been "stood down." (they had the day off) This courtesy was rarely effective. Nobody had figured out how to wake up grumpy young men quietly, in the middle of a cold damp English night. Several hours would elapse before these grumpy young, " old men" would be sitting in their "Forts." Other groups of men have been working all night. First, the senior Eighth Air Force officers at High Wycombe, 28 miles West of London, had the work of planning this mission. They were charged with the task of destroying the Luftwaffe, German Air Force, in the air and on the ground and they were allowed a little less than six month's time to complete the destruction. If the Eighth Air Force is successful, the men storming the beaches of Normandy, will not see any fighter or bomber aircraft with black crosses on their wings. Today the Brass at High Wycombe are sending the combat crews to visit a fighter aircraft factory at Halberstadt. This will be a deep penetration, only 144 miles from "Big B,"the capital. The Germans as they see our bombers on their radar will be angry and worse for the bomber crews, they will be furious, if they think the target is Berlin. Luftwaffe Chief Herman Goreing has pledged, that no American bombers will ever reach Berlin.

At the bomber bases scattered all over East Anglia, The Midlands and Southeast England, crew chiefs are making sure that the four 1200 horsepower Wright Cyclone engines on each " Fort" will drag the 65,000 lb. load of ten men, 3 tons of bombs, 2700 gals. of high octane gasoline and a full load of 50 caliber ammunition, off the runway and into the air. Later, when the two pilots arrive at Weary Bones, they will suddenly look off in a different direction,so as not to embarrass a gunner who is trying to smuggle some extra boxes of ammunition on board. Who wants to aim an empty gun at a Focke Wulf 190 fighter which is attacking head on?

The Crew Chief who has been working all night is the combat crew's best friend on the ground and his skills and dedication are essential ingredients for the combat crew's survival.

The airfield for the 306th Group, has a most welcome safety factor built into it. The airfield was carved out of farm land which was somewhat higher than the surrounding terrain. Thus if one of the engines failed on takeoff, it was possible for a skillful pilot to follow the descending terrain and thus gain precious airspeed, and have time to sort things out, and prevent a rather nasty crash. During World War Two, pilots often referred to a crash as "buying the farm," a much older expression derived from a pilot making a forced landing on farm land and having to pay for destroyed crops, possibly at inflated prices.

Now there are 3 B-17s in line on the the up wind end of the longest of the 3 runways. The first airplane in line will be flown by Colonel George L. Robinson, the Commanding Officer of the 306 th Bomb Group (H.) for heavy. Of the two airplanes behind the leader, soon after take off one will form on the right side of the leader the other on the left side thus forming a VEE. Today The B-17 on the right is called the PFF Ship (which stands for Pathfinder) because it has airborne Radar which can "see" the target even if it is obscured by cloud cover.

At 1322 hours, about 5 hours and 10 minutes after take off both of these wingman aircraft will be shot down, as 30 Focke-Wulfe Fighters attack the 306th Group head on. This type of attack can be a bit unnerving for both the Luftwaffe fighter pilots and the two American bomber pilots because the aircraft are heading straight for each other at a closing rate of 900 hundred feet per second. When both aircraft are about 2000 feet apart, each of the opponents will start firing at the other. The gunfire will cease after about 2 seconds, because the two aircraft will have passed each other. The Luftwaffe pilots will either fly straight thru the American's formation or roll their fighter upside down and dive away.

At 0812 hours Greenwich Mean Time, the green flare arches up from the control tower and the tension of the long wait is replaced by the more tangible fear that one of the 1200 horsepower engines may fail halfway down the runway.

If this happens, even the two heavily booted left feet or right feet of the two pilots on the rudder pedals might fail to keep 65,000 Lbs of men, metal, gasoline and explosives on the runway. If an engine on the right suddenly fails, the aircraft will rapidly swerve to the right and strong pressure must be quickly applied to the left rudder pedal to avert a crash. If a left side engine fails, strong pressure must be instantly applied to the right rudder pedal, If the wrong rudder pedal is pressed, the result can be quite spectacular. The day's start has been good. All of the heavily loaded bombers have safely departed English soil, where long ago Roman soldiers once stood.

Today, American crew chiefs, other ground personnel and even a few airmen who had finished their missions, stood and watched with the hope that no black smoke would

rise in the distance, signifying a crash.

The "retired airmen" who watched, were the ones that psychologists wondered about. Were they war lovers who yearned for just one more trip? Winston Churchill was supposed to have said "there is no greater thrill than being shot at and missed." The crew of Weary Bones never yearned for that sort of thrill!

One of the hazards of flying in England, is the low lying cloud layers that are so common during the winter months. Although the take-off of the whole group was without incident, the bombers soon entered the lower cloud layer. This became a problem because now the bombers are in a long line, nose to tail and there is only a spacing of 25 seconds between each aircraft. You just hope that every one is flying at the same speed because you can't see each other. Fortunately there are no midair collisions or loss of control due to wake turbulence. Soon, all the bombers climb safely out of the top of the clouds and into bright sunshine!

The sun is a welcome sight after that tense period of flying in the clouds with no visibility. But after getting the group into the proper formation and heading East toward Germany, another hazard presents itself. The sun rising in the East is now an enemy. The two pilots trying to maintain a close formation and the gunners protecting the bomber from enemy fighters, are partially blinded by the sun. After the target has been attacked, the bomber will be heading West and facing into the sun again. Bad geography, why couldn't England be East of Germany?

When the pilot of Lazy Bones was still an aircraft mechanic at Boise, Idaho, he sneaked into a lecture given by Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, the famous World War One Ace. The word "sneaked" was appropriate because the lecture was for the 303rd Bomb Group flight crews, about to leave for England and not for a mechanic. Captain Eddie kept emphasizing: "Watch out for the Hun in the sun!" Those wise words kept returning during mornings and afternoons on mission days, for the mechanic turned pilot.

The 306th Bomb Group is scheduled to leave Lowestoft on the English Coast two hours after take off. The distance from Thurleigh is only 97 miles in a straight line. To assemble all these bombers, so that each one is in the correct position in relation to the others, requires maneuvers, that from above resembles a giant ballet. That's why the mere 97 miles takes 2 hours!

As the Group leaves Lowestoft, they will soon be climbing thru 10,000 feet and the crew must don the oxygen masks which will keep them alive at the cruising altitude of 25,000 feet. All ten men in Weary Bones can communicate with each other. Every ten minutes or less the Bombardier will use the intercom to check on each crew member to make sure that he is conscious and still has his oxygen supply. If a crew member's oxygen fails at 25,000 feet, he will probably die within 10 minutes.

When the bombers are far enough out to sea, all 13 fifty caliber machine guns will be test fired. The muzzles of the upper turret guns are only about 8 inches above the pilot's heads, so that altho the pilots expect the blasts, they tend to jump a bit but the

four inch wide seat belt keeps them from hitting their heads on the the cockpit roof. When a large group of Luftwaffe fighters are attacking, the blast of the bomber's guns are more comforting than startling.

The 306th Group reached the enemy coast at 1044 hours. Soon the crews will be seeing black puffs of smoke in the distance. These little black puffs resemble cumulus clouds but they are not friendly. They contain many shards of steel which the Germans hope will kill the approaching Americans. Six of Weary Bone's crew have good forward vision and can see what the group ahead of them is encountering. They also know that they will be in that same spot shortly. During this interval some of the gamblers aboard are thinking about odds and the flak. This morning the Intelligence officer said: "Gentlemen, today you won't see much Flak (Flieger abwehr kanonen) and it will just be a deterrent." This brings raucous boos and rowdy laughter from the bomber crews. Perhaps, during the next briefing, some pilot will invite the intelligence officer to go along on the mission to see what a deterrent looks like. By now many of the crews have developed a wry sense of humor. The crews had great respect for "Ground Grippers" who flew when they didn't have to, but the crews thought that they were "Certifiable." translations: "Ground personnel and insane." Andy Rooney, my favorite curmudgeon flew 5 bomber missions with the 8th Air Force when he was a reporter for the Army newspaper, The Stars and Stripes.

The term enemy coast is somewhat misleading, yes the land is occupied by the Nazis but the group has just passed 20 miles northwest of Amsterdam, Netherlands. The flight crews know that if they have to bail out or crash land, they will have a chance to be picked up by friendly people.

The German border is only 105 air miles from Amsterdam. According to the navigator, Weary Bones has a groundspeed over the earth of 230 miles per hour and that includes 10 miles per hour of help from the wind so the word is that Weary Bones will reach the true German border in 26 minutes. This brings a bit of a twitch to the men in Weary Bones, but they already could have been shot at by Luftwaffe flak and or fighters based in the Netherlands. When the 26 minutes are up, the land below will suddenly seem darker, more forbidding and dangerous to the crew. They know this is mostly psychological but the same thoughts arrived, when on other missions they flew from over France into German airspace. After getting a good visual check of when Weary Bones crossed the true border between Germany and the Netherlands, the navigator told the crew that his ETA (estimated time of arrival) for the target was 11:53. . The German border is only 105 air miles from Amsterdam. According to the navigator, Weary Bones has a groundspeed over the earth of 230 miles per hour and that includes 10 miles per hour of help from the wind so the word is that Weary Bones will reach the true German border in 26 minutes. This brings a bit of a twitch to the men in Weary Bones, but they already could have been shot at by Luftwaffe flak and or fighters based in the Netherlands. When the 26 minutes are up, the land below will suddenly seem darker, more forbidding and dangerous to the crew. They know this is mostly psychological but the same thoughts arrived, when on other missions they flew from over France into German airspace. After getting a good visual check of when Weary Bones crossed the true border between Germany and the Netherlands, the navigator told the crew that his ETA (estimated time of arrival) for the target was 11:53. The rest of the crew was interested in this news because the run in was for god

and country, the way home was for the crew. There was no enemy opposition on the way to the target from either flak or fighter aircraft. The bomb run lasted 60 seconds, during which time the lead airplane was being flown by an autopilot which was connected to the bombsight. With this system the bombardier was actually controlling the bomber with the bombsight. The automatic system failed to release the bombs, so the bombardier had to salvo the bombs with his manual switch, with the result that the bombs landed beyond the target. The rest of the group saw what had occurred, made a correction and registered good strikes.

Six minutes later, at 12:00 hours the group was attacked by twin engine fighters. One fighter circled around the group and attacked within 200 yards. these attacks lasted for 11/2 hours, none of the group's B-17s were shot down. During this period our crews saw a lone B-17 from another group, fight the twins for half an hour. The crew finally started bailing out, seven or eight parachutes were seen. The pilot of another ship stayed at his post while all the crew bailed out except the tail gunner, who stuck to his guns fighting off the attacks. Neither pilot or gunner made an attempt to bail out, tail guns were still firing until the ship exploded.

At 1322 hours with 19 planes in the 306th group lead, 30 to 35 Focke Wulfe 190 fighters attacked from 1030 to 0130 high (this describes the direction of the attack as one reads the clock, 12 is from the front, 6 is from the rear.) They came in three or four at a time in successive waves, not rolling over or breaking away, but continuing right over the top and sometimes thru the formation. One F.W.190 went between the lead ship and the right wing ship,tilting his wings to avoid a collision. The attacks continued until 1330,when the group leader found a thin area of clouds and led the formation into a haze layer to escape. There were 19 aircraft in the formation when the attack started and only 11 remained 8 minutes later. The pathfinder ship had the tail shot off in the first wave of attacks. Eight parachutes were seen from this ship. The left wingman of the leader was also shot down and Colonel Robinson's aircraft had an engine shot out on one side and the wing tip shot off on the other side.

During these attacks the nose section of Weary Bones was struck by shell fire, the impact of which was felt by the two pilots. Almost immediately the bombardier called on the intercom: " The navigator has been hit!" The only crew member close enough to render aid was the bombardier who was just inches away, so the pilot asked the bombardier to give what aid he could to his wounded comrade. The navigator had suffered a massive head wound which must have killed him instantly. These words are being written during the year 2000 and the horror of those few seconds during the afternoon of January 11,1944 still remain to haunt the surviving crew members of Weary Bones.

Much later, the men of the 306th learned why the enemy attack was so devastating. Many of the huge stream of bombers and their escorting fighters were recalled because of rapidly deteriorating weather in England so that the Luftwaffe was able to concentrate their forces on a far smaller number of bombers and their escorting fighters. By the time the surviving bombers reached England many of the bases, including Thurleigh were closed due to heavy fog, The 306th pilots made landings

anywhere they could find an open airfield. They were so scattered and the weather remained so poor, that it took three days to get most of the planes back home. Several had to be repaired before they could be flown and some had to be scrapped.

The crew of Weary Bones and the crews of seven other B-17s of the 306th managed to find another bomber base at Hethel, England near the coast and land there just before darkness fell and the fog closed in. Before landing, the Weary Bones crew fired double red flares to signify wounded aboard so that Weary Bones would be met by the medics. As a cold damp wind blew in from the North Sea, the medics lowered the body of 1st Lt. Charles L. Stevenson, Navigator out of the nose hatch of Weary Bones. The nine tired crewmen watched and silently wept.

Who were these men standing next to their shell holed bomber? Where did they come from? What brought them to England and the 306th Bomb Group? Did some things occurring during their formative years, influence their decisions that eventually brought them here to this cold, windswept air field in England?

Their names reveal little information nor do their home states:

Charles W. Smith Lt. Pilot, New York
Merle P. Brown Lt. Copilot, Ohio
Charles L. Stevenson Lt. Navigator, New Jersey
Burton C. Gustafson Lt. Bombardier, State Unknown *
Sgt. Carl Heuser, Engineer & upper turret gunner, Brooklyn, N.Y.
Victor R. Marcotte Sgt. Radio Operator, Michigan
Raymond J. Kristoff Sgt. Ball turret gunner, State Unk. *
R.B. Trumble Sgt. Tail gunner, State Unk.
Donald S. Courson Sgt. Left Waist gunner, Mississippi
Howard C. Granger Sgt. Right Waist gunner, Kansas
Burton C. Gustafson Lt. Bombardier replaced Lt. Herman F. Allen, Washington State who was grounded with ruptured ear drums. Sgt. Kristoff replaced our regular Ball turret gunner Sgt. Thomas Stillson who was also grounded with a severe cold. flying with a severe cold usually caused ruptured ear drums.

The crew of weary Bones never saw the two replacement airmen again but Group records indicate that Lt. Gustafson was shot down on May 24, 1944 on a mission to Berlin and was made a POW. The last information that the author has, was that Lt. Gustafson was living in Connecticut in 1996 but he has been unable to contact him. Sgt. Kristoff was also listed as living in Connecticut in 1996 but again no contact could be made.

The January 11, 1944 mission to Halberstadt, Germany was the date of the 306th's 100th's mission, there was no celebration that evening at Thurleigh.

Note: The actual air battle was directly taken from a declassified intelligence report dated 13 January, 1944

Weary Bones had suffered serious damage from both flak and fighter gunfire. On

September 17, 1944 Weary Bones was declared salvage after being involved in a taxiing accident . Weary Bone's life at the 306th Bomb Group spanned 9 months and 5 days. Weary Bones and her crew were members of the 368th Bomb Squadron, one of the 4 squadrons that formed the 306th Group. During the squadron's stay in England, 1942-1945 the squadron was issued 83 B-17s. 45 were lost either by enemy action, midair collisions, mechanical failures or other causes by the time the war was over in Europe.

How did these young airmen deal with their thoughts about possibly dying in a fiery takeoff crash? (they had seen one happen.) What were their thoughts when they saw the group ahead of them being surrounded by ugly black clouds of flak knowing that soon they will be in that exact same position?

Some of the crew members were quite religious, Donald Courson, our left waist gunner wrote me these words recently: "I think we were all praying men and God kept us safe with good training and people behind us who were united in a common cause".

Howard Granger also practiced his religion and I believe it gave him hope and solace. During a recent telephone call from Merle P. Brown I asked him how he coped with the fear of dying in aerial combat. He replied: "I was never afraid." He may have been right, but I had known fear! One night I had gone to a movie in the small city of Bedford. After the movie, I took a taxi for the 7 mile trip back to the 306th Bomb Group at Thurleigh. The night was unusually clear and with a bright moon. The farm fields and cottages looked so beautiful and peaceful in the moonlight. Suddenly a thought entered my consciousness: "This might be the last time that I would see a night such as this". With this weather, there would probably be a predawn wake up call for me and that tomorrow, sometime, somewhere over Germany, I might buy the farm. Once I brought the four 1200 horsepower engines to full power for take-off the next morning all fear vanished, there was work to be done and little time to think about dying.

The pilots had a far easier time than the rest of the crew, where fear was concerned because they were completely occupied with the work load in the cockpit. Their attention was also required outside the bomber in trying to keep a good formation and spotting German fighters approaching head on. save our lives.

When this crew arrived from the replacement crew center north of London in mid November, 1943 they were met by Major John Regan, the 368th Squadron Commander. He apparently gave every green, new crew a pep talk. I was a brand new 27 year old 2nd Lt., Major Regan was a 23 year old, highly seasoned combat pilot. In my ignorance, I wondered who is this fellow? He sounds like a high school basketball coach. A few sentences later he uttered some words that I believe helped to save the lives of this bomber crew. Major Regan: "Imagine you are Luftwaffe Me 109 fighter pilot." " You are flying several thousand feet above the bomber formations and you are looking around to see who you want to shoot down." " would you attack a tightly packed formation or would you attack a group of airplanes more or less going

in the same direction and which were strung out all over the sky"? That was the easiest question anyone had ever asked two pilots. Lts. Brown and Smith did not fly as close to the leader as the Navy's Blue Angels do. but they did snuggle up close. Thanks to the good Major's pep talk, they only picked up 3 machine gun bullet holes during all their missions. Please don't ask how many holes were made by flak. German flak gunners 5 miles below you, can't be choosy, they just hope that their 88 millimeter shell will destroy some bomber, any bomber. Even if the fragments of fine Swedish steel missed you, the black cloud that dirtied up the blue sky tended to make the bomber's crew a bit nervous.

Until I leave this scene, I will be forever grateful to the nine wonderful, trusting young men who willingly climbed aboard that 65,000 pound machine and allowed me to be their driver. I didn't even mind it when they called me: "Pappy," in fact I rather liked it!

There were enough tragic events occurring during the war years to bring back many sad memories. A few funny scenes did help to relieve the bad ones. On one mission we had a replacement crew member who had us all laughing before we left English soil and headed East. Gregory Peck, in the movie Twelve O'Clock High used to enter the B-17 Flying Fortress through the nose hatch, It was a very spectacular way to enter the bomber, and I've wondered whether it was Peck or a double who made the entry. I entered our "kite" in a more dignified manner for two reasons. The right rear entrance was near the tail and allowed me to greet most of the crew the crew members as I worked my way forward to the driver's seat. Also, I was only 5 feet 7 and acrobatics were not my cup of tea, neither were rah, rah pep talks. These young gunners were trained in gunnery school, and now they had an incentive to shoot straight, they would be riding in this aluminum tube. We each just had to trust each other to do their best.

As I worked my way forward I greeted the tail gunner, the left waist gunner, the right waist gunner, the ball turret gunner, (he was even smaller than I was,) and if you ever saw a ball turret, you would know why. Then there was the "Static Chaser" or radio operator in his little room. Next, there was the bomb bay which besides the bombs, had a six inch wide catwalk which led to the cockpit where Lt. Merle P. Brown and I hung out. As I started up the catwalk, my way was partially blocked by three large rocks (they were roughly about 14 inches in all directions) resting on the catwalk. I turned to one of waist gunners and said," Where the hell did these come from"? He pointed to the radio operator and he motioned for me to come closer. He quietly said, " I understand that he tries to put rocks on board every trip he makes. When the bombs are all gone and before the doors close, if he sees something he likes, he kicks HIS Bombs out". So Pappy, that's what they called me to my face anyway, just carefully climbed over the Three "Bombs," sat in my seat and started the " before take off check list". The reader can do his own fantasizing. Mine is that a German looks up and shouts,"Hurrah we've won, the Allies are all out of bombs", The down side is that he gets hit on the head and takes off for Valhalla.

..I will try to tell you a little bit about these crazy young fellows. There used to be an

old Army Air Corps saying: " You don't have to be crazy to fly combat airplanes, but it sure helps." And that is what I want to write about, Our Crew.

Charles W. Smith