

The Plane That Won The War



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Four roaring engines on the bomber's silver wings vibrated the air above the tarmac, and the B-17 began to glide forward. Behind the plane's Plexiglas nose dome, a tall man sat straight and proud in the bombardier's chair.

This was Colonel John C. "Red" Morgan, awarded a Congressional Medal of Honor in 1943 after his plane was shot up by German fighters. That day he was forced to hold off his wounded and crazed pilot with one hand while he flew the plane all the way in to the target and part way back, until another surviving crew member could enter the cockpit and relieve the situation.

A few months later, shot down over Berlin, Morgan was blown into the sky as his plane exploded. The order to bail out had come just seconds before; holding under one arm the parachute he'd barely managed to snag, Morgan fell 20,000 feet before he could

clip it into place and yank the ripcord - only to float down into the hands of a German flak crew and be taken prisoner.

But here he was, going up again. Many things had changed since that raid on Berlin. Red Morgan's flaming shock of red hair had turned white. His B-17 was not taxiing past other prop-driven warplanes, but sleek modern jets. And he wasn't launching into a hazardous sorty, but a flight of celebration. Morgan was one of a swarm of World War II aviation vets who had descended on Seattle's Boeing Field for a celebration of the 50th anniversary of the first flight of the B-17.

Mount Rainier's snowclad watched, silent and gleaming in the near distance, just as it had back in 1935, when the B-17 prototype - Boeing Model No. 299, the largest land plane in the United States at the time - lifted off from this very field to make a record, 2100-mile nonstop flight at over 250 mph to Wright Field in Ohio. By doing so, it won a U.S. Army competition for a new bomber.

Once in production, the B-17, nicknamed the Flying Fortress, was mated with crews of citizen soldiers from across America. Those flights went to Europe in 1942 as an initial wave of direct American involvement in the struggle to defeat Hitler's Germany. By several accounts, it was the single most important wave. The B-17, more than any other weapon, was responsible for the defeat

of the German Air Force, the Luftwaffe. This victory made possible all other Allied successes on the European fronts.

As might be imagined, the Luftwaffe did not go gently into that good night. The first formations of B-17s were flung against the Third Reich at the zenith of its power. It is a tribute to the design strength of the B-17s and the courage of their youthful crews (their average age was 20) that their missions ultimately succeeded so well.

"I had been hauling logs in the woods of Oregon," said Mickey Foster, who was with Red Morgan during the 8th Army Air Force's most harrowing days, "Well, Uncle Sam decided I was going to take up field artillery, instead. I was drafted in early '41. Although the situation looked bad, I didn't figure on being in a war. Then the Japs hit Pearl Harbor, and it looked as if I was going to be in a war for a good long while.

"I didn't want to be stuck with the foot soldiers. So I took an exam to enter training in aviation. I wanted to get into fighters, but they made a mistake on my orders and sent me to multi-engine school instead. Then I went on to 'B-17 Transition' in Washington, where we hooked up with our particular crews, and got to know the plane.

"Flying a B-17 was just like driving a big truck. They forgave a lot of mistakes. They were easy to land as a Piper Cub, and you could even fly them on two engines. Once I got to know the planes, I felt a little reassured."

The British did not feel reassured. Twenty of the first B-17s built were rushed to England for use by the Royal Air Force; eight were promptly lost. B-17s, designed as precision daylight bombers, did not fit well with British tactical concepts. The Brits had seen Germans fail at daylight bombing in the Battle of Britain, and they failed at it now themselves, over occupied Europe. They decided they preferred night raids, which hampered anti-aircraft fire and Luftwaffe fighter retaliation. The British urged America to abandon B-17s and begin production of their own Lancaster night bombers.

The U.S. Navy men weighed in with their own objections: They thought American production should be devoted to heavy cargo planes, for ferrying supplies to Navy ships and bases. But believers in the potential of the Flying Fortress prevailed, and production of B-17 planes and crews proceeded at a mounting pace.

"B-17 school is where I met old Pop Nicol," Foster remembered, "our tail-gunner - who wound up being my best friend in the crew. He was a tough customer, a coal miner in his middle 30s with a

wife and five kids. One day he told his wife he was heading down to find work at the Baltimore shipyards. Next thing she heard, he'd enlisted and signed on as a gunner for B-17s. I think Pop knew things were breaking loose, and he wanted some of the excitement. Well, by God, he got it!

"One time during training I buzzed a tugboat on the Columbia River. Came up on him from behind, so he couldn't see us. The captain had a little pilot house right up on top, and when I got about 10 feet over his head I changed the pitch on all four props, which made a helluva thundering racket.

"Well, Pop was watching from his turret, and he said that guy came running out so mad he couldn't see straight, just waving his fists and dancing around. Must've scared the damn daylights right out of him.

"Now, that was a stupid thing for me to do. What made it seem especially stupid was a cable I suddenly saw strung across the river. I barely managed to dive the plane under it! But all of our pranking around did some good; it showed us what the plane could do, and helped build the morale we were going to need later. We didn't know it at the time, but one of the secrets of getting back from missions was having a crew that really knew how to pull together."

Part of the plane's mythology was that a bombardier using the B-17's new Norden sight could drop a bomb "straight down a pickle barrel" from 20,000 feet. Actually, on a level and steady practice run, a bombardier at that altitude who hit within 300 yards of the barrel might consider himself a pretty fair shot. But the crews who began to ferry planes overseas soon found the British had been absolutely correct about one thing: It was hard to take a good shot in broad daylight, when you could see everyone trying to take a good shot at you.

After the Luftwaffe's severe losses to RAF Spitfires and Hurricanes in the Battle of Britain, the German air force received a flood of new aircraft, thanks to Reich procurement maestro Albert Speer. By August of '43, air superiority over Europe began to revert to the Nazis.

Of all the Luftwaffe fighter planes, the most formidable and feared was the "Wurger," or "Butcher-Bird," the Focke-Wulf 190. Attacking a flight of B-17s head-on, an aggressively piloted FW-190 could close at a combined speed of 500 mpg, firing from 20mm cannons and .30 caliber machine guns. In the last nerve-racking moments before collision, the Nazi fighters would then break off in a sudden half-roll or dive.

"You never knew where they would come up to meet you," said Foster. "Sometimes they'd fight you going in, sometimes coming out. On December 5 of '43, we went in to bomb their aircraft assembly plant at Bordeaux, and they hit us both ways and shot us all to hell.

"These were the guys we called the Abbeville Kids - Hermann Goering's personal squadron. Their planes all had the noses painted bright yellow. The Kids were dedicated professionals. I forget how many B-17s we lost that day - something like 40 - and I never did see one of their fighters go down. They came in from the front, barrel-rolling straight through the formation to spray their bullets around and make themselves harder for our gunners to hit.

"One smart aleck came in from behind - just slipped in between me and my right wingman, so neither of our gunners could fire at him. That's when I fired my only shot of the whole damn war, with a Very pistol that was set in the roof of the cabin. I reached up and triggered it, shooting a green flare right past him. He veered right, put a burst into the next plane's number three engine, rolled over and slid away without any of us getting another shot at him. Slick. They knew what they were doing.

"But we made it in to drop our bombs, even though I almost got my balls shot off. I was taking evasive action, and pulled up just as a shell drilled right through the front of my seat. It kept going into the next compartment, hit the oxygen bottles and blew up the plywood floorboards. I had my leather jacket on, and it blew a load of slivers into it, but they didn't draw any blood, so I never got a Purple Heart. In fact, just one crewman was hurt - a guy who had a finger shot away.

"The plane was absolutely riddled. One engine was shot completely off the wing, another had its turbocharger shot out. Our oxygen was gone, the radios were shot up and the ball turret gunner could see holes in the landing gear nacelles. After the bomb run, we couldn't maintain altitude; we had to drop back out of formation and fly home alone. Which was especially dangerous, because the Luftwaffe just swarmed all over stragglers . . . and we'd already run out of ammo. Even though we'd regularly bribed an armaments sergeant to give us twice the usual requisition of machine-gun rounds.

"Finally we limped back across the English Channel, only to find out our IFF (Identification: Friend-or-Foe) signal wasn't broadcasting. All the anti-aircraft guns on the English coast started to fire up at us. That made us change our minds and head

back out to sea. We were finally able to get a dinky short-range radio working, the Darky radio, and call off the English gunners. But by then, we were out of gas. Had to make an emergency landing at a P-38 small fighter plane field. We had no flaps left, and flat tires on one side of the landing gear. So when we touched down, me and the pilot stood on the brakes for the other side. But we still swerved, left the runway and plowed into the mud. We'd made it, but our ground crew sure had a mess of patching up to do on the plane."

Myasam Dragon , Foster's ship, had her name and a flame-spouting logo prominently displayed on her nose. Most B-17 crews regarded their planes with affection, even endowed them with aspects of personality. Structural strength had been wisely distributed throughout the semi-monocoque fuselage. The plane seemed to have a mystic ability to sustain incredible damage and still bring its crew back home. Many of the Dragon 's flying companions were also given names infused with punny humor and a certain rowdy romanticism: Phartzac , Vertical Shaft , Damdifino and, of course, the Memphis Belle , the first bomber to complete all her missions. In 1943, this was something of an accomplishment. Fewer than one B-17 in five managed to complete all 25 missions.

Most ships went down before they had flown 10 missions - before their crews got savvy. Many others returned so riddled with flak and gunfire they could never fly again. These became anonymous "Hangar Queens," bequeathing their parts to those still airworthy. The big problem with keeping 'em flying was that long-range escorts had not yet been effectively developed. When the cover of Spitfires and P-38s fighters bade farewell to a flight of B-17s at the edge of the continent, the bombers had to go on by themselves, huddling together in tight formations to maximize protection from their own .50 caliber guns. They flew on into the teeth of a German fighter force that had started to realize that its own airfield and production facilities were the 8th Air Force's main target.

The Third Reich was beginning to reap what it had sown.

Traveling to London on leave, Foster could see all around him the fantastic devastation wrought by Luftwaffe bombs during the Battle of Britain and the London Blitz. The Germans still managed to pull off occasional raids.

But the reason for go on leave was to relieve tension, not acquire it. This was accomplished by touring pubs, not bombed-out Allied buildings. Unwinding in the pubs a bit also gave the crews a chance to get to know each other better.

"Out of all our bomb group's tail-gunners, old Pop was the best," said Foster. "He never got excited or rattled; in fact, he helped the rest of us stay cool. Actually, Pop might've been a little too cool. He liked to drink, and one night we got him pretty well oiled in a London pub and he said, 'You know, Mick, I kind of fool those Jerries when they're coming at us.' I said, 'How do you do that, Pop?' He said, 'Well, I just sort of wink one gun at 'em, to make 'em think my guns are jammed. Then I just wait until they come up close, and really let 'em have it.' I hit the ceiling. 'You SOB,' I yelled. 'You better start hosing those bastards down with both guns while they're still out there!'"

After the pub crawls came the long trip back to the chilly Nissen huts at Bury St. Edmunds. This lodging Foster described as, "like a big tomato can buried in mud." It took all the coal a B-17 crew could get by legal means - and then some - to keep the places warm. To keep things interesting, every once in a while, the Luftwaffe managed to pull off a nocturnal revenge raid.

"There was some dame that used to broadcast from over there, like Berlin's Tokyo Rose," recalled Foster. "One day, she surprised us by saying that they were going to come over and bomb hell out of the 94th Bomb Group at Bury St. Edmunds. So that night we turned off all the lights in the camp, and turned on this other

bunch we'd set up about five miles away. At 9 o'clock, when we heard them come over, I didn't even bother to get out of bed. Just laid there laughing, listening to them bomb hell out of that set of dummy lights."

Other, milder sorts of enmity were part of the scene, too. Once, after a local dance, Foster found himself being hoisted in the air and thrown through a plate-glass store-front by five British servicemen who objected to his friendship with a WAAF (a woman in England's Auxiliary Air Force). The British soldier's common complaint about Yanks was that they were "overpaid, oversexed and over here." Some additional chagrin may have come from the fact that the Americans were starting to succeed with their program of precision daylight bombing of military targets. The RAF had dared a few daylight raids, but most of their bombing effort was nocturnal and directed at the civilian populations of industrial cities, with the goal of "undermining their morale." This policy reached horrific fruition in the fire-bombings of Hamburg and Dresden. (Dresden, packed with refugees from the Eastern front, saw some 135,000 civilian casualties - more than would later die in Hiroshima.)

Finally, a game-changer showed up. In January of '44 the first P-51 Mustang escort planes appeared. The Allies at last found

themselves with a few fighters that could outperform the best German planes and also escort bombers all the way to their targets. With a vengeance, the 8th Air Force now took the air war to the source of all its troubles: the German heartland.

"If a single enemy bomber ever reaches the Reich," the rotund commander of the Luftwaffe had once boasted, "my name is not Hermann Goering - you can call me Meier!" In 1944, the air raid sirens that German civilians had sardonically christened "Herr Meier's hunting horns" were howling all the way from the industrial zone of the Ruhr Valley to the German capital.

But when American bomber crews slipped on oxygen masks and ascended to a battlefield five miles above the earth they had more worries than Luftwaffe squadrons swarming up from airdromes. They also encountered whole thunderstorms of flak, shot into the heavens by gun crews far below. These black, sooty flowers with their cores of glowing red were not as harmless as they looked. Each exploding shell scattered whirling fragments of jagged metal that ripped through wings and hulls; a direct hit could tear a wing or tail section right off. Especially when sticking to a route during final bomb run approaches, gauntlets of flak could not be avoided. They could only be endured

At times, the very weather seemed an enemy. Since ports had to be kept open for the B-17's dozen .50 caliber machine guns, the plane fuselages were neither heated nor pressurized. As they soared above 20,000 feet on winter missions, the interior temperature often dropped to 30 to 50 below zero, and exposed metal became coated with frost. Though the men wore electric long johns and fleece-lined flying suits, for every three wounded in combat another four were disabled by frostbite.

In addition, treacherous flying conditions - thick clouds, fog and poor visibility - were commonplace. Such conditions produced collisions on takeoff, failure to find the target or, worst, when returning on a crippled bird with wounded aboard, failure to find the home airfield, a terrifying experience followed by a crash landing or a ditch in the icy North Sea. Sometimes a confusion of logistics or orders amplified all of these dangers.

"On the 11th of January, we took off on our worst mission of the war," said Foster. "There were supposedly 663 bombers going over after a Messerschmitt factory in Brunswick, and targets in two other towns. The weather was bad, so over the French coast, headquarters issued a recall. Most of the planes turned around and went home. But Thorup, the leader of our flight, said he didn't hear the confirmation word.

"I radioed him and said I'd heard it, but he didn't even answer me. He just led us right on to Brunswick, and we had to follow. We were just three squadrons, of about 21 planes each. Our ship was with Thorup's, in the lead squadron. We ran into flak and fighters on the way in, but we really caught hell over the target.

"What made it worse was that Thorup's bombardier, the lead bombardier, couldn't even find the target the first time over. The camouflage had been changed from the way it was described in the briefing. Thorup's bombardier radioed the change back to the other squadrons, and they hit it OK. But we had to circle and make another pass.

"By then, all the other planes had toggled their bombs and lit out for home. Which made us the stragglers, and for two hours we fought our way out of there against every fighter the Germans could put up - JU-88s, ME-110s, ME-210s - you could see them swarming up from the ground just like ants. If they could've put wings on the kitchen sink, they probably would've sent that up, too."

Myasam Dragon trembled from the continuous recoil of her .50 caliber guns, shuddered under the impact of bullets from her foes. Though the plane was riddled, none of her vitals were pierced. Then they saw a plane closing in on them at an impossible speed.

It was a twin-engined ME-262, one of the world's first combat jets and Hitler's secret weapon for retaining control of the skies.

"Pop was on the intercom," continued Foster. "He said, 'Hey, Mick, there's some kind of strange plane back here. Don't have any propellers. Looks like he's lining up to shoot something!' They had rockets under each wing, and they'd lay out beyond range of our guns, aim and fire. But Pop was still cool. He said, 'OK, I see smoke . . . he's fired! It's coming at us!' Those 50mm rockets were slower than a bullet, you could see 'em coming in. I yanked up on the wheel, and the rocket went under us and blew up. I didn't get any hits on that, but Bill Seeley sure did. Had one hit behind his pilot's chair and put a hole in the plane you could walk through.

"That one, I didn't think we were going to make it back from. I was puckered up all the way to England. On that mission is when I learned how to pray, even though I'm not a religious man. The formation helped save us. We were in the front, and that time they attacked mostly from the rear. Of our 21 planes, 11 were wiped out from the back V's. We made it, but there was nearly 300 holes in our ship.

"Seeley's was the last to limp in, with that huge hole in the cabin, and two engines gone on one wing. Seeley had been a helluva good-looking guy, with bright red hair, but I saw him the next day

and his hair was all dingy, like it had been bleached. It just took all the color right out of him."

On the grounds at Seattle's Boeing Field on that day in July of 1985, speaker after speaker extolled the strength of the B-17s and the courage of the men who flew them. The chaplain led a prayer for comrades in all the crews who never returned: "They shall remain forever young in our minds and hearts, as we get older." And thousands of aging vets from the bomber groups stood silently, used fingers to wipe tears away from behind bifocal glasses, put arms around the shoulders of women with tinted hair and hugged them a little closer.

The debacle of Brunswick was only a minor setback in the ongoing pummeling of the "Vaterland." In late February of '44 came "Big Week," six continuous days of raids in which 75 percent of the factories producing 90 percent of the Luftwaffe's aircraft were destroyed. Shortly after, in early March, came the "Big B" - the first appearance of Flying Fortresses in a major raid on Berlin. It was on this mission that Red Morgan was blown into the sky, and his parachute blossomed over Germany along with hundreds of other white chutes as American crews bailed out of their broken planes.

More than 300 B-17s went down in these raids alone. But American war plane production was turning out 5000 planes a month - including the 16 new B-17s that Seattle's Boeing plant rolled out each day - and a high count of those nimble Mustangs, fighters that could escort entire missions. And so, yellow German parachutes also began to blossom in unprecedented numbers. The Germans lost 600 fighters during Big Week and Big B. From July to April of 1944, 1000 Luftwaffe pilots were removed from the war, and as these were the most experienced and highly trained, their loss could be ill-afforded.

By D-Day, June 6, General Dwight Eisenhower was able to reassure the Allied invaders, "If you see a plane, it will be ours," and he was 99.9 percent right. Of the thousands of aircraft over the Normandy beachhead, only two belonged to the Luftwaffe. That pair of FW 190s bravely made a single strafing run, then vanished. Subsequently, throughout Europe, a bitter joke began to make the rounds of the German Army. "If the aircraft you see are camouflaged, they're British; if silver, American; and if they aren't there at all, they're German."

Escorted flights of B-17s went on to pound other targets, including Axis transportation and oil facilities. But for some, the war in the air could end before the war did. Soon after the epic

raids of Big Week and Big B, Mickey Foster found he had survived all 25 of his missions. In early June, he went home.

Rather than fly a “war-weary” back to the States, he opted to sail on an ocean liner, one with soldiers’ initials carved all over its hand-rails, and 24-hour poker games romping along below decks.

Though he returned as a hero to a grateful nation, Foster's experience reveals that post-traumatic stress was not something invented after Vietnam.

"The war really changed me forever. I didn't do much flying after I got out; it made me too goddamned nervous. I was offered a job flying for an airline between New York and Miami, but I didn't feel up to being a pilot, flying with all those lives behind me anymore. Just said the hell with it, I'll go back to driving a logging truck. If I make a mistake, I can't kill those logs.

"Shortly after I got back, me and the wife went to a movie in Santa Monica called 'The Memphis Belle,' about the first bomber to finish its missions. Suddenly they cut to a scene where all this damn flak was coming up, so thick you could walk on it. I must've still been flak-happy . . . I jumped right to my feet and hollered 'Flak!' at the top of my lungs. Christ, I think everybody in the theater turned around in their seats and looked at me."

Nearly 13,000 B-17s were built. Today, perhaps 10 of those planes, worldwide, remain airworthy. Three of them thundered into Seattle for Boeing's memorial ceremony. For a few minutes of flight time, Red Morgan got to take the controls of one, the Confederate Air Force's "Sentimental Journey." It was the first time he'd been in a B-17 cockpit since he had been shot down over Berlin, 40 years before.

He sat straight and proud for the take-off, and upon landing, he emerged beaming from the nose hatch. "I just died and went to heaven!" he said. "It was amazing, terrific! We loved this plane." He patted the fuselage. "It still flies as easy as rolling a baby carriage down a sidewalk."

Well over 100,000 men once flew on B-17 crews.

Approximately 4000 of them and their wives made it up to the celebration in Seattle. They streamed around the vintage planes, touching them, excitedly swapping stories as memories came rushing back. Then, munching upon the fried chicken lunch that Boeing had provided, they went to sit under a sun that bounced bright rays off the distant profile of Mount Rainier.

They heard speeches by Lieutenant General "Moose" Hardin and General Curtis LeMay extolling their bravery and urging them to

support the present administration's arms buildup. As they listened and applauded, the veterans sat among the hulking buildings of Boeing, now a vast corporation with a hand in nearly every major military project in the works, including the B-1 and Stealth bombers, "Star Wars" gear and the MX and Midgetman missiles. From aggregate sales of \$493 million at the height of World War II, Boeing's gross income has soared beyond \$10 billion, making it an armaments empire with a social and industrial momentum apparently quite difficult to reverse - unless the country begins paying arms manufacturers not to make weapons, the way it pays farmers not to grow wheat.

"No one who has really seen combat ever wants to see it again," Red Morgan said. "I think the arms build-up is absolutely essential to prevent a future war. We can't indulge ourselves in the luxury of waiting until war starts to prepare for it. The reason Hitler got off to such a rolling start is because no one was really ready to stop him."

Other vets have other ideas about how to prevent another global conflict. Mickey Foster thought it should be obvious that war has become obsolete. If people want to be titillated by war adventures, he said, they can dredge up stories from World War II, not try to re-enact them. Re-enacting them is not possible anyway, he

asserted. Instead of fighting man against fighting man, the next war will feature automatic engines of destruction aimed against all the civilian populations of the Earth. The black seeds of destruction sown over London, Dresden and Hiroshima may sprout a sequel incomparably more hideous.

"All that stuff about the joy of battle is horseshit," said Foster.

"We had a job to do - that was it. I was damn glad I could fight the air war rather than the ground war. That was the only point at which gladness came into it.

"Modern war has gotten way past the point of being a sane alternative. What we could do instead is just build a wall. Then, if we have to have a war, we can send all our politicians to the top of the wall, and they can punch each other in the nose. The first side that gets a man knocked off, loses. And that would be it."