

# THE MIGHTY EIGHTH

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And the memorial to their heroism.

During the early 1940's at an airfield in southeastern England, the men of Eighth Air Force got the same rude awakening every day before dawn: a shout and a flashlight in the face. In 30 minutes they were dressed and fueling up with bacon, powdered eggs and all the coffee they could drink. Then came the real wakeup call: the announcement of their mission. If it was a low-risk assignment, the squadron fell into relaxed conversation. If it was high-risk, silence gripped the room; the morning chill grew arctic. Some of the men, seized by stress and airsickness, would vomit before their planes reached the English Channel. The lucky ones who returned at the end of the day were routinely offered a 2-ounce slug of whiskey from the flight surgeon.

People, not bombs, bullets or flying machines, won World War II for the Allies. That fact is flown home at the Mighty Eighth Air Force Heritage Museum in Pooler, Georgia, near Savannah. While most military museums concentrate on weaponry, the things employed to vanquish the enemy, this 90,000-square foot; hangar-like structure emphasizes the human experience behind one unit's heroic feats in the skies over war-darkened Europe. Opened in 1996, it sparks emotions that surprise you with intensity. In an era when many view World War II as ancient history and its veterans as relics, this museum brings the hell and heart of it up-close and very personal, reviving the sheer awe inspired by those who started down unthinkable peril in the name of freedom.

At that aforementioned air base in England, the men were virtually boys—average age: 23. They came from the remote farms; small town and street corners of America to be part of the greatest air armada ever committed to battle. Activated in Savannah in 1942 and conceived to strike a lethal blow against the Third Reich, the Mighty Eighth Air Force relentlessly bombed strategic German targets in occupied Europe, capable of deploying 2,000 planes every day. Of an estimated 200,000 aviators and crewmen who flew with the Eighth, 28,000 became Prisoners of war, and 26,000 lost their lives. No other U.S. military command suffered a higher percentage of deaths, but not one mission was turned back by the Nazis.

It would have been an unconscionable oversight if a museum hadn't been built. On display among the myriad exhibits are the belongings of the Mighty Eighth's pilots, including fleece-lined flight jackets emblazoned with morale-boosting artwork, and bailout survival kits containing compasses and syringes for morphine. The Wall of Aces devoted to the flyers that shot down five or more enemy aircraft. There they are vintage visages framed by leather helmets, goggles and white scarves. One can only guess at the level of the fear their cocky smiles concealed. In another section is a replica of the grim interior of German POW barracks. A nearby video spotlights survivors of a POW camp as they recount the plight. Video and audio are used superbly throughout the museum, as are hundreds of enlarged mounted photographs that chronicle not only the deeds of the Eighth Air Force, but the saga of global war. One frightful propaganda photo shows and avuncular Adolf Hitler holding hands with German school children. Several images depict the resolve that defined the British during those bleak years. You see three gents in topcoats and derbies blithely browsing through the still standing bookshelves of bombed library, surrounded by a sea of rubble.

No Hollywood epic could match the stories told here. In the museum's handsome, abundantly stocked library, you could spend weeks poring over archival letters and diaries, immersed in the individual dramas of Mighty Eighth airmen. "It was so great to hear from you, Sis..." "We had 6,000 lbs. Of bombs aboard..." "We no sooner hit the ground but I was running as fast as I could..." "Men bailed out in the bay. Germans were shooting at chutes..." "One hell of a rough spot the French coast..." "The waist gunner said he saw the Germans working on the pilot after they fished him out of the water but couldn't revive him..."

And in the background, the faint strains of a Glenn Miller tune.

But the museum's most spellbinding feature is the Mission Experience Theater, which, via authentic film footage, puts you in the white-hot center of a Mighty Eighth bombing raid over Germany. Eight screens are filled with terrifying, exhilarating action punctuated by the deafening sounds of air combat. You are there in the aircraft, dodging bursts of flak and the barreling assaults of the German Luftwaffe, the heavens raining parachutes and airplane fragments. Ultimately locating target, you drop your explosive payload. At the exact moment that the bomb bay opens, a whoosh of air sweeps into the theater—a special effect that struck a resounding chord with 1996 visitor Walter Cronkite, who flew with the Eighth as a war correspondent.

Adding immeasurably to the museum is the presence of veteran volunteers—the actual pilots, navigators and bombardiers of the Mighty Eighth. After learning on staggering detail the extent of their valor, it is no less than thrilling to encounter these gentlemen, dressed in coat and tie and anticipating your questions. Their insights and recollections are every bit as compelling as any exhibit.

Seventy-nine year old Ken Scott, for example, who survived 62 sorties as a fighter pilot, vividly recalls his most memorable mission: "There were 16 of our planes on a fighter sweep over Germany. It was a beautiful, clear day November of 1944, and we were just kind of ambling along, enjoying the view, when suddenly we saw a flurry of black specks. About 250 German FW-190's were headed directly toward us. It took us completely by surprise. I thought we were doomed, but we woke up right quick and showed 'em our best stuff. When it was all over, we downed 11 planes and didn't lose one of ours."

In the Combat Gallery at the hub of the museum is a sleek replica P-51 Mustang, the same kind of plane that Scott and his brethren flew that momentous November day, an aircraft that served as a feisty sheep dog in the skies, flanking B-17 bombers as they zeroed in on their targets and driving away the Luftwaffe. Nearby is a curious invention of the Germans—a squat Messerschmitt Komet, the world's first rocket plane, with a ghost of swastika on its tail.

But again and again, as you tour this museum, it's the human element that rivets your attention. A stroll through the Memorial Garden completes the impact. There, reaching toward the warm Georgia sun, are dozens of individually crafted monuments, many of which were commissioned by surviving fighter and bomber groups to honor crewmen. They bear the names of those who never came back.

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