

# **FLIGHTS OVER GERMANY (SHOT DOWN TWICE)**

**Written by Warren D. Price**

My service career began in August of 1943 after graduating from Michigan Valley high school in May of that year. Knowing that I was going into the service Wilma and I became engaged before the school term was finished.

Flying had always been a passion for me and I had read volumes of material about World War I pilots and their aircraft. Much of my early life had been spent with my uncle and aunt that lived near the Lawrence Airport so I had the chance to see planes of all types and talk to pilots who were of course "my idols." They were good enough to explain the principles of flying to me along with allowing me to sit in the cockpit to become acquainted with the controls.

Fort Leavenworth was my induction center and you were allowed to select the branch of service you wanted. Of course my pick had to be Air Force and my choice was fighter pilot as I had no desire to be responsible for a crew of any size. The physical and paper exams were all passed and my next stop was cadet training at Buckley Field located outside Aurora, Colorado. This was to be a year of ground training and AT-6 flight training. The AT-6 is a single engine training plane with plenty of power and "fool proof" instruments and controls. This was a great time for me in spite of a 16-hour a day training schedule. I remember the Sundays that were spend on the flight line watching the advanced cadets shoot landings and take-offs. My time was coming.

Four months into the program we had an early wake-up call for assembly. Each squadron had a captain that was in charge of our training program and it was evident that our captain was "under the influence" as he paced up and down in front of our squadron. "I have some bad news" were his first words and he went on to explain that our bombers had suffered heavy losses and bomber crews were top priority and all our force flight personnel would be rushed through training and assigned to a crew. Since we had already finished ground training, air gunnery was to be our next stop. To me, this was the end because I didn't want any part of a heavy bomber.

Our next stop was Kingmon, Arizona for air to air gunnery training and the planes were B-17F. Much of our time was spent shooting skeet as it was ideal for training a man to lead a flying object. It was time to put my fighter pilot dreams behind me and to get on with training. I spent my spare time on the skeet range because it was fun and it served a purpose.

After gunnery training it was on to Alexandria, Louisiana for actual bomb-run training carrying bombs filled with a white powder substance that would show the hits on a target area. This training was more of a training program for bombardiers, navigators and pilots and gunners had very little to do. At this time I was flying the waist gun position and the poor sighting equipment compared to tail, lower ball and upper turret was a concern to me. The waist gun was designed to put out a lot of rounds hoping for a hit while the tail had a Sperry sight that was lighted and very accurate. Also the tail had twin 50 cal. Guns while the waist was a single 50. It was here in Alexandria that we were assigned to crews. Our pilot was a serious minded man that was becoming an excellent pilot. The crew was housed together to get acquainted with each mans quirks, etc.

We were going to Kearney, Nebraska to pick up our plane and on to England for the final assignment. The trip to Ireland was without incident however to look down on the North Sea is always a cause for concern. It is always rough and it is always cold so we were happy to set down in Ireland. From there I

was on to Scotland and then to England. Our base was at Bassingbourn, a small village near Cambridge. This was the 91<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group and was our final assignment for actual combat operation. At that time 25 missions was considered a tour and you would be eligible to come home however that was changed to 35 before I could finish my tour.

My first mission, April 1944, was to Munich, Germany and it was here that I learned real fear with fighters all the way in and the heavy flak over the target. This mission made it certain I wanted out of the waist position and into the tail if I was going to make it through this tour. At this time our crew was reduced from 10 men to 9 to put together new gunnery crews. This meant one waist gunner would sit out the next mission. That day was my day to stand down and my crew was shot down over Leipzig with no reports of anyone bailing out. This was a bad day for a lot of us.

When this happens, the extra crew member is put on stand-down basis for a couple of weeks to recover from the shock before being assigned to a new crew.

I spent my time on the skeet range and the gunnery range trying to keep busy. A Major Reaume and I shot skeet together on several days before the crew was lost and we both had 7 missions at this time. He had flown about every type of plane they had in England and was getting ready to fly lead for the 401<sup>st</sup> squadron. I had told him that I wanted to fly the tail position but didn't look forward to starting with a new crew again. A short time later my name was posted on the board and was assigned to fly the lead plane crew tail position with the Major Reaume crew. All of this crew had rough combat experience and it was difficult to know that every man was as good as there was at his job Major Reaume's mother owned a small airport in California so he grew up in a cockpit and it showed. He outranked all other active pilots on the base but I never saw him use that as a tool to put another pilot in line. His rank made him second in command over the entire 91<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group but his skill made him the No. #1 man to contact if there was a problem. He said very little about his personal life except that he was single and an Air Force Academy graduate. All of his first lead crew members were single except the navigator and that position had to be filled with the best the group had regardless.

We made the rest of our tour together and as I look back today I am sure I idolized him and I'm sure that he was aware of this. Many times when we were coming back from a mission he would give me a call as soon as we came to the English Channel to let me fly the plane across the channel. Later when flying weather ship out of Monroe, Louisiana, I spent hours in the cockpit getting a crash course on flying the big 4 engine jobs.

The following days flight crews list was posted around 4pm so we had time to prepare. Most important was a shower with a soap that prevented bacteria. This was important in case of a wound it could be hours before receiving medical attention.

The day the Battle of the Bulge began we were in the air before the news was announced so was unaware of the situations. We went deep into Germany to hit oil fields and refinery and started our "let down" to 10,000 feet early to get off oxygen. We believed we were over safe territory and had pulled off our masks and eating our lunch when ground fire opened up at point blank range. A large hole appeared 3 feet above me in the tail section and another round hit an outside engine so they had our range and speed programmed another engine had to be feathered so we couldn't gain altitude. The ground fire had concentrated on our plane and the rest of the group was able to get out of range before getting hit. We were able to cross the German lines and the two feathered engines did not catch fire so we had time to consider our options. The navigator was hit in the shoulder so bailing out was not considered. It was decided by Major Reaume to crash land in the best area we could find. To stay in the

air in our condition was foolish with German fighters in the area. For us to call our base would have alerted the fighters to our problem so we picked an alfalfa field to set it down. There were 3 Belgium workers in the field and I'm sure our problem scared them too. The Belgium people were not to be trusted and in some cases were pro German. With this in mind we hoped they would cooperate and further problems would be avoided. The landing was good enough that no one was injured and the navigator was still conscious and in good condition. Reaume was able to communicate our needs to the Belgians and each of us carried an escape packet with money, a price was agreed upon and we started our walk to a mine entrance where we would stay until dark. As soon as it was dark we started the walk to Liege, Belgium where we would find friendly troops and contact our base. We arrived in Liege in the early morning and M.P.'s put us in an old hotel for some rest. The navigator was taken to a field hospital and we radioed our base that we were safe. Two days later we were aboard another B-17 headed for home. An incident did occur when Reaume explained what we wanted the Belgians to do. They wanted to go home to tell their family where they were going. This of course was impossible because they could not be trusted and could very well come back with a truckload of Germans. They finally realized they could not be left and agreed to go as planned.

In December of 1944 we were shot down again and crash-landed at Merville France without incident. Our base flew in a B-17 in for us, parked it at the local airport and the two pilots caught a ride back to the home base immediately. We were notified that our plane had arrived and would be gassed and ready by the time we got to the airport. Both pilots had been celebrating the landing of yesterday and were slow to get our gear, etc., to the new plane. It was evident there was an altitude problem when we called the tower for take-off clearance. They weren't ready to go back to our base and the tower control was not sympathetic. It was a short flight home and the flight bulletin board had us scheduled for a mission the next day.

The English people are a serious type. They are masters of the art of conversation and I found them to be students of history and very knowledgeable with American history. Their sense of humor is usually lacking and I attended a number of comedy shows in Cambridge that were slapstick type comedy and very boring after 15 minutes. The dry humor most of us enjoy is unknown to the British. Their transportation was mostly train and bicycle and since it rains often for 10 months of a year, every bicycle has a raincoat tied to the rear-carrying basket. All students and adults carry a book or newspaper or both. They read constantly and it is evident in their correct English. There is some slang but not much.

The food served in English pubs was plain and good. Meat, sugar and coffee were in very short supply during the war so this is not a true evaluation today. We always rode our bikes to a local home that served "Fish & Chips" when we had a day off. Their fish was always fresh and their potatoes were far superior to anything in the U.S. They always offered beans and Canadian bacon at the pubs and this was always a treat. Their bread was the old "home baked" type and was excellent. The pastries were poor by our standards and we stayed with the toast with peanut butter and orange marmalade for our dessert. I think our government shipped marmalade to the ETO in tank cars as it was everywhere. The tea was a good substitute for coffee but was never hot enough for me.

I carried my fly rod with me every place except on missions. I fished the small lakes and streams and caught carp and suckers. They had trout rivers but not in our area. The local farmers had pheasant and a type of grouse and they would allow us to hunt. All of the game was given to the farmer and they were very appreciative.

Soon after arriving at our base in England our first acquisition was a bike. For safety reasons all buildings were scattered over a large area and the need for transportation was top priority. There were many of them for sale on the base and a good used bike was cheap. The jeep was used to transport us with equipment to our plane but on days that were on stand down, it was our bike to get us to the range, etc.

Our library was almost non-existent and we borrowed from the men that received books from home.

On April 15, 1945 the major and I finished our tour with a milk run that was a short trip to a submarine base. We were home by mid-afternoon and we thought a low buzz job over the tower was a good idea. A mild reprimand was the penalty but we felt it was the thing to do.

We both had 6 air medals with battle stars so we knew a discharge was waiting when we got home.

May 28, 1945 Wilma and I were married in Topeka, Kansas and our next stop was Monroe, Louisiana to await the paper processing to complete my discharge. The major was at this base flying weather ship and by his request I was assigned to fly with him again. Again, this meant many hours in the co-pilot seat doing what I enjoyed and during one of these trips he told me I would be offered the chance to go back to finish my training in single engine. Wilma was with me in Monroe and we had several discussions trying to decide. Finally I decided that I had enough of the service and we should move on to other things. I was only 19 but I felt like I was 40.

When first arriving at Monroe base 11 of us reported to a Captain who was in charge of an office that handled the daily reports plus the quarter master supply room which was attached to the back of the office building. All 11 of us had about the same service history with some being shot down over enemy territory and escaping while others had been wounded and not able to continue with their tour. All were just waiting for our discharge papers to be processed. Protocol was not on our mind when we walked into the Captain's office however he was quick to remind us that he was in charge and we were still in the military. No wings and no combat ribbons on his uniform gave us his background check and respect from us would be hard to come by. This was our first dealing with the "homefront" officers since our return and we all went to school on this meeting. Wilma was coming to Monroe and I wanted to look into the apartment situation so I agreed to the job of typing the day report which is to list all personnel coming to the base everyday. Two days of this and I asked for the duty of guarding German prisoners of war that were out doing yard and building detail. This proved to be the answer to getting away from the office for most of the day. I enjoyed visiting with the POWs and two of them spoke enough English that we could communicate. Their ages were 20 to 45 and all of them had questions about the areas they came from. They had families in Germany and no way of keeping up to date except for newspapers. I know some of their home cities were destroyed so we had to be careful not to give any of them bad news. They didn't need that. They were hard working men that wanted to do their job. There was never a complaint and when lunchtime came they always wanted to share. Their lunch was the same everyday – 1 cheese sandwich, 2 cookies, 1 apple and a small carton of milk. They knew that good behavior was the key to going home.

Most of the 11 returnees were gone to other parts of the base and I was resigned to this job – until I saw Major Reaume's name on the newly assigned roster. He was flying weather ship and I called the flight line and left my name and number for him on his return. That afternoon when my job was done I had a message to report to the line the next morning with flight gear. It was old home week again. The entire crew was men that had completed their tour of duty with the exception of a captain that handled the weather instruments. My job was to fly the tail position as an observer in time of heavy air traffic and to log the fuel consumption and supply.

Wilma had arrived and we found a place to live that was small but we had kitchen privileges along with bath and laundry facilities. Another returnee and his wife lived there along with the couple that owned the home. The owner of the house made a living as a professional gambler so he kept odd hours. Of course we didn't have air conditioning and it was hot. The humidity had to be 80-95% day and night and Wilma had to live in this heat all day. I was flying almost everyday and was away from the discomfort she had to endure. Some days she went to the drug store for iced tea just to be in an air-conditioned room. When we could afford the treat, Wilma would prepare round steak with french fries for our evening meal. This was a special treat. Since we lived off base I was now obligated to take care of my laundry and this was a problem. We had laundry privileges but no dryer. It takes clothes two days to dry in that climate and my uniform had to be starched and pressed regardless of the fact I only wore it 30 minutes in the morning and 30 minutes in the evening.

I am sorry to say, the Major and I had no more communications after I left the Air Force. He was in line for a promotion when I left Monroe however he was also tired of service protocol so would believe he went home too.

The most famous plane we flew was "Pistol Packin Mama" which was flown back to the U.S. for the War Bond tour. We also flew "General Ike" and the "Peacemaker."

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