

THE DELTA REBEL & STEVE PERRI

Story from the March/April 1995 issue of Yankee Wings by Jim Hanford

"Ask any man who went to war in a Fortress which was the worst crew position on the aircraft and the chances are he will immediately reply "The ball turret". Indeed, this tight little glazed sphere buttoned to the underside of the fuselage needed a stout-hearted occupant, immune from claustrophobia and bolstered against the thought of being without a parachute if the aircraft was suddenly stricken. So cramped was the gunner's position that an early British assessment of the turret considered it quite untenable for long flights - there were many American airmen who would have agreed." So noted Eighth Air Force historian, Roger Freeman, in his book, B-17 Fortress at War. But Steve Perri is not just any man. Almost from the moment he was introduced to the Sperry ball turret he decided that was where he wanted to fly. "I loved it - I felt like I was flying my own airplane. It was unbelievable! I could move it straight down and 360 degrees around." Of course his small (5'6" 138 pound) frame was certainly a factor. (Translation: You had better like it, because you're one of the few gunners who can fit inside one.)

Perri was born on January 19, 1922 in Asbury Park, NJ and moved to neighboring Long Branch when eleven months old. He attended elementary and high schools there and played on the school golf and tennis teams. After high school he attended the Casey Jones School of Aeronautics in Newark, NJ from which he was inducted into the Army. He started mechanics school just a week before Pearl Harbor. There was a need for flight engineers when he completed the course, so he was sent to gunnery school in Texas where he became acquainted with the ball turret. After completing the gunnery course, he went to Walla Walla, Washington for crew training with the 323rd Bombardment Squadron (Heavy) was activated a month later at MacDill Field, FL. In late June the squadron transferred to Walla Walla where combat crews were formed. Perri's crew was headed by 2Lt. George Birdsong. He recalled there were only three aircraft available for each of the four squadrons. "Those airplanes were in the air 24 hours a day," he said. On August 24th, the squadron divided into air and ground echelons. The latter (17 officers, 257 enlisted men left immediately by train for the East Coast where they boarded a ship for England. The air echelon (38 officers and 47 enlisted) proceeded to Boise, Idaho and turned in the training airplanes, then proceeded by rail to the B-17 Modification Center at Bangor, Maine where they drew brand-new B-17F models to take overseas. (In order to minimize disruption to the aircraft production lines, it was common to move completed ships to a modification center for installation of late design changes and field changes.) One field change was the installation of stowage racks for six .30 caliber carbines, ostensibly for the crew's use if brought down in enemy territory. While at Bangor the crew had the name Delta Rebel #2 painted on their ship. Unfortunately, the original Delta Rebel never left the United States. They had taken it out on a fuel consumption flight with an intermediate stop at Mitchell Field, Long Island. While they were absent from the aircraft, an unauthorized ground crewman tried to move it, lost control, and taxied it into three other airplanes wrecking them all before he stopped.

The air echelon ferried their aircraft to England via Gander, Newfoundland and Prestwick, Scotland. The runway at Gander was so wide that the B-17s took off three abreast. It also had a significant hump in the middle. "Once you got over that, you picked up speed like crazy," recalls Perri. Shortly after take-off they encountered icing and Birdsong climbed above it. Their aircraft was followed by an echelon of the 303rd BG Although most of the B-17s elected to fly beneath the weather. When they arrived at Prestwick, the 303rd BG Commander, a full Colonel was noticeable irritated when he

realized that he had followed a "lowly second Lieutenant" into severe icing conditions while the majority of his group had taken a more prudent altitude.

The ground echelon arrived in Great Britain on September 11, 1942 and spent a month at Kimbolton Air Base before moving to their permanent station at Bassingbourne, where they flew three practice missions before the group's first combat mission on Nov. 7th. Although the 323rd was "stood down" that day, Perri and a navigator as replacement crewmen, earned the distinction of beating their squadron-mates into battle. Perri completed 25 missions as a ball turret gunner and 23 of those were made in the Delta Rebel #2 piloted by Lt. Birdsong. During his tour, he was officially credited with four enemy aircraft destroyed including two Me-109's an Me-110 and an FW-190. "I actually claimed seven but four of them were confirmed." For his contributions he received the Air Medal with three oak leaf clusters and a Distinguished Flying Cross. All airmen received the Air Medal upon completion of five combat missions. He was awarded the DFC for the third kill and clusters to the Air Medal for the others. The passage of time has dimmed some of those aerial encounters. Unit records show that he got his first kill, an FW-190 on December 30, 1942 on a mission to bomb the submarine pens at Lorient, France. His third and fourth kills were Me-109s on April 18th-Bremen and May 19th-Keil respectively.

He remembers with vivid clarity however, the mission to Hamm, Germany on March 4, 1943. Five times previously the fledgling Eight Air Force had set out to make a reasonably deep penetration into Northwest Germany, only to be frustrated by the weather. This day they took off into a gray dawn although the weather over the target for forecast to be fair. As the formation crossed the occupied coast however, there seemed to be little improvement and three groups turned back. Perri's own crew had already experienced an omen of what lay ahead when they lost an engine during take-off. The crew of Delta Rebel #2 jumped into a spare ship appropriately named Stormy Weather and rejoined their group. The fifteen B-17s of the 91st stayed above the "soup" and lost contact with the other groups. As they approached the target, the weather cleared and it became apparent that they were alone. Major Paul Fishburne, a 22 year old leading the group, elected to press on and subsequently made an excellent bomb run.

Approaching Hamm at 22,000 feet, Pilot Birdsong asked Perri whether he could see another B-17 group. What Perri saw was 60 enemy day fighters which had initially been confused by the diverging bomber tracks but were now determined to exact a price. They pressed their attacks from all directions. Perri's bullets sawed the canopy off an Me-110 forcing the pilot and gunner to bail out. It was his second confirmed kill. "He was coming up from hitting us in the rear and he started to go back down. He was really close to us, must have been 80 to 100 yards. I was tracking him and firing, trying to stay in front of him - leading and leading and leading him - until the turret stopped at dead zero, so I just held my finger on the trigger and he went through the fire and I raked the back of him. I spun around and saw they were shot up. They were close enough that I could see the pilot and gunner fighting to get out - there were two of them in a 110. It was the first time I actually saw a German. Then I saw them bail out." "Then we really caught it." he said. "A Focke Wulf came after us - they have 20 millimeter cannons synchronized to fire through their props and we took a 20 mm shell right through the windshield hitting our co-pilot and our pilot had bits of glass in his right eye. Another shell knocked out our number three engine." When the bombardier hit the salvo switch, nothing happened. Battle damage had sheared the wires to the bomb bay, hence the bombs had not released. With two engines out, Birdsong dropped to the deck to avoid enemy fighters. A crew member crawled into the bomb bay and replaced the arming pins, but Birdsong still had to land the plane with only two engines, three wounded men and a load of bombs on board and no brakes. As our pilot set the wheels down on the runway, he hit the brakes and the pedals went right to the floor. The main brakes were out and the end of the

runway was coming up fast. We went through the perimeter fencing, across the main road, over a ditch and between two telephone poles, through a farm full of Brussel sprouts, over a plow which ripped off the ball turret and then we crashed into a haystack andstopped.

Perri's experiences refute the British claim that the ball turret was "quite untenable for long missions" He estimated that his longest missions involved 6 1/2 to 7 hours actually inside the turret. However, he had completed his tour before the really deep penetrations into Germany. For Perri the mission preparations began the day before take-off. Each gunner was assigned his own .50 caliber machine guns which were stored in the base armament show between missions. He cleaned and oiled them the day after each mission and covered the breech mechanism with an athletic sock. When alerted for a mission, he stopped by the armament shop and thoroughly removed the oil lest it freeze at altitude and cause the gun to jam. After briefing, the gunners drew their guns and were transported to their aircraft. From outside the turret, Perri removed a small cover on each side of the entrance door and inserted the guns into their rigid mounts. After pre-flighting the turret, he helped the pilot and flight engineer pre-flight the aircraft.

The turret was not manned for take-offs and landings. Perri entered and excited while the aircraft was over the English Channel. Before entering however, it was time to load the guns. While the turret was stowed in take-off position i.e.guns horizontal and facing rearward. The two covers were removable from inside the fuselage. Through the openings he fed belted ammunition into the turret boxes until full (approximately 400 rounds each). With a hand crank he depressed the turret straight down, which moved the entry door inside the fuselage. One of the waist gunners helped him get into and out of the turret. Inside the ball turret there was neither room for a parachute nor for the heavy fleece-lined flying suit that waist gunners wore. Perri wore coveralls, a light-weight flight jacket and English flying boots, depending primarily upon the electrically-heated undergarment to keep him warm in temperatures as low as - 30 degrees F. One hazard was burns in the groin, resulting from crimped wires in the electric suit. Once inside, he connected his throat mike, earphones and oxygen hose and fastened his safety belt. He was curled up with his back resting against the armored door, his legs bent and his feet resting on each side of the 13-inch diameter armored glass panel which was his main window on the world. The two 50s were just inches away from his head with the ammo boxes above them. His face was about 30 inches from the armored glass panel and suspended in between was the optical display glass for the computing gun sight. With his left foot he could adjust the lighted reticles projected onto this glass. When a target was framed by them, the range was correct. Two post handles projected rearward above the sight and flexing then moved the turret in azimuth and elevation. The firing buttons for the guns were in the ends of these handles, hence, to move the turret and fire the guns, Perri's arms were bent with his hands above his head. As cramped as it sounds, it was actually quite comfortable "if I was firing straight out, it was like an easy chair". Perri also refuted the common belief that the ball was the most dangerous crew position. Although he wore his parachute harness, the chest pack itself was stowed in the fuselage by the radio room bulkhead. A waist gunner was assigned to latch and unlatch the turret door and help him in and out. We were able to get out in 30 seconds. As far as danger, the pilots and the crewmen in the nose had it worse because the Luftwaffes preferred to attack from ahead (12 o'clock high).

The B-17F had less defensive machine guns forward and the fighters had a better chance of hitting the pilots and/or the bombardier thus breaking up the attack. The "REEL" Air Gunner One famous person who need not have exposed himself to the hazards of aerial combat and did so anyway, was movie actor, Clark Gable. In January 1942, his wife, actress Carol Lombard, was killed in an airline crash. Gable grieved so much that he couldn't resume acting, and joined the Air Force. There are conflicting

accounts, however, about his military service. Whether it was his idea to enlist or General Arnold's is unclear, but the 41 year old actor, did not go in with the rank of captain, as an MGM press agent suggested. Private Gable's first assignment was to Officers' Candidate School, graduating in 1943 as a second lieutenant. It was no coincidence that an MGM cameraman, Andrew McIntyre, took OCS training with him. On completion, he reported to General Arnold for a special assignment- to make movies of AAF activities for public relations purposes, beginning with one about aerial gunners. Gable and McIntyre dutifully entered gunnery training at Tyndall Field, Florida, where the former made first lieutenant. In April 1943 Gable, now a captain just six months out of OCS, and McIntyre went overseas with the 351st BG.

While in England, he is credited with having flown five combat missions, including at least one in Delta Rebel #2. By the fall of 1943 Gable's crew had exposed 50,000 feet of film and the team returned home. From the footage, he produced a 63 minute feature entitled Combat America but it was released at the same time as William Wyler's Memphis Belle, which far overshadowed the former. Subsequently, however, at least five films used the combat footage shot by the Gable team. Perri remembers him as "a great friend of the enlisted men as well as a great all-around guy."

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