

Walter Hughes (93rd Bomb Group)

(February 19th 1997)

I will start by giving a little background.

The late 1920's was a time of economic boom. Easy credit, lots of money available, easy times, Rich Big Business. A factory new ford model A, cost less than \$400.

In 1931, the economy failed, resulting in what was called the Great Depression. What did depression seem like to a 9-year-old boy? No Money, No money for cars nor food, clothing or entertainment. I was lucky, I lived on a small farm where we grew and canned fruit and vegetables, sweetened with honey from Dad's bees. We did have to buy flour and salt. Clothes: each child got two pairs of blue jeans (Osh Kosh B-Gosh) and 2 shirts each year when school started. Movies were today's television, Saturday matinee cost 5 cents and we could only afford to go once or twice a month.

1933-37 were the dust bowl years in Kansas, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Missouri. Families came to California by the 10's of thousands. California could not take care of them. There were no jobs; many lived in camps where sanitation was very bad. The state tried to keep them out but they were starving and needed help.

The depression continued through 1938 and 1939. There were millions getting government subsistence from a hundred programs, like WPA and CCC.

War broke out in Europe in 1939 but it seemed remote. Orders for war material began to boost jobs and the economy. President Franklin Roosevelt thought war was inevitable but the citizens would not hear of it. There were groups such as, "America First" who insisted that it was

not our war and we were shielded by great oceans so we couldn't be attacked. The German American Bund, a German propaganda group, had the same message. Individuals, Charles Lindbergh and others who had seen Germany's military power, especially the Air Force, said Germany couldn't be beaten and since it was a European fight, stay out of it.

The US couldn't even start training because the voters would not approve the costs. Fortunately, Roosevelt had started our industry building the materials for war on the excuse that others would buy them.

On Sunday Dec 7 1941 I was in a freshman At U of Ca at Davis. I was in my room studying for an examination when at about 10 AM a great shout in the stair well said, "Come listen to the radio". It was Pearl Harbor- Bombed. It couldn't be war; the country wasn't ready. The draft had started only a few months earlier. Pearl Harbor and the submarines sinking American ships along our East Coast came as an enormous shock to every American. And now we had enemies who showed us that the oceans were no longer a barrier against attack. And we might very well be beaten.

The attack unified the nation. Everyone followed President Roosevelt's call to defeat the German and Japanese Nations which had attacked us. Then on Feb 23 1942, a Japanese submarine surfaced and shelled the Elwood oil fields north of Santa Barbara Ca. My 4-H project dairy cows were in a field where several shells exploded, fortunately, none was injured, but-- We were for sure in the war.

In June my draft board let me know my induction date for military service was Aug 1 1942. I wanted some control of my future, so I signed up for the Army Air Force Pilot training program. I was told to go home and wait for a call. I went to College for the summer then went home and waited. The Call finally came in Feb.

1943. I reported, with thousands of others to the Santa Ana Army Air Base for Preflight Classification. So many failed the Classification tests and were "Washed Out" of training.

I Qualified as a Pilot Cadet and was assigned to Pilot School. Each flying school was a 9-week course. I was sent to primary at Thunderbird #2 outside Scottsdale Arizona in May 1943.

My Basic flying school was Minter Field near Bakersfield. Every school has its story. At Basic it was about the fighter pilot, returned from combat and assigned to teach new pilots. He couldn't stand the tedium of training students, or the Petty Politics of Training Command. He was refused permission to return to combat. He took a training plane from the flight line, tried to crash it into the person who refused permission to go back to combat and finally crashed the plane in sight of the cadets.

I received about 40 hours of flying time at each school. I graduated Jan 7 1944 with my wings, 120 hours flying time and a second Lieutenant's gold bars, just 11 months after I entered active duty.

At Albuquerque NM I spent 2 months learning to fly a B-24 Bomber. At Fresno Calif., I was assigned a crew of nine men and took them to March Field, Riverside Ca. for 3 months of combat training, bombing practice and gunnery practice for the 5 men whose job was to defend our plane from enemy fighters.

In late July 1944, I signed a Quarter Million Dollar Note for a brand new B-24 Bomber at Hamilton Field, near San Francisco, It was shiny and smelled new like a new car.

We flew it to England by way of New Hampshire, Labrador, Greenland, and Iceland, to Valle in Wales England. I had only been out of

California a couple of times, once to Crater Lake and once to Boulder Dam and here I was flying an airplane 1/3 of the way around the world.

At Valle, in Wales they took our Factory Fresh plane away from us. We thought it was ours, but actually we were only a ferry crew. The plane had to be modified before it could be flown in combat.

We were assigned us the 93rd Bomb Group, 2nd Air Division, 8th Air Force. The day was August 21 1944. Just after I got to the 93rd, the group was stood down, (taken off Combat status) for two weeks. One evening toward the end of that time, several of us in the pilot hut were listening to Axis Sally on Radio Berlin. We heard her say, "We Welcome Lt. Hughes and his crew to the 93rd Bomb Group. We are planning a much warmer Welcome for them when they fly to Germany". How could this happen? We didn't know where we were going until we were airborne and en route and then we only had a destination, not a duty station. German Intelligence was Awesome.

My first mission was Sept 10 1944 to Heilbronn Ger. We got a little flak from a four-gun battery, it was accurate and tracking so the bursts were in our formation. Our ships intercom system was out so no one could comment. I was scared, more than anytime before in my life. That stuff looked lethal.

Now I read an excerpt from the book about our 2nd mission, "The next day".

"How I remember the Hush, the utter silence, which followed the announcement that, our target was Magdeburg, just short of Berlin and heavily defended. We hit perfectly the 2-mile gap between the Osnabruck and Munster flak patterns. Heavy flak on both sides but none reached us. Right down the alley like ducks in a shooting gallery. We were the first group in, no clouds, no haze, perfectly clear. Then all of a sudden the sky is full of black smoke. All there is to do is fly tight on

the leader's wing and wait for Bombs Away. They are away! Then Ping - Ping - Ping, 3 ships are afire and going down. We try desperately to count the chutes of our buddies who were in those ships, only 3 out of one with its bomb bay blazing like a torch. Another man plummets through the flames. Nineteen chutes, possibly 2 unaccounted for in two ships and 6 from the third.

You might think we would be ducking and dodging but there is no ducking. The essence of precision bombing is "Tight formation" and absolutely straight and level flight until Bombs away. Then you turn only as fast as 30 ships in tight formation can be maneuvered. A scattered formation is a magnet for fighters. A tight formation with its 300 guns is a good fighter repellent. A 1 on 1 fighter - bomber encounter is no contest; the bomber loses.

Flak is a different matter. There are two basic types of flak aiming, Barrage and Tracking. Barrage flak was used mainly when there were clouds hiding the airplanes. The Germans knew as well as we did what kind of targets we were after. Even without visual or even radar contact, they could tell as soon as we turned at the IP onto the bomb run what target we were going to hit. Then all they needed was altitude and wind speed to plot precisely the point to place their shells to intercept us. They got altitude and air speed from radar, but in these early days of radar, we could jam it to some degree with Chaff. Often they sent captured U S planes up to track us and refine the altitude and speed data. Barrage Flak was devastating to the psyche because it was so thick and one had to fly right into it. Tracking flak came at us when weather allowed visual or radar aimers to sight on a single plane, in a formation this was the formation leader because he controlled the bomb release. On long bomb runs, 6 to 10 minutes, the lead might weave gently but the last 3 to 4 minutes had to be straight and level.

In respect to flak we believed we had 40 seconds to be somewhere other

than our expected position. We calculated it took 20 seconds to get the flak shell into the fuse setter and set, 10 seconds to transfer it from there to the firing chamber and the travel time of the shell to us at 23,000 ft. was 9 seconds. The minimum bomb run was about 4 minutes and up to 10 minutes. Each 88-mm gun could fire 3 shells per minute. Even a little old target with 30 guns could fire 400 shells at us on a bomb run. Although Fighters were the most deadly peril, Flak was the one we could see and which we could do nothing about, just ride through it and hope your name wasn't on one of the shells. Flak regularly claimed a few planes.”

My Co-Pilot was killed by flak on our 15th mission. The crew was devastated and I was teetering on the edge of insanity. The crew was sent for a week of R&R, rest and recuperation) at an English Manor House and pampered with Ice cream and Counseling. Just about the time our sanity was returning, we had to return to flying combat.

The weather in Europe was terrible for flying. I was wakened for more than double the missions I completed. The temperature averaged nearly 49 deg. Below zero and our ships were unheated.

Two of the crew were later injured in the war's last major fighter attack. We were under attack for 150 miles. Their wounds were serious but not fatal. It was our next to the last mission.

It was hard to climb into the plane for that last mission. We persevered and completed our combat tour in April of 1945.

I was sent home on a boat, which was an ordeal because I had developed fear of water from having to fly over the channel twice every mission in the B-24 from which pilots rarely survived ditching.

I was hurrying home because while training at March Field I met Violet, the

Prettiest and Nicest of the WAC Corps. She wrote me a letter daily the whole time I was in Europe. A critical factor for my moral. I answered when there was time and when my psyche would allow.

We were married, July 24 1945 in the post Chapel at March Field. My mother assured us that it wouldn't last five years; we were too different. Something seems to be working, If we can just get through this our 58th year, I think we will just declare our marriage a success and get on with the Loving.

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