

## **IN ENGLAND ----- BEFORE FLYING AND DURING EACH MISSION**

by Lester Schrenk, sent to [www.airmen.dk](http://www.airmen.dk) on 28 January 2009

I was with the 8th Army Air Force, 92nd Bomber Group, 327th Squadron based near Podington, England I flew in a B-17 Bomber on combat missions over German targets during the early part of World War II from December 1943 to February 22, 1944.

Our barracks were steel Quonset huts, with cement floors. Each barrack held the enlisted men from four bomber crews for a total of twenty-four men. We watched the bulletin board daily, to see if there was an alert for a bombing mission the next morning. If there was, we went to bed as early as possible, because we knew that at three o'clock in the morning we would have a wake-up call. At that time we would quickly get dressed in our flying gear, and head for the mess hall, which was about a three-quarter mile walk from the barracks. A special breakfast was always served before every mission. That was one time that we would get fresh eggs, other times we would get dehydrated eggs which didn't taste very good and always had a slightly slimy texture. We ate a very satisfying meal, because we knew that our next meal was a long way off, like 14 hours or more later.

After breakfast, we went to the enlisted men's briefing room. Security was very tight. We had to make positive identification of our crew before we were allowed to enter. The briefing officer would unveil the map and a red ribbon would show the route to, and from, the target. The route to the target would never be in a straight line, but rather zig zagging back and forth. This was to throw the enemy off guard as to what the actual target would be. If we knew that the target was going to be a difficult one, there would be a very loud groan from the crews. Even before we started our missions one had a pretty good idea of how well the Germans would defend their city.

The briefing officer would tell us what opposition we were expected to encounter, but that was all guesswork. They would always minimize the opposition. They would also tell us that we were expendable, that it was more important for us to hit the target, than to get back alive and they thoroughly meant that!!

As you can see, they did not value life very much.

The next stop was the supply shop. Here they would issue each of us a parachute, an electrically heated suit, shoes and gloves. They would also give each of us an escape pouch, which contained French francs, a map, a compass, a candy bar, and a pack of gum. The money was for bribery, the candy was for food to nourish us if we were shot down. They always gave us French francs, because they said if they gave us German money then we could be accused of being a spy and shot. We were forbidden to carry any weapons, such as a pistol or knife, and we would be subject to court martial if we did.

The next stop was the gun shop. Here we would tell the operator what plane we were flying, and what position. Being a ball turret operator I had two guns to install and arm. This was always a very tricky maneuver. One could not get inside the turret while the airplane was on the ground, so part of the installation had to be done from the inside of the plane, and part from the outside.

After this was accomplished, we would sit and wait until we got word if we were actually going on the mission or if it would be scrubbed. This was wintertime and most of the time the weather was very unfavorable. If they shot a green flare into the air, we knew we were on our way. If there was a red flare, we knew the mission was scrubbed, and we then would reverse the whole procedure taking the guns back to the gun shop, and returning all the supplies and head back to the barracks.

If there was a green flare, the pilot would start the engines, and taxi out to the runway. There would be any number of airplanes nose to tail waiting to take off. The usual number being 21. At the time of takeoff, it still would be very early morning and totally dark. It was very hard to find the airplanes that we were supposed to form a formation with. To accomplish this each bomber group had their own marker flares. Our colors were green yellow green. We were flying completely without lights, and it was very

hard to find the planes from your group. There were so many bomber groups in such a small area of Great Britain that there would be airplanes all over the sky and without the flares one would never know which plane to follow. Sometimes it would take over an hour just to form our formation. Even at this point, the mission could still be scrubbed. We flew in very tight formations, and sometimes when we were bucking a heavy wind or crosswind we would be jockeying all over the sky and collisions were not uncommon.

Once airborne, we would test fire our guns to make sure that they would fire correctly. It was so cold at the altitude we were flying at that it was necessary to have electric heaters on our guns to keep them from freezing.

All of the windows of the plane, from the bomb bay back to the tail, were removed to give free range for firing the machine guns. Needless to say there was a very strong wind blowing throughout the airplane at all times. The temperature was anywhere from -40 to -50 degrees, the same temperature inside as outside. At that altitude we had to wear oxygen masks, and these were very uncomfortable. Most crewmen had frostbite around the edge of the oxygen mask. Because of the humidity from breathing, the oxygen masks had a tendency to freeze and thereby cutting off the oxygen, so if one didn't check his oxygen mask periodically one could die from lack of oxygen.

A mission could last anywhere from 12 to 14 hours, and during this time we were not allowed to leave our post, because we could be attacked by enemy airplanes at any time. All during this time we had nothing to eat or drink. The electrical heated suits were very unreliable. On most missions some part or the whole heatsuit would burn up, giving us big blisters, and then on the rest of the mission one had no heat whatsoever. Also in the ball turret one was so crowded that exercise was impossible. I was much too tall for this position, being 5-11, and weighed in at 185 pounds. With this height and weight I could not wear my heavy flying jacket or heavy flight pants. I also could not wear a flack suit nor a steel helmet. When the heat suit malfunctioned, and this happened to me on 3 missions, I really had to brave the cold.

We were never given any more fuel than the minimum that was absolutely necessary for the mission. Rather than give us more fuel they preferred to load an extra bomb. With this, many airplanes went down in the English Channel out of fuel on their return to home base. This always sounded foolhardy to me. Many times the whole crew would be killed and a plane lost for the sake of carrying an extra bomb.

Bomber crews were a very tight knit group of men. Even if one was not feeling well he would go on a mission anyway. One always felt as if he were letting the rest of his crew down if he failed to go. We never wanted to be placed on another crew, as you trusted your fellow crewmen. At one point they used our bombardier as a fill in on another crew and that plane was shot down. I never saw him again. His name was Lt. Meakin.

Germany still had superiority of the sky at this stage of the war. Our fighter planes could not escort us all the way to the target as they had to turn back because they couldn't carry enough fuel. We therefore suffered huge losses. It was not unusual to see several bombers go down at one time. I even saw the Germans ram our bombers. I do not know if this was intentional. They would come so close through our formation, that one could see the expression on their faces, and strangely, they would wave as they passed by. The Germans always wore full dress German Luftwaffe uniforms, and one could even see the iron crosses some of their pilots wore. I can still see bombers explode. It was eerie to see parts of planes litter the sky. I remember a whole wing that had been blown off, and the engines were still running, it made lazy circles around the formation. When an airplane went down, if we were not busy fighting off enemy planes, I would follow the plane down to the ground, hoping to count as many parachutes as I could, but many times there were none. At times there would be all sorts of debris floating through the formation, propellers, landing gear, wings, and yes, even people being blown out with no parachutes.

In most positions of the plane, one could not wear a chute. There just was not enough room at their specific station of duty. This included all of the enlisted men and some of the officers. Most kept their parachutes as near their station as possible. My chute would not fit in the ball turret, so it was kept on

the floor of the airplane near the ball turret. With the violent action of the plane, often times my parachute would not be where I left it.

In our group, the average number of missions flown was six and one third missions before the average crew was shot down. I did not know of a single crew that finished the magic figure of 25 missions. If they would have completed 25 missions, they would have been sent back to the States to help sell war bonds. During the time I was flying, the highest number of missions flown by any crew that I know of was 21, and on their next mission, they received a direct hit and were all killed. That crew was in our barracks, bunked next to me. Their airplane was called "Wilder N Hell" flown by Lt. Wilder, hence its name. They were all good friends of mine. Usually we knew the crew of any airplane that went down, and if we saw no parachutes it was a very sad day. Despite this, morale was always very high. I never had any doubt that I would not survive. Even after I became a POW, I never had a doubt. It was only after the war ended that I found out how many times my life hung in the balance. Several times I was almost shot while in captivity.

I should introduce my crew members. Lt. Wm Lavies, our Pilot, he was killed in action. Lt. Elijah Vaughan- Co-pilot; Lt. Francis Peacock-Navigator; Lt. Robert Schuma-our fill in Bombardier; Sgt. Neil Byers-Top turret Operator; Sgt. John Walcott- Radio Operator; Sgt. William Harmon-R. Waist Gunner; Sgt. Peter Guastella-L. Waist Gunner; Sgt. Vern Swindler -Tail Gunner; and myself, Sgt. Lester Schrenk- Ball Turret Operator.

During each mission our pilot would periodically call each crew member, and he would tell us all to check in. That was to make certain that we were not suffocating from lack of oxygen, or from being wounded. Our pilot was the nicest man I have ever known. He always took care of his men, even when we were on the ground, or going up town on a pass. He would always make sure that we were happy and OK. He even offered money to make sure that we had a good time, and always a father figure. I never heard an angry word or complaint from him to the day he was killed. Even when he knew that we were doomed, he kept on reassuring us that all would be OK.

Flying in the ball turret, I had a perfect view, and never a dull moment. I could see German airplanes taking off on the ground, see the flak batteries firing at us and a split second later see the burst of flak. It made a loud noise, then you could hear the shrapnel hitting the airplane, and it sounded like large hail. If the burst was near it would flip the airplane violently. One burst of flak was so severe that it flipped us over, completely tearing out engine No.2, leaving a hole about 3 feet wide. However, even with the severe damage, this plane did bring us home. I could also see the bombs dropping towards the target and see them hit and explode. They would set off a shock wave, similar to dropping a stone in the water.

The enemy flack at and near the target was severe, and that was also the time one could expect to be attacked by enemy fighters. They would fly right through their own flack trying to knock us down before we could drop our bombs. I saw any number of them being shot down by their own AA fire. Were we scared? You damn right we were scared. Who wouldn't be.

The Germans tried any number of defenses. One was to drop steel cable, in front of our bombers, so that we would become entangled. Another was to come from behind and to lob bazooka shells into the formation. It was at this time that they were trying a new jet airplane called the ME 262. The ME 262 had an extremely short range, not enough to reach our formation, so they would load the new plane piggy back on a JU 88 twin engine fighter, to gain altitude to above our formation. They would separate and the ME 262 would make one pass through the formation, firing as he passed. At the time the ME 262 was a very fast airplane, faster than any plane the Allies had. At this point the ME 262 would be out of fuel and would be forced to land. I never thought that this was very effective.

We always breathed a sigh of relief as we passed the coastlines, even more so when we were over England. Many times we so badly shot up that we could not keep up with the formation. If you lagged behind you were very vulnerable to be attacked by German fighters, as you lacked the support that the other bombers gave you. At this time you had these options: drop down into the clouds and fly blind; if there were no clouds, the next option was to keep up with the formation as long as possible, then slow

down and hope to join another group behind you and keep up with that group as long as possible; and the final option was to hit the deck and fly as low as possible, as low as 10 feet was not uncommon.

At long last we would see our home field. What a relief to be able to take off the oxygen masks, also to get out of the turret and move about. If a crew shot a red flare, that meant they had wounded on board, giving them priority to land first and there would be an ambulance waiting for them. There would also be planes that would be badly damaged and would have to make crash landings, landing on their bellies with their wheels up.

We had 2 flight engineers on board, one was Neil Byers, the other was myself. We never trusted the landing gear to be down and locked, so either of us would hand crank the landing gear down. This was done because the mechanism could be damaged. We also helped the Pilot and Co-Pilot land the aircraft.

We would constantly call off the air speed, and be ready to pull the emergency brakes in case of damage to the hydraulic system. In spite of being all shot up, our pilot always made a good landing. He was really a good pilot.

As soon as we landed we were taken to the debriefing room. Each crew would be asked many questions about the mission. They always wanted me to point out exactly where the bombs had hit. They also wanted to know what opposition we encountered, and where. Also how many of our airplanes we saw go down, and did we see any parachutes.

Only after the debriefing, could we turn in our gear and then go to the mess hall. The next thing that we had to do was to walk back to the airplane, remove the guns and ammunition, take them back to the gun shop, and thoroughly clean and oil the guns. Next we had to completely wipe off all traces of oil. If any oil remained, it would solidify at the low temperatures that we encountered while flying on the next mission. One never knew which airplane you would be flying your next mission. During my tenure we flew in at least 4 or 5 different aircraft due to the fact that some of the planes we returned in would be so badly shot up that they could not be repaired in time for the next mission, while others were so badly damaged that they would be scraped and used for spare parts. Next, we would walk back to our barracks which was a walk across a very muddy field about 3/4 mile. Only then were we done for the day. This would be quite late in the evening.

As I have stated, there were 4 Crews to each barracks. It was always very sad to return to the barracks and discover that one of the crews did not return, Or to find that someone was killed or wounded. Two times there was a crew that did not make it back, then one day 2 crews did not return, which meant that half of the barracks were casualties. This happened 2 days before we did not return. The remaining crew was shot down within a week and all of their crew were killed

We were quite likely be called to fly again the next day. On the day we were shot down, we had flown 3 consecutive days with the same routine I described above. It was not only the lack of sleep that bothered. The lack of oxygen also is very hard on the system as it has a tendency to make one very tired in itself. The oxygen masks were so very uncomfortable that we always delayed putting them on until absolutely necessary when we felt groggy, and we also removed them much too early. We were always dog tired at the end of every mission, as it was an extremely long and stressful day.

I am often asked, if I had all to do over, would I again volunteer for military service, even if I knew that I would have the same ordeal to go through? Yes, most certainly I would. Freedom is worth fighting for. I lost my freedom for the 15 months while I was a prisoner of war. Also I saw firsthand how they treated their slave labor, tearing families apart and working people to death with no regard and compassion for other people. Slavery exists in many parts of the world even today. The price of freedom is very high. However, the price of freedom is never too high to fight for. There is just too much at stake.