

## THE SOUNDS AND SMELLS OF COMBAT

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The only smell in the barracks that I can remember was that of a coal burning stove. The entire area smelled of burning coal and coal gas as the whole of England was heated by coal.

By morning the barracks had a cold feel even though the temperature in England was not that cold. The humidity was very high and it would be bone chilling. I had my bunk arranged just as I wanted it. I had a total of six English issue wool blankets. My pillow was topped off with my heavy sheep fleece lined flying jacket using the fleece portion for my pillow. This gave my bunk the smell of lanolin from the lambs' wool. Very pleasant smell.

Most men never made up their bunks. Many had good luck pieces or went through some routine before going on a mission. The floor most times had small coins around a bunk that had been used to play poker to pass the free time. However poker was never played when there was an alert for a mission as everyone retired early.

A man from the orderly room would come and very quietly awaken each airman that would be needed for a mission. Now, to be awakened at 3 A.M. and getting dressed in a room where the fire had all but burned out did not appeal to me in the least. We dressed in almost silence and quickly made our way to the latrine to clean up. Then we walked about ½ mile to the mess hall. We each had to bring along our own knife, fork and spoon as the mess hall did not furnish them. The greeting we got when we entered the mess hall was of strong coffee and the smell of frying bacon. There was not much conversation during breakfast and most airmen would sit with their fellow crewmembers.

The most time spent at briefing was spent being thoroughly checked at the door for security. Each man had to state his pilot's name and crew position. Only after all was in order would briefing begin. There was a huge board covered with a sheet. The briefing officer would remove the sheet. Everyone was very quiet waiting to see where the mission would be. There would be a definite sound if the target were considered to be easy, and still another if we knew it would be hard. Morale was always high. Bad targets did have much intimidation, but we were young and invincible and never figured that the odds were not in our favor. As soon as briefing was finished, there were chaplains to give us our blessings. I think they did a great job and gave much confidence. I always spent time with them.

Another thing that mattered, was the aircraft we would be flying. We knew which planes were fast and which were not. Some just always had some problem and some did not handle well. We all had our favorite planes. My favorite plane was Pot O Gold, the one we were shot down in. No one wanted to fly in a plane that was marginal.

At this point I could only hope that the mission would be scrubbed due to bad weather and that I could gain access to my bunk. If that happened I would return and sleep until 11 A.M. or so in time to get noon chow. I loved flying, but never wished to fly combat missions and was always glad when a mission was scrubbed.

All planes on the ground had very specific smells. One odor was the faint odor of fuel and another was of hydraulic fluid. We burned 100-octane fuel, which had a smell all of its own. If the control surfaces had been damaged and recently repaired, there would be a strong acetone odor. Acetone was a primary ingredient in repairing the fabric on the control surfaces. As soon as we were in the air those smells would subside as the windows were removed from the plane and there was a very strong breeze.

The sounds of starting a radial engine are like none other. They have a sound all of their own, and to this day I just love to hear them. Radial engines have a starter system that does not have a direct electrical connection, but consists of a small 4½ pound rapidly spinning flywheel that builds up inertia to the point of being capable of turning over the engine for some time. However, if during this time the engine does not start, then all must be shut down, and the procedure repeated all over.

Radial engines are very temperamental and usually do not start that easily. They make a slow grinding revolution that has a distinct whirr. During start times they backfire, cough, spit and at times even catch on fire. There always is a crewmember standing by with a fire extinguisher, just in case of fire. Many times the engine will fire for some time on just 1 or 2 cylinders before it manages to erupt into a powerful roar on all 9 cylinders. Each engine is started one at a time, and with 4 engines, this may take some time. Engine sounds change as the pilot puts each engine through various tests and changes the pitch on each propeller to see how well the engines adjust. When all engines are running one can just feel the power and it is a sight to behold. The sound of a four-engine piston powered bomber is like music to me. Combine that with a group of bombers flying in close formation is yet another thrill. The vibration and reverberation has a pleasant sound, like none other. But alas, I fear that this sound has been lost to History, as there are not enough B-17s left to fly in a formation.

The pilot puts the engine through all sorts of tests to make certain all the engines are operating at their maximum. As the pilot changes the pitch of the propellers, the sound of the engines changes. I still love to hear these sounds and can remember them very clearly. Another thing that was nice to see was when all four engines are running and the pilot trims the propellers (having all four engines rotate at the same r.p.m.). This gives the illusion of the propellers standing still at one point, but blurred with the propellers rotating. This is the same as a stage coach wheels when shown in a movie rotating backward when the stage coach is moving forward, except this was done with all four engines. Every pilot adjusted the four throttles so that each engine was operating at exactly the same r.p.m. This was done without exception.

During WW II bombers were routinely overloaded by two to four tons overweight. As a result many crashed on takeoff at the end of the runway and most times all of the crew were killed. Pilots were very careful to make sure the engines and propellers were operating properly for the takeoff. We always sweat out takeoff and were always thankful when we were airborne and gaining in altitude. Because of overloading with bombs we were shorted on fuel and often times on returning to our base in England some planes would go down in the English Channel for lack of enough fuel to return to base.

On the first mission we were to participate in, even after we were airborne, our plane could not keep up with the rest of the formation and we were forced to abort. This made us feel as if we had let our buddies down as this meant that there were fewer gunners to protect the formation. Unless a mission was completed, it was not counted as a mission.

When we used our oxygen masks, there was an odor of neoprene.

All bombs had a front and rear propeller that was a safety device. They would not explode until the bomb was dropped and the force of the wind would buzz off the propeller device. For safety reasons each of these propellers had a cotter pin so the propellers could not accidentally be removed. After takeoff a crewmember had to enter the bomb bay and physically remove all the pins. This necessitated reaching to the farther-most bomb and had to do it without a safety harness or a parachute, as there was not enough room. He had to hang on the rigging with one hand and remove the pins with the other. If he had, fallen it would have been to his death, as the bomb bay doors would not have held his weight. If the mission was called back, the pins all had to be re-inserted before landing. We many times brought back a load of bombs when a mission was recalled.

During my tenure we dropped four types of bombs. The most common types were the 500# variety and also the 500# delayed action bomb, incendiary and fragmentation bombs. The first exploded on contact and would blow a hole about 30 feet across and 20 feet deep. The delayed action would not explode right away, but would explode anytime up to days later. Incendiary bombs would burn so hot that even water could not put out the fire. Fragmentation bombs would go off at ground level.

When we were attacked there was a strong odor of cordite and the sound of bursting flak and shrapnel hitting the aircraft. There would be huge black bursts of flak. When the flak burst was very close there would be a bright red glow in the center of the puff and the entire airplane would quiver and the plane would be thrown in any direction. Most flak was 88 mm. (3½ inch), but the larger ones were 155mm (5inch). I remember very well the first burst of flak that I saw. Flak bursts always came up in multiples of 3. All 3 were at our exact altitude and just a few feet in front of our port wing. Almost as soon as they appeared, the port wing cut the smoke puffs in half. This made me realize how close the bursts of flak were.

When the Germans first started firing, the smoke of the first flak burst was pink, followed by yellow, then black. I believe this was to test for range.

I cannot emphasize the sheer fear and intimidation to see the target area being blasted with so much flak as to make the formation ahead disappear into the black cloud. Then, the sound and fear hit me of hearing the bomb bay doors opening, feeling the plane noticeably slow down due to the excess wind drag from the open bomb bay, seeing numerous planes explode and go down, and then hear the bombardier say we will have to make another pass as I couldn't get a good fix on the target. To go around to make another pass seemed like an eternity. When the bombs were dropped, the plane lurched skyward with the lessened weight. The bomb bay doors would close, but we were far from being safe yet.

Another horrifying sound is when a bomber is hit and starts its final death dive. This is a terrible sound, one I do not like to remember. Once you have heard this sound you will never forget it. It is best described as a high pitched scream.

On our off time most airmen went to town. Many of them drank heavily, but that was not for me. I met a lovely English girl. We did occasionally go to a pub, but that was not the usual. Most of the time we either went to the cinema for a movie, which most likely was made in the USA. Other times we spent with her family. She lived with her mother and dad along with her Grandma. We all got along well. She was 17 and worked at a local newspaper. We had a very nice time and she wrote to me all during my time spent as a POW. She helped make my life bearable and I owe much to her.

I faithfully wrote to my family twice a week and always assured them everything was just fine. We were not allowed to say anything about our missions. All mail was censored by the military. I was lucky as I received lots of mail from back home. This was a terrific boost in morale. Some men never got any mail.

Most airmen had a good luck charm. Some had certain routines and the like. As for myself, I believed in prayer. We were young and invincible and everyone thought that they would somehow beat the odds that were so heavily stacked against us. Everyone counted the missions they had credit for, which made them feel much closer to going home. I do not remember anyone talking of impending doom. Never did I have the least thoughts of not returning home alive.

I still get a thrill out of visiting a restored B-17 and always go directly to the ball turret and wonder just how I fit in that small 3 foot ball. I would love to again get back into the ball turret for one last ride, but alas, there is too much of me to ever have that experience again. But I can dream, can't I ????