

I would imagine people who never flew combat, sometimes must be wondering what is meant when we use the terminology such as tail gun, nose gun, waist gun, top turret, etc. These all refer to gun positions throughout the airplane.

There are two types of guns. One is a hand held gun, and this would be a single 50 caliber machine gun that is not power driven and would be swung on a pivot. A waist gun would be of this type, and is so named because it is waist high, with the operator standing upright.

The other type of gun would be mounted in a turret and would be power driven. Turrets always had two guns mounted side-by-side. They also were 50 caliber guns. The one I'm going to describe today is the ball turret, which is the turret which I used while flying combat. The ball turret was a big round ball approximately 3 feet in diameter and mounted under the aircraft about halfway back. Needless to say it was very crowded inside, and the two machine guns that one fired were right alongside ones body. They and the ammunition magazines took up a great portion of the turret.

There also was a massive sophisticated, computerized gun sight that also took a good portion of the room. While operating the turret the operator would be in a fetal position, his knees would be bent almost tight against the chest and his elbows would be bent almost to their maximum. If the guns were pointing straight down he would be in more or less an upright position, but if the guns were pointing at the horizon, he would be in a horizontal position laying on his back, still in a fetal position. While in combat he would be inside the turret for approximately 8 to 10 hours without ever leaving the turret. Conditions inside the turret were not that comfortable because the temperature would be anywhere from 40 below zero to 60 below zero, very crowded. Also there would be a very strong wind blowing throughout the turret.

Most ball turret gunners were usually quite small. I was the exception, I weighed 185 pounds at the time, also I was 5 ft. 11. The only way I could fit into the turret was by not wearing a flak jacket (this was a forerunner of the bulletproof vest) also by not wearing my heavy sheep lined flying jacket, or my heavy suit.

To offset the cold we wore an electrically heated suit, shoes and gloves. These worked out very well but there were a lot of exceptions. For one thing, you sat on a seat made of steel. For some reason, the heat suit had no heating wires in the seat portion of the suit.

Malfunctions were commonplace. For example you would feel a burning sensation and would find part of your suit on fire. The only thing you could do was to quickly pull that portion of the suit away from your body, and from that point on you would have absolutely no heat. Another thing that would happen is that either a glove or a shoe would go out and at that point both the gloves and the shoes would have no more heat. This was because they were wired in series, just like the old Christmas tree lights, when one bulb would burn out, all of the remaining bulbs would not light. I can remember a number of missions in which at least one part or other of the heating system of the suit was not working. Being so cramped for space, one couldn't even exercise. There were many cases of frost bite.

Another bad thing about the heat suit was the electrical cord that plugged into the turret. It was a very heavy cord about four feet long, which was permanently attached to the heat suit at about the waist area. The other end of the cord was plugged into the electrical outlet under the steel seat. I will explain later why this was a very bad feature.

Most airmen did not like to fly combat in the ball turret. This was for a very good reason. It was about the absolute worst place to make an escape in case your aircraft was shot down. This was due to a number of reasons. In the first place the turret was outside the aircraft. It was powered by an electric motor, which in turn drove a hydraulic pump which powered the turret. As a result, if either the electrical or hydraulic system were damaged, the turret operator would be trapped

inside the turret with no chance of escape. Also there are number of gears that drove the turret which could also become damaged.

There are cases in which the ball turret operator could not be released, and if the airplane was damaged so the landing gear could not be lowered, the person inside the turret would be crushed to death. This happened while Andy Rooney was in England reporting a news story. Also to escape from the turret there were any amount of things necessary before one could leave.

First the turret had to be in a neutral position, which meant the guns had to be pointing straight down. This was necessary so as to place the small escape hatch to be inside of the airplane. Next one had to unplug the heat suit cord which was in a very awkward place under the seat where one could not see it and you had to give it a twisting motion to remove it. This also meant trailing a long cord which could easily become tangled (It had a large plug on the trailing end), and prevent escape when time was critical. After I was captured I tried to break the cord, but found it to be impossible. I had to persuade a German to cut it off with an axe, as it always got in the way.

One also had to remove the oxygen hose, your headset cord, your microphone cord, undo 2 hatch bolts, and unbuckle ones safety belt. The next step was to crawl out of the small safety hatch which was about 24 inches across. The turret was so small that you could not wear a parachute inside the turret. So your next step would be to find your parachute, and in a wild pitching airplane it may not be at all where you had left it. It was a small parachute that fastened to your harness by 2 large clips. Next would be to try to find an escape hatch, leading from the airplane, but remember, all during your escape you would be without oxygen, also in most likelihood the airplane would be pitching and spinning wildly, and most of the time headed almost straight down. Most were also on fire. You also hoped that your parachute was not hit by bullets or flak. There also were cases of sabotage, by German agents.

Oxygen masks were very uncomfortable to wear. But without them one would not live very long. They were made of neoprene rubber and covered the nose mouth and chin. They were always very cold and clammy. To keep them operating one would have to physically break the ice that would accumulate inside the mask. If you did not do this, it would slowly starve you of oxygen. Another common problem was that your oxygen hose was plugged in under your seat where you could not see it. I remember one time when I started to feel very groggy, and discovered that my oxygen hose was not connected. Outside of feeling groggy you had no indication if you are breathing oxygen or rarefied air.

All crew members had to wear oxygen masks as no portion of the aircraft were pressurized. Also all windows and hatches were removed to allow firing of guns, so it was rather breezy. As I have stated the masks were very uncomfortable. As a result most crew members would remove their masks long before they reached the correct altitude (16000 feet). This of course would starve your body of oxygen and you would really feel it the next day by being extremely tired. This of course was very hard on you if you had to fly on consecutive days. The masks left a ring around your face due to frostbite.

I am sure many of your wondering what you did in case you had to go to the bathroom. This was solved in many ways by various crewmen. What I had done was to find an old oxygen hose which was about an inch and a half in diameter and run it up and through one of the slots that dis-charged the spent shell casings, and on my first attempt I was not too successful. It worked just fine, except that I had the turret in the wrong position and I was sprayed by my own urine. It didn't take me to long to find out to the correct position of the turret.

The ball turret did not have much protection from bullets, or shrapnel from flak guns. The only protection was a piece of glass about four inches thick and about 12 inches across. This piece of glass was located between the two guns and was used as part of the sighting mechanism while firing the guns. The only other piece of protection was the steel seat on which one was sitting. The rest of the turret was made up of Plexiglas Windows along with thin cast aluminium. None of

which would have stopped even the smallest piece of shrapnel.

Due to the small size of the turret, it had a very limited amount of ammunition. We were always told to conserve as much ammunition as we could, and to fire only very short bursts. One danger of firing long bursts was not only to waste ammunition, but also to keep from burning up or melting the gun barrels. This was always a problem with many of the operators, and as a result, they would either run out of ammunition, or have the gun barrels so hot that they would jam.

This very thing happened to one of the crewmen in our barracks. He burned up three sets of gun barrels, and as a result of it they grounded him permanently. He was so despondent over letting his crew down that he committed suicide. His name was Shorty Sweat. He was also a ball turret gunner, and I knew him well.

I would always fire in very short bursts, and if I were running short on ammunition I would put the switch in an off position and only fire with one gun. When that would run out I would switch to the other gun, I came near to running out of ammunition, but never completely out. They would not allow us to fire tracer bullets because these caused the gun barrels to heat up even much more quickly. Although, I think they would have been far more effective.

Flight crews were a very close knit group. They never wanted to let fellow crew members down. One always felt more comfortable flying with your fellow crew members. In most cases even if you had a cold and could be excused from flying, you would continue to fly anyway. I can remember doing that myself.

Morale was very high. Even though losses were very heavy. At this point of the war, your goal was to fly 25 combat missions. This was the early part of the war and Germany still had control of the air and we did not have long-range fighters. So we had to fly to the target without a fighter escort. During the time I was flying I did not know of a single crew that managed to complete the 25 missions. Although I'm sure that some did. Some of the men kept track of crew losses, and determined that the average missions flown at that time period was 6.3 missions before you were either killed or captured. I do not claim these to be official figures, but rather statistics figured out by fellow crew members, so I am not sure how accurate they are. And I'm sure that many men will disagree.

All power driven turrets had a sophisticated camming device that prevented hitting your own aircraft while you were firing your guns. This of course did not prevent you from hitting another aircraft in your group. In the heat of battle there were bullets, shrapnel, and pieces of the aircraft, both theirs as well as ours. There were thousands of spent shell casings littering the air. Mishaps were very common.

When returning from a mission you could expect your airplane to have any number of holes. These could be less than an inch in diameter to very large gaping holes that you could easily crawl through. If the ground crew had time they would patch the larger holes, but only after repairing the major damage to keep the airplane flying. Such as engine damage or control surface damage, etc.. It was not uncommon to take off with an airplane that was full of holes from a previous mission. Also, propellers with small dents and nicks.

There was a very good side of the ball turret. You had absolutely the best view of anyone in the whole airplane, you could turn the turret in a 360 degree circle during which time you could have the guns pointing straight down, or you could elevate them too well above horizontal. As a result you could see in any direction, both up and down. Whenever one of your fellow crew men were shot down you could watch his airplane to see how many people would bail out. Sometimes you would follow his airplane all of the way to the ground without seeing a single parachute. When you knew the crew well, this really bothered, also one could clearly see the ground, see flashes of light, and puffs of the smoke from anti aircraft batteries firing at you from the ground. Also you could see numerous enemy fighter planes taking off from the ground. Also see where the bombs

exploded and the resulting fires set from the bombs. There never was a dull moment.

Despite all of this, the ball turret was my favorite position; I don't regret flying combat in it at all. All during the mission you had nothing to eat or drink. Upon landing, you went through a debriefing, as to what extent of damage, where the bombs hit, how many enemy fighters were shot down, etc.. I never tried to claim credit for any fighter kills. I am not a glory seeker, nor would I be proud about killing anyone. Also there were so many guns shooting at the same enemy airplane, who would know who hit what. I myself do not wish to know! I do know it is highly probable, as I fired at many that I did see go down.

After a quick trip to the mess hall, the next duty was to remove the guns, take them to the gun shop, disassemble, thoroughly clean and oil the guns, then reassemble. This took longer than an hour. Only then could you retire. This made for an extremely long day. On the day we were shot down, I had flown 3 days in a row. On missions, the day started at 3.30 AM. There were many days when you were briefed and ready to fly, only to have the mission scrubbed.

We hardly ever flew the same aircraft. Planes were usually so badly damaged, that they could not be operational in time. This was if the missions were flown on consecutive days.

On our tenth mission, we were shot down after bombing the target at Aalborg, Denmark. We were already 20 minutes from the nearest land and were over the North Sea, headed for home. We were attacked by a group of J. U. 88 fighter bombers and our number 4 engine fuel tank was set on fire. Periodically there would be a loud explosion and we were trailing a plume of fire about 20 to 30 feet long.

This was Feb. 22nd 1944. During the winter months the water is so cold that we could not bail out and expect to be rescued. The pilot headed the airplane back towards Denmark. We never thought that we would possibly make landfall before the wing would be blown off. There was a loud explosion every few minutes and they kept on getting louder and louder. During this time I had ample time to get out of my turret and put on my parachute.

The B-17s had a reputation of being a very tough airplane. This certainly turned out to be true with the one that we were flying it was named POT OF GOLD. It was a B17-G, serial #42-31377. This airplane most certainly saved my life. Nine of us parachuted to safety but unfortunately my pilot Lieut. Wm. Lavies was killed. He was one of the best pilots I have ever known and I feel very indebted to him.

The wing on the airplane held out just long enough for us to reach land and then a final explosion tore off the wing. The Germans were waiting for us and we were all captured almost immediately. I spent the next 15 months as a prisoner of war being treated in a most inhumane treatment which I will save for another story.

February, 22, the day we were shot down, we lost 76 heavy bombers. All were stationed in the UK and attached with the 8th Air Force.