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Dec

8

1943

The trials of a new USAAF Bomber Group in England



“Battlin’ Betty”

Vega B-17G-1-VE Flying Fortress s/n 42-39847 614th BS, 401st BG, 8th AF Shot down by flak and fighters on the April 11, 1944 mission to bomb the synthetic oil refinery at Politz/Sorau. The entire crew became POW's
Photo taken at: RAF Deenethorpe (AAF-128),



The USAAF would fly combat missions out of Deenethorpe for nearly eighteen months. Parked aircraft at Deenethorpe, England. Closest aircraft is Boeing B-17G-80-BO (S/N 43-38077) (IY-Q) of the 401st Bomb Group, 615th Bomb Squadron. Photo taken on Jan. 12, 1945. (U.S. Air Force photo)

The USAAF airforce presence in Britain, the 8th Air Force, continued to go from strength to strength. They had endured [some heavy casualties](#) as they took their daylight raiding into the heart of Germany and occupied Europe, and tactics were continually developing. New Bomber Groups were still being established in eastern England, arriving just as fast as the airfields could be built for them.

Colonel Harold W. Bowman arrived with the 401st Bomber Group in England at the end of November and began operations in December. Things did not go smoothly at first and it took a while for them to establish themselves, both to life on a base in England and to combat missions.

When he later contributed to the history of the 401st Brigadier General Harold W. Bowman was to recollect the earliest difficulties they encountered:

There were several severe hazards at our new base at Deenethorpe, that couldn't be credited to the Germans:

1. Mud, mud, mud. The runways, buildings, and roads had been hurriedly set down in the muck, by necessity, and it took time to bring it under control.
2. English bicycles. Americans were not used to brakes on the handle bars. Pressure on the front wheel brake control effectively stopped the front wheel, as ordered, but the rear wheel kept on going – overhead. The result was non-combat injuries galore.
3. Weather. “Blind bombing” by electronic means, had not yet been fully implemented, when we arrived, so a clear view of the target was needed for good results. There was a great improvement in that regard, as time passed.
4. Inexperience. Our first efforts in assembling with hundreds of other planes, settling into assigned positions, and reassembling after “bombs away”, in the long stream of heavies, took practice which could be gained only in the arena of combat. Our first mission effort was a failure. We never found the bomber mass, and returned to base, humiliated. (I was leading). But we learned fast, and were soon setting exemplary standards.
5. Intelligence. Big mouths, big ears. It seemed natural to discuss our missions openly. This is a democracy, isn't it? But if the enemy knows where we'll be coming, he'll be waiting for us, and some of us won't be coming back. It soon became obvious that there were enemy ears listening to us.

“Lord Haw Haw”, the English speaking German radio propagandist, (Note: Not only was “Lord Haw Haw” English speaking – he was, in fact, English, and was executed as a traitor after the end of the war. V.M.) took great pleasure in rubbing it in. On the day we completed our first mission, he gleefully announced, in his evening broadcast, “Congratulations to the 401st Bombardment Group, which flew its first mission today, led to Bremen by Colonel Harold W. Bowman, Commander, and returned to its home base at Deenethorpe.” That shook us up, and was a great help in reminding us to keep our mouths shut.

6. Vulnerability to German fighters. The early planners had so admired the B-17, which, when first designed, could defend itself quite well, by its speed and altitude, that fighter escort was assumed to be unnecessary. They forgot that fighters could improve too. During the first year of combat, American bomber forces took tragic losses. Available fighters were too “short-legged” to follow the bombers all the way in to far away targets that had to be destroyed.

The arrival of the P-51 Mustang saved the day. The 401st crews were lucky:- We arrived about the same time as the Mustangs. I recall the first briefing we attended, as guests of the 351st Group at Polebrook. When the briefing officer uncovered the route map, revealing a deep penetration, there was deep silence. Long faces. Then he announced fighter escort all the way in and out. Pandemonium broke loose. The crews jumped to their feet and shouted their joyous relief.

7. Assembly problems. Fighter pilots could fly formation thru clouds. Bombers could not, safely, because they were more cumbersome, and too large. They were so big that pilots sat too far apart to see next door. So we had to climb individually thru the clouds, and assemble on top, using radio locators. Although surprisingly successful, it was complicated and time consuming, thus requiring more fuel consumption. And that reduced the payload and range.

8. Cold. Piloting, pounding radio keys, firing hand-held machine guns, dispensing first aid, repairing damage, and fingering sensitive bomb sights or navigation equipment, while encumbered with heavy clothing and oxygen lines, was extremely difficult. To make matters worse, bathroom facilities were a few hundred miles away. "Relief tubes" soon froze up. If time permitted, flak helmets, canteens, or condoms would serve. If not, the clothing itself would have to do. At 50 below zero? During the first few missions, we had more men in the hospital from frozen buttocks than from enemy action.

You can read much more about the 401st at 401bg.org.



The con trails of USAAF B-17 Flying Fortresses on their way to bomb Germany.



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G.H.W. Bush

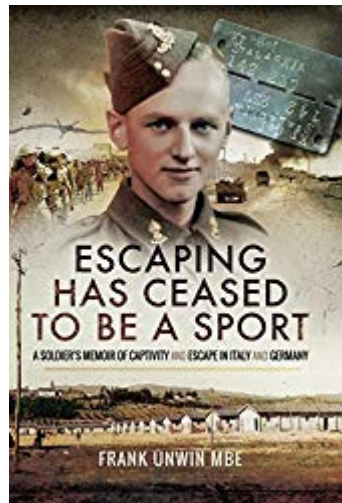
Lieutenant Junior
Grade George H.W.
Bush, USN, pilot
from Torpedo
Squadron Fifty One
(VT-51) pictured in
mid-1944.

Leading one section of a four-plane division in a strike against a radio station, Lieutenant, Junior Grade, Bush pressed home an attack in the face of intense anti-aircraft fire. Although his plane was hit and set afire at the beginning of his dive, he continued his plunge toward the target and succeeded in scoring damaging bomb hits before bailing out of the craft.

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