

My Wartime Experience

Andy Widness

I'm writing this so my children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, etc. will know what I did during WWII. My grandfather fought in the Civil War, but no one in our family knows what he did, and I don't want that to happen to me.

About 3 weeks before Japan bombed Pearl Harbor my draft number came up and I went for my physical, which I passed, so I knew that I would be called up soon. Two months after the war started, I went to Camp Upton in Yaphank, LI, where I underwent tests and examinations of all kinds. I must have done well because they asked me if I wanted to be a pilot. I said, "No", as I knew nothing about aviation or planes. The recruiting officer said if I ever changed my mind to tell my commanding officer. They put me in the Army Air Corps and shipped me to Keesler Field, in Biloxi, MS. I was at Camp Upton only for a week. We went by troop train to Keesler which took 3 days.

At Keesler Field we drilled and exercised and had K.P. (Kitchen Police) duty which I hated. A buddy of mine from Westchester County, NY, who was waiting to be called into pilot training said if I became a pilot I wouldn't ever to wash pots and pans again. So after 3 months when I was shipped out to Chanute Field, Urbana, IL, I told my commanding officer that I had changed my mind and wanted to be a pilot. I was at Chanute for 2 months, learning about airplane mechanics. Then I was shipped to Kelly Field near San Antonio, TX where we learned more about planes, our own and the enemy's.

I then went about 50 miles away to Randolph Field where I became a "Cadet" instead of a "Private". At Randolph we lived in nice brick buildings instead of tents and wooden barracks as we had at Keesler and Chanute. There were 2 of us cadets to a room, and we had to keep it clean at all times.

Our Cadet class was 42X. X was for "experimental". We were to be trained in flying for only 3 months, whereas all the other classes flew for 6 months before earning their "wings" or "commissions". The reason for this accelerated training was that the war effort needed pilots desperately but there weren't enough instructors to train them. Everybody in our class would become instructors to help produce more pilots. (Before the war we were a peace loving nation and did not want to get involved in other nation's wars, so we had only a very small air force and army, nowhere near enough to fight a war of the scale of WWII.)

My instructor was Lt. Victor Poole from Maryland – very nice – and he taught me how to fly. After about 7 hours of flying with him I "soloed" by myself. After 3 months I had about 180 hours of flying time and graduated, becoming a 2nd LT.

Life at Randolph was rigorous and harsh. There were West Pointers there who gave out "gigs" or demerit points for infractions of all kinds. If a cadet got a lot of gigs he had to march up and down the flight line for hours depending on the number of gigs he accumulated. I was lucky and never had to walk up and down. We also had a lot of calisthenics, classes, etc. so we didn't have much free time.

There were about 230 of us who graduated, which was about half the number who began the class. Many who washed out and didn't qualify as pilots went on to become navigators and bombardiers.

I remember Pres. Roosevelt came to Randolph and we all stood at attention as he rode by in his car. We also had the Secretary of War, Stimpson, and other dignitaries come by to see how we were doing.

We had two cadets killed a week before graduation when they crashed into each other while landing their planes. They were the only casualties during the 3 months we were at Randolph Field.

Our graduation was at a big auditorium in San Antonio and Hap Arnold, commanding General of the Army Air Force gave the address.

About 10 of us newly commissioned officers went to Blackland Air Force base in Waco, TX, 100 miles north of San Antonio, to be instructors in twin engine advanced cadet training. Since we had only flown single engine planes we had to learn to fly these two engine planes, which took a couple of months, and then they gave me 6 cadets and I taught them how to fly them. My 6 cadets graduated, and then I taught 6 new cadets who also graduated after 2 months.

I remember I had to ditch my plane once because my landing gear was broken. I raised the wheels and slid the plane on its belly in a dirt airfield. There wasn't too much damage - the propeller was bent and had to be replaced - and the plane was flying again a month later.

This brought us into June 1943 and by this time the air force had enough instructors so they asked for volunteers for combat. I didn't know the casualty rates in combat were as high as they were since the government didn't publish them at that time, so I volunteered since I wanted to fight the enemy.

By this time I had been in the service for 16 months and had never had a "leave" or vacation, so they gave me two weeks off and I traveled by train back home to Brooklyn to see my folks and we all went to Lake Raponda.

I returned briefly to Waco after my vacation and from there went another 100 miles north to Fort Worth Air Field where I learned to fly the B-24 Liberator plane. That was quite an experience since the plane was so large and a big jump from the small

planes I had flown up to that point. The B-24's had 4 engines and weighed over 56,000 lbs. Some test pilots said that it was the hardest airplane to fly ever made.

Then I went to Davis-Montham Air Field near Tucson, AR where I picked up my 10-man crew. We flew mainly navigation flights and after a month we went to Alamogordo, NM where we practiced bombing and shooting at a sleeve carried by a small plane. That was a very dry and sandy place. Sand was always blowing into our tents and cots.

From there we went to Charleston, SC and mostly practiced formation flying with many other B-24s. I remember landing at Havana, Cuba where many of the crew members bought cheap liquor, but not me.

I was at these 4 airfields for about a month and a half each which brings us to the end of January 1944 when we picked up our plane at Mitchell Field on LI. We were there 3 days so I got to see my folks again.

From Mitchell Field we flew to West Palm Beach, FL – Morrison Field. We stayed there one night and then got our sealed orders on where to go - Italy. We flew first to Trinidad, then to Brazil, and then across the Atlantic to Dakar in Africa at night. My navigator had to use the stars to get us to our destination. Then we headed on to Morocco, and then to Tunis and finally to Italy.

We were assigned to the 449th bomb group at Grottaglia, Italy. The 15th Air Force at that time consisted of 4 B-24 bomber groups – 98th, 376th, 449th and 450th. Each group had about 60 planes, and there were 4 squadrons in each. Our group started their bombing missions beginning in early Jan. 1944. We were a replacement crew, getting there a month and a half later.

We had to pitch our own tents – the 4 officers (me as the pilot, the co-pilot, bombardier, and navigator) had one tent and the 6 gunners had the other one. We put in flooring from boards that we found and a stove – a 25 gallon barrel which burned gasoline.

A week after arriving we flew our first mission. It was on February 22, 1944. That day was one of the worst days of my life, but it was also one of the best, as I felt the Spirit of God in my life as never before. The target to bomb was the Messerschmidt airplane factory in Regensburg, Germany. It was also my mother's birthday and I remember thinking that if I were killed that day that her birthday in the future would be sad instead of glad.

We were flying in formation, 4 miles up in the air, and everything was going well until we got within sight of the target. Ahead of us was a black cloud which was getting blacker as more flak (anti-aircraft fire) was exploding on the bomb group ahead of us. I knew I had to fly into that flak to drop my bombs.

I told myself to be brave but I only got more scared. The closer I got to that black cloud the more afraid I was. Finally it got so bad I started to panic. There I was, flying an airplane with 9 other men on board who were depending on me, and I was slowly going out of my mind. I finally realized that I didn't have the courage to go on and I needed help. Then I did what I should have done earlier – I prayed. The most wonderful thing happened – I was no longer afraid. It was a miracle. I didn't have to wait 30 seconds for the prayer to be answered, not even 10 seconds or 5 seconds. It was answered immediately.

I didn't have the time or thought to compose a great prayer, but I simply asked God to be with me. That's when His Spirit came upon me and calmness returned to me, so that I was able to fly the plane again with my fears relieved. I flew through that black cloud knowing that God was with me. We dropped our bombs and returned to our base safely, although 4 of our planes did not return. Thereafter, I depended on God and not myself, and always prayed whenever danger presented itself.

We had lots of rain during March which prevented us from flying as we had dirt runways and our heavy bombers would sink in the mud, making takeoffs impossible. We managed to fly 5 missions in March, mostly at the end of the month. There were 17 days we couldn't fly on account of the wet field.

Then the weather became perfect and we flew 11 missions in April, and 16 in May, and 3 in June. In the latter part of April we went to the rest camp at San Cesaria which was the southern most point at the heel of Italy. We were there for a week and slept on nice beds with sheets.

Our losses during these bombing missions were great. On April 4, 1944 our squadron, consisting of 15 planes, sent 7 planes to bomb Bucharest, Romania. Only 2 planes returned so we lost one-third of our squadron in one day. I was not scheduled to fly that day as our plane was having an engine change (friendly-fire bullets in our # 2 engine a few days before). As a result they used 3 of my crew to fill in for missing personnel on other crews. One was on one of the planes that returned but the other two were killed when their planes were shot down.

I bombed the Ploesti oil field, the main source of German oil, making it one of our most important targets, 4 times. In total the US lost 367 bombers over Ploesti. Other bombing targets included railroad yards, German troops, airplane and ball-bearing factories, airfields, and submarine pens, et al, in a total of 8 countries - Germany, Austria, Romania, Italy, France, Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria

My roughest mission was over Ploesti when some German fighter planes had a running battle with us for half an hour and our group lost 5 planes. The gunners on my crew claimed that they shot down 4 German fighters. I also remember after another bomb run we were turning around to return home and we were flying into the sun. Two German fighters with guns blazing shot down the planes on my wing.

In the first 5 months of operations flying out of Italy our squadron lost 20 planes (11 of the originals and 9 replacements). At the start we had P-38 and P-47 fighter planes to escort us to the targets but because they carried less fuel they couldn't fly as far or accompany us all the way. This was unfortunate because it was near the target that the German fighters would attack us. In the beginning of May we got the new P-51 Mustangs to escort us all the way. They would fight in the sky with the German fighters and the only thing we had to worry about was the flack, or anti-aircraft fire, from the ground.

Finally on June 6, 1944, which was also D-Day (the day the Allies landed at Normandy, France to free the European continent) we completed our 51st mission. Usually 50 missions was the limit for combat flights. (Actually I was on a total of 37 flights or sorties, but some missions, for example to Ploesti or some other heavily defended target, were so dangerous that they counted double towards the requirement).

That was the end of my combat experience. Just a month and a half after I flew my last mission the plane I had been flying was shot down. The pilot and 7 crew members parachuted out and were POWs. Two crew members were killed. With so many planes having been shot down, and our surviving, I felt God was with us.

Then our crew went to Naples and awaited a convoy of ships to take us back to the US. We landed at Newport News, VA at the end of July and went to nearby Patrick Henry Camp for a couple of days before going home to Brooklyn. Again my folks and I went to Vermont for a month. Then I reported to Atlantic City, NJ for further orders. Since gas was scarce, being conserved for the war effort, my folks had no use for the second car they owned so they let me take it. I could get lots of gasoline as a soldier.

I drove to College Station, TX but was there less than a week, when the Air Force decided to move me to Langley Field, VA. Bill Arnold, who also completed his 51st mission in the 15th Air Force and whom I had just met, accompanied me to Langley. He helped me drive and we made the trip in a day and a half (non-stop) which was very good as the roads weren't so good in those days. And we got even more gas coupons so I sent some to my dad so he could buy more gas.

I finished up my aviation career at Langley. I was there 8 months and I was flying B-24s so that new bombardiers and navigators could learn to bomb by radar:

When the Germans surrendered in May 1945 the Air Force had too many pilots so they asked who wanted to get out. I raised my hand and since I had so much service time behind me they gave me my discharge right away. I went to Fort Dix, NJ to be discharged, and spent a few days there before going home.

Again I went to Vermont and spent 3 months there recuperating from my war experience. It is a wonder that I survived the war, and I owe it all to the grace of God.