



Boeing's magnificent B-17 Flying Fortress

Long Island Early Fliers Club, Inc.

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Editor: Fred Coste Volume 2, Issue 6

Editor's Note:

In this issue we will feature the Boeing B-17, their crews and the hardships they faced in bringing the air war to Germany. The B-17 was a favorite among air crews because it could take a beating and would often bring its crew home after sustaining horrific damage.

B-17s had a crew of ten; pilot, co-pilot, navigator, bombardier (in the lead airplane), radioman, ball turret (belly) gunner, engineer/top turret gunner, 2 waist gunners, and tail gunner. In non-lead airplanes, there was a position called a togglier, who was responsible for arming and manually releasing the bomb load using a toggle switch, when the lead plane with the bombardier dropped its bombs. The bombardier was trained in the use of the Norden Bombsight and actually flew the plane remotely when they got over the target. The Norden Bombsight targeted the location of the drop using airspeed, ground speed, altitude and humidity.

Both the B-17 and the B-24 Liberator were used by the Army Air Corps as long-range, high altitude heavy bombers. On paper, the B-24 would appear to be the winner by features, but the B-17 was more graceful looking and could fly higher and was much more durable. The B-24 tended to break up when ditching, while the B-17 was likely to stay intact, thereby providing a higher survival rate among crewmembers.

IT WAS A FORTRESS COMING HOME

By Allen Ostrom

They could hear it before they could see it!

Not all that unusual in those days as the personnel at Station 131 gathered around the tower and scattered hardstands to await the return of the B-17's sent out earlier that morning.

First comes the far off rumble and drone of the Cyclones. Then a spec on the East Anglia horizon. Soon a small cluster indicating the lead squadron. Finally, the group.

Then the counting. 1-2-3-4-5.....

But that would have been normal. Today was different! It was too early for the group to return.

"They're 20 minutes early. Can't be the 398th."

They could hear it. Something was coming home. But what?

All eyes turned toward the northeast, aligning with the main runway, each ground guy and stood-down airman straining to make out this "wail of a Banshee," as one called it.

Not like a single B-17 with its characteristic deep roar of the engines blended with four thrashing propellers. This was a howl! Like a powerful wind blowing into a huge whistle.

Then it came into view. It WAS a B-17!

Low and pointing her nose at the 6,000 foot runway, it appeared for all the world to be crawling toward the earth, screaming in protest.

No need for the red flares. All who saw this Fort knew there was death aboard.

"Look at that nose!" they said as all eyes stared in amazement as this single, shattered remnant of a once beautiful airplane glided in for an unrealistic "hot" landing. She took all the runway as the "Banshee" noise finally abated, and came to an inglorious stop in the mud just beyond the concrete runway.

Men and machines raced to the now silent and lonely aircraft. The ambulance and medical staff were there first. The fire truck....ground and air personnel....jeeps, truck, bikes.....

Out came one of the crew members from the waist door, then another. Strangely quiet. The scene was almost weird. Men stood by as if in shock, not knowing whether to sing or cry.

Either would have been acceptable.



The medics quietly made their way to the nose by way of the waist door as the remainder of the crew began exiting. And

to answer the obvious question, "what happened?"

"What happened?" was easy to see. The nose was a scene of utter destruction. It was as though some giant aerial can opener had peeled the nose like an orange, relocating shreds of metal, Plexiglas, wires and tubes on the cockpit windshield and even up to the top turret. The left cheek gun hung limp, like a broken arm.

One man pointed to the crease in the chin turret. No mistaking that mark! A German 88 anti-aircraft shell had exploded in the lap of the togglier.



This would be George Abbott of Mt. Lebanon, PA. He had been a waist gunner before training to take over the bombardier's role.

Still in the cockpit, physically and emotionally exhausted, were pilot Larry deLancey and co-pilot Phil Stahlman.

Navigator Ray LeDoux finally tapped deLancey on the shoulder and suggested they get out. Engineer turret gunner Ben Ruckel already had made his way to the waist and was exiting along with radio operator Wendell Reed, ball turret gunner Al Albro, waist gunner Russell Lachman and tail gunner Herbert Guild.

Stahlman was flying his last scheduled mission as a replacement for regular co-pilot, Grady Cumbie. The latter had been hospitalized the day before with an ear problem. Lachman was also a "sub," filling in for Abbott in the waist.

DeLancey made it as far as the end of the runway, where he sat down with knees drawn up, arms crossed and head down. The ordeal was over, and now the drama was beginning a mental re-play.

Then a strange scene took place.

Group CO Col. Frank P. Hunter had arrived after viewing the landing from the tower and was about to approach deLancey. He was physically restrained by flight surgeon Dr. Robert Sweet.

"Colonel, that young man doesn't want to talk now. When he is ready you can talk to him, but for now leave him alone."

Sweet handed pills out to each crew member and told them to go to their huts and sleep.

No dramatics, no cameras, no interviews. The crew would depart the next day for "flak leave" to shake off the stress. And then be expected back early in November. (Just in time to resume "normal" activities on a mission to Merseburg!)

Mission No. 98 from Nuthampstead had begun at 0400 that morning of October 15, 1944. It would be Cologne (again), led by CA pilots Robert Templeman of the 602nd, Frank Schofield of the 601st and Charles Khourie of the 603rd.

Tragedy and death appeared quickly and early that day. Templeman and pilot Bill Scott got the 602nd off at the scheduled 0630 hour, but at approximately 0645 Khouri and pilot Bill Meyran and their entire crew crashed on takeoff in the town of Anstey. All were killed. Schofield and Harold Stallicup followed successfully with the 601st, with deLancey flying on their left wing in the lead element.

The ride to the target was routine, until the flak started becoming "unroutinely" accurate.

"We were going through heavy flak on the bomb run," remembered deLancey.

"I felt the plane begin to lift as the bombs were dropped, then all of a sudden we were rocked by a violent explosion. My first thought – 'a bomb exploded in the bomb bay' – was immediately discarded as the top of the nose section peeled back over the cockpit blocking the forward view."

"It seemed like the whole world exploded in front of us," added Stahlman. "The instrument panel all but disintegrated and layers of quilted batting exploded in a million pieces. It was like a momentary snowstorm in the cockpit."

It had been a direct hit in the nose. Killed instantly was the togglier, Abbott. Navigator LeDoux, only three feet behind

Abbott, was knocked unconscious for a moment, but was miraculously still alive.

Although stunned and bleeding, LeDoux made his way to the cockpit to find the two pilots struggling to maintain control of an airplane that by all rights should have been in its death plunge. LeDoux said there was nothing anyone could do for Abbott, while Ruckel opened the door to the bomb bay and signaled to the four crewman in the radio room that all was OK – for the time being.

The blast had torn away the top and much of the sides of the nose. Depositing enough of the metal on the windshield to make it difficult for either of the pilots to see.

"The instrument panel was torn loose and all the flight instruments were inoperative with the exception of the magnetic compass mounted in the panel above the windshield. And its accuracy was questionable. The radio and intercom were gone, the oxygen lines broken, and there was a ruptured hydraulic line under my rudder pedals," said deLancey.

All this complicated by the sub-zero temperature at 27,000 feet blasting into the cockpit.

"It was apparent that the damage was severe enough that we could not continue to fly in formation or at high altitude. My first concern was to avoid the other aircraft in the formation, and to get clear of the other planes in case we had to bail out. We eased out of formation, and at the same time removed our oxygen masks as they were collapsing on our faces as the tanks were empty."

At this point the formation continued on its prescribed course for home – a long, slow turn southeast of Cologne and finally westward.

DeLancey and Stahlman turned left, descending rapidly and hoping, they were heading west. (And also, not into the gun sights of German fighters.) Without maps and navigation aids, they had difficulty getting a fix. By this time they were down to 2,000 feet.

"We finally agreed that we were over Belgium and were flying in a southwesterly direction," said the pilot.

"About this time a pair of P-51's showed up and flew a loose formation on us across Belgium. I often wondered what they thought as they looked at the mess up front."

"We hit the coast right along the Belgium-Holland border, a bit farther north than we had estimated. Ray said we were just south of Walcheren Island."

Still in an area of ground fighting, the plane received some small arms fire. This gesture was returned in kind by Albro, shooting from one of the waist guns.

"We might have tried for one of the airfields in France, but having no maps this also was questionable. Besides, the controls and engines seemed to be OK, so I made the decision to try for home."

"Once over England, LeDoux soon picked up landmarks and gave me course corrections taking us directly to Nuthampstead. It was just a great bit of navigation. Ray just stood there on the

flight deck and gave us the headings from memory."

Nearing the field, Stahlman let the landing gear down. That was an assurance. But a check of the hydraulic pump sent another spray of oil to the cockpit floor. Probably no brakes!

Nevertheless, a flare from Ruckel's pistol had to announce the "ready or not" landing. No "downwind leg" and "final approach" this time. Straight in!

"The landing was strictly by guess and feel," said DeLancey. "Without instruments, I suspect I came in a little hot. Also, I had to lean to the left to see straight ahead. The landing was satisfactory, and I had sufficient braking to slow the plane down some. However, as I neared the taxiway, I could feel the brakes getting 'soft'. I felt that losing control and blocking the taxiway would cause more problems than leaving the plane at the end of the runway."

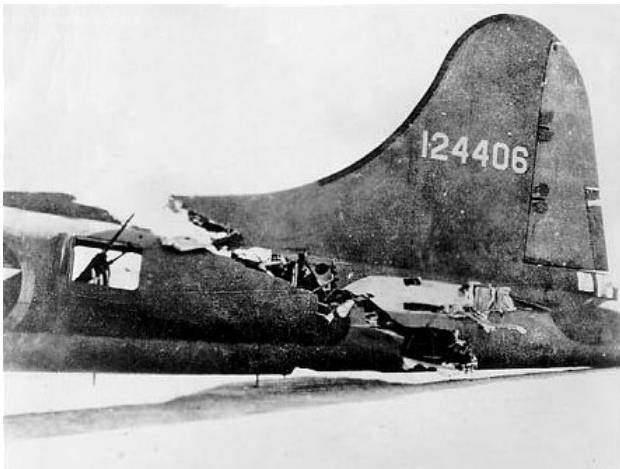
That consideration was for the rest of the group. Soon three squadrons of B-17's would be returning, and they didn't need a derelict airplane blocking the way to their respective hardstands.

Stahlman, supremely thankful that his career with the 398th had come to an end, soon returned home and in due course became a captain with Eastern Airlines. Retired in 1984, Stahlman said his final Eastern flight "was a bit more routine" than the one 40 years before.

DeLancey and LeDoux received decorations on December 11, 1944 for their parts in the October 15 drama. DeLancey was awarded the Silver Star for his "miraculous feat of

flying skill and ability" on behalf of General Doolittle, CO of the Eighth Air Force. LeDoux for his "extraordinary navigation skill", received the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Another example of the B-17s durability



The B-17 "*All American*" (414th Squadron, 97BG) flown by Lieutenant Kendrick R. Bragg, its tail section almost severed by a collision with an enemy fighter, flew 90 minutes back to its home base, landed safely and broke in two after landing.

The Wednesday work crew is making great progress in growing our museum

The tug for the Widgeon is now fully operational thanks to Tom Alferman, Eric Sandberg, Ed McDermott and Ray Kelly. The ignition system needed to be rebuilt, as did much of the fuel system.

Tom found many ignition parts online, as well as a new air cleaner and housing. Eric managed to locate a rather unique, original gas cap that appears to be new old stock.

The tug has done a few short tours on the airport, with many of the crew happily enjoying the ride while we await the arrival of the Widgeon.

The Widgeon's arrival has been delayed as a result of hurricane Irma. Fred Kattermann, our lead mechanic has been at his home in Florida, since sustaining damage from the hurricane. The additional crew members are also from Islip Avionics, one of our newsletter sponsors. They are Tres Whitt and Dave Vives.

Please support our sponsors and say hi to Fred, Tres and Dave when you are at Islip Avionics.

The Widgeons engines run beautifully. Our next work session on the airplane will focus on the hydraulic system and getting the flaps and landing gear working smoothly. When those items are again operational, we plan to fly the Widgeon to Bayport.

We are hopeful that we will be able to start making progress again soon.



The display cases at the hangar are also nearing completion. Special thanks to John

and Tom Hancock who have been working diligently to sort and ready some of our many models for display.

The new display case has about 19 of its 24 feet completed along the north wall of the hangar. Tom and John have separated the five existing sections by theme, which includes Grumman and Republic manufactured aircraft, an airline case and a World Wars display.



The new model display cabinet along a 20 foot section of the north wall.

We are also getting back to completing the television/audio visual cabinetry. Be sure to stop in and check in out....it's starting to look like an aviation themed man cave!!!



Frontier Airbus at the gate at Islip

Frontier Airlines adds additional cities to the line-up at Islip!



Airport Commissioner Shelly LaRose Arkin, along with her staff and Islip Supervisor Angie Carpenter hosted the event for the inaugural flight to Tampa on October 5th.



Islip Supervisor Angie Carpenter and Daniel Shurz, Senior Vice President of commercial development for Frontier Airlines.

Announcing! **LIEF Holiday Party!**

Our Holiday Party will be
Sunday, December 10 from 12
noon until 5 p.m.

We are again holding the gathering
in our hangar at Bayport on an
afternoon schedule, as many of our
members are more comfortable
driving during daylight hours.

We are serving beer, wine,
and soda,
all you can eat food buffet,
dessert and coffee....
all for \$40 per person.
AND

Don't forget this will also be the day
of our Mach Money Drawing

**To order tickets see
page 8 of this issue**

Please support your club!

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BUY YOUR TICKETS TODAY!!!!)

The prizes in our raffle are as
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**\$50 per ticket / 600 tickets to be
sold**

1st prize is \$10,000; or 33% of total ticket sales
2nd prize is \$5,000; or 16.6% of total ticket sales
Two 3rd prizes: \$1,000; or 3.3% of total ticket
sales
Two 4th prizes: \$500; or 1.6% of total ticket
sales

Drawing: December 2017 Holiday Party

Winner need not be present to win

See complete contest rules

We are also asking for our members to
assist us in ticket sales. For every 10 tickets
sold, you will receive a FREE ticket!

If every member of our club would help in
this endeavor by taking just one book of
tickets to sell, we would be able to sell out
all of our tickets in a very short amount of
time.

**To sign up for the Holiday Party
and buy**

**Your raffle ticket, see page 8 of this
newsletter**

Time to smile.....

When "normal" folks do dumb things....
(or pictures worth 1000 words?)



| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Holiday Party Tickets:</p> <p>Please cut out this slip and mail it to:</p> <p>LIEF, Inc. P.O. Box 43 Holbrook, NY 11741</p> | <p>LIEF Holiday Party</p> <p>Please reserve _____ tickets at \$40 each = \$_____</p> <p>Name: _____</p> <p>Phone: _____ Email: _____</p> |
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Early Fliers Club

Long Island Early Fliers Club, Inc. is a non-profit organization founded in 1956 and Chartered by the New York State Education Department. We are dedicated to aviation education and preserving Long Island's aviation heritage. Volunteers who want to help educate and preserve our history are always welcome. Annual Membership in our organization is \$35.00 for individuals; \$50.00 for families.

Donations of aviation memorabilia, aircraft and aircraft parts, aviation clothing, display quality models and items of historic significance are always welcome and greatly appreciated. Cash donations, as well as artifact donations are tax deductible. You may visit our facility at Bayport Aerodrome, Vitamin Drive, Bayport New York most Wednesdays between the hours of 9:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. Appointments are necessary as airports are secure locations and can also be arranged at other times for your convenience. Contact us at: L.I.E.F.C., P.O. Box 43, Holbrook, NY, 11741 or call (631)-523-5407 (Fred Coste) or fax: 631-588-2147

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