

Memoirs

*Lt. Thomas W. Horan
Bombardier
United States Army Air Force
World War II*

Entered Air Force:

*Date: 4/20/42
Place: Mitchell Field, N.Y.*

Commissioned:

*Date: 7/15/43
Place: Midland Army Air Force Field, Midland Texas*

Overseas:

*Dates 11/11/43 to 5/28/44
Places: 351st Bomb Group, England- 11/27/to 4/20/44
30th General Hospital, Manchester, England 4/21/44 to 5/20/44*

Returned to USA:

Date: 5/28/44

Purple Heart:

Date: 2/22/44

Separated:

*Date: 11/23/45
Place Mitchel Field N.Y.*

Active Reserve Duty: Korean War

*Date: 6/5/51 to 11/4/52
Place Mather US Air Force Field
Sacramento, California*

I was very bitter when my combat tour was ended due to engine failure and only three credited missions in eighty-six days at the 351st B.G. Later I learned that engine failures plagued the Allies as well as the Axis Air Forces.

We should have been forewarned as we sailed from New York on Armistice Day on the HMS Andes. Her maiden voyage was to bring reinforcements to Singapore. They were later to be killed or made captives by the Japanese when they overcame Singapore.

As a cadet at Midland AAF Bombardier School, Class 43-10, my Circular Error was the lowest three of one hundred seventy five cadets. Also another cadet and I were selected by Col. John D. Ryan (later US Air Force Chief of Staff), to drop bombs from a B17 that had arrived at our base flown by Boeing test pilots. They were accompanied by engineers from the Nordon bombsight factory and engineers from Minneapolis Honeywell manufacturers of the automatic pilot. We bombed from 10,000 feet and I hit the shack five times in five attempts. The other cadet hit the shack four times.

As a result of my standing in the class and the above bombing in the B17 I was selected to be an instructor. That assignment lasted five days and I requested Col. Ryan to assign me to B17's. I was sent directly to Epharta, Washington, where I was assigned to a crew.

I was hoping to qualify as a lead Bombardier as 1. My high standing in my class. 2, Bombing results in the B17. 3. Being selected as an instructor. It was not to be.

We were a bad luck crew beginning with our first mission on December 11, 1943. The target was Emden, Germany and as we turned toward the enemy coast from the North Sea the number three engine fell off the wing. There was no flak or fighter action. We were ordered to abort. No credit for a mission.

Then came four more aborts and two recalls. On December 24th we were briefed for a target in Germany but as we prepared to board our plane orders came that the flight was canceled. A senior crew took over and had a milk run bombing for the first time the "No Ball" Rocket Sites that were to launch the VI Bombs on London.

On December 31st we were briefed very early in the morning for a flight to Bordeaux, France, secondary target Cognac, France. As we were preflighting the plane 42-37731 a truck loomed out of the darkness and we were told our plane was being taken over by Colonel William Hatcher, Base Commander, who was leading the mission. The plane was shot down and Col. Hatcher became a prisoner of war. Major John a. Baylock, the pilot, was killed when his parachute failed to open.

On January 5, 1944 we were credited with our first mission bombing a German AirField at Tours, France.

On January 7th the mission was to the marshalling yards at the IB. Farben Chemical Factory in Ludwigshafen, Germany. (We were not allowed to bomb the factory, but only the outlying areas because of cartels in Great Britain and the USA who had monetary interests in the factory).

We were assigned plane number 42-29882 "Sharon Ann" a war weary veteran. We did not carry bombs as half the bomb bay had a wooden crate with propaganda leaflets and the other half a filled auxiliary gasoline tank. We got as far as Luxembourg when Lt. Robert Taylor had to feather a smoking #2 engine and we had to leave formation and abort the mission. We were about 18,000 feet and had not seen any enemy fighters or flak. We then lost #3 engine and #4 engine and had dropped to about 8,000 feet. Lt. Taylor restarted #2 engine and we sat above 10/10 cloud cover about 2,000 feet below us. We had jettisoned everything moveable on the plane except for a tail gun and one gun in the top turret. The engineers somehow got rid of the ball turret. Meanwhile I was calling for fighter protection. I remember the exact word "Red Rose to Cracker Jack". A disabled P38 lightning with one engine smoking joined us for protection and asked our Navigator for a heading to the wash. A P47 Thunderbolt with the name "Shorty" on the nose joined us. He advised he had plenty of gasoline and ammunition and would stay with us. He roamed in front of us and went below the cloud cover, alerting us that we were approaching the cities of Ghent and the Ostend, which we avoided.

As they might have flak guns and at 8,000 feet or less we were an easy target. We eventually reached the coast and as both escorting escorts were running low on fuel our navigator Lt. Joseph Norton (who was later killed

over Ludwigshaven on May 24) gave them headings to their bases. I'll never know how Lt Taylor and Co-pilot Lt. James Duffy ever got us home safely.

The next day we were called down to the tower and there was a P47 with the name "Shorty" sitting on the tarmac. Lt. Duffy picked up the pilot, "Shorty" whose name I do not remember, and gave him a big kiss on the cheek.

On January 29th I flew with another crew, the target was Frankfurt. We had just crossed the enemy coast when the #2 engine ran away and before the pilot could feather the propeller it began windmilling and shaking the plane to pieces. The pilot jettisoned the bombs as they were incendiarys. One bomb hung up so I toggled the bomb out and the engineer and I cranked the bomb bay door closed. The pilot decided to ditch so we took crash positions in the radio room. I looked out toward the tail and was amazed to see the vibration caused by the windmilling propeller causing the rivets to pop and pieces of the fuselage were breaking loose. We were so low that sprays of water were coming into the radio room when all of a sudden the propeller broke loose and flew up in the air. The pilot was able to apply full power and avoid ditching. No mission credited.

The next mission was the start of "Big Week", February 20th, a hoped for seven days of continuous bombing. The target was an airplane factory at Leipzig, Germany. Lt. Eugene Welsh, co-pilot, finished his tour on this mission. This was the mission where Lt. Clarence Nelson's plane "Ten Horsepower" was damaged and he was killed and co-pilot Lt. Ronald Barley badly wounded. Lt. Walter Truemper, navigator and S/Sgt Archie Mathris, engineer took control of the plane and flew it back to Polebrook. As Lt. Barley was still alive they stayed with the plane and in attempting to land they were both killed. Both were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, posthumously. I saw the crash as we were circling to land. All that was visible was a piece of wing with a star on it and a tire bouncing over stone walls.

The next day mission was to Achmer, Germany. We were carrying 38 100lb. Bombs 300 in the shackles and 8 were piggy backed on to other bombs.

Shortly after take off in "Murder Incorporated" (I often wonder who ever gave plane # 429850 that name) we experienced engine trouble and flying at

tree top level approached the field from the south. Lt. Joseph Norton and I were in the nose alerting the pilot Lt. Howie Evans, and the co-pilot Lt. James Duffy of buildings and trees. Approaching the field from the south we almost hit the tower and hanger but Lt. Evans had enough power to lift up the plane and clear the base but we crashed shortly after in a newly planted and plowed brussel sprout field. Lt. Evans had alerted Lt. Norton and I that we were about to crash and to go to the radio room. Lt. Norton made it to the radio room but I was in the bomb bay when we crashed. The "piggy backed" bombs broke loose, some went through the fire wall into the flight deck and one apparently hit my arm. I made it to the radio room as Lt. Norton and five Sargeants climbed out of the radio room hatch. I couldn't climb out as my arm was smashed and useless. I called out and Sgt. Orie Vance who was about 25 yards from the plane, now in flames from wing to wing, returned, jumped back into the plane and boosted me out. Sgt. Merle Dillard had also returned and lifted and dragged me away from the burning plane. Sgt. Vance was awarded the Soldiers Medal. The Pilot, Co-pilot and Engineer escaped through the windows of the flight deck.

Fifty caliber bullets were exploding from the heat and one hit me in the right buttock. We were about 100 yards from the plane when a jeep came and lifted me off the ground to put me in the jeep when the plane exploded, 3,800 lbs. of bombs, 1,000 gallons of gas and 10,000 rounds of 50 caliber ammuntions all in one explosion. I was blown over the engine in the jeep and Sgt. Vance covered me with his body as debris rained down. No one was injured as a result of the explosion. Lt Evans and Lt. Duffy had extensive superficial face lacerations, the engineer had a dislocated shoulder and Lt. Norton a fractured finger. Beside the bullet wound I had a fractured left arm, a severely injured back and a head wound.

Another plane piloted by Lt. Ritzema also crashed on take off but there were no injuries. He and his crew were shot down the next day over the Ruhr Valley.

As I was being transported by ambulance to the 30th General Hospital at Mansfield during a blinding snow storm to undergo back surgery and surgery on my arm, the ambulance slid down and embankment sideways and hit a tree. I ended up face down on the floor of the ambulance but I didn't suffer any further injury as I was encased in a full body cast.

Volunteers pushed the badly damaged ambulance back on the road and we drove to the hospital very slowly. Due to the traumatic episode in the ambulance feeling returned to my lower extremities and back surgery was not necessary.

I was returned to the United States and spent eight months in a number of army hospitals. Upon release from the hospital I was permanently grounded from flying status.

The day I reported to Atlantic City, N.J. for reassignment, they had the worst hurricane in their history. We were given a ten day emergency leave.

The crew continued their mission and had to ditch on April 24th and were all rescued by Air-Sea-Rescue.

On May 24th during a mission to Ludwigshaven the crew was shot down. Lt. Joseph Norton and the six Sargeants were killed. Lt. Howie Evans, Lt. James Duffy, and Lt. Roger Peterson became prisoners of war. In the same barracks in the prison camp besides Lts. Evans, Duffy and Peterson were Lt. George Kiley 510th sq., Lt.C.Butrum 509th sq. and Lt. Richard Perkins, 508th sq..

The 8th Air Force casualties were 26,000 dead and 17,000 Prisoners of War. Those wounded numbered in the thousands,

Howie Evans died in a helicopter crash in 1946. Jim Duffy died in 1996 and Roger Peterson died in the 1980's.

I was separated from active service in November 1945.

Despite being grounded from flying and drawing a 40% disability pension from the Veteran's Administration and on inactive Reserve Status, I and sixteen others in the inactive reserve were recalled to duty in the Korean War. All of us had more than a college education. The now U.S. Air Force was trying to elevate the education level of its officer corps. We had so many recalled officers we were tripping over one another.

With no experience in personnel work, I became the Assistant Wing Personnel Officer at Mather Air Force Base, Sacramento, California. The Commanding Officer was General Julius K. Lacey our Wing Commander in England.

Each month I would be asked by the General's Adjutant to remain in the Air Force as a regular officer with the rank of Major. I refused. Instead of 24 months I was again separated after 17 months of active duty.

I married Rosemary McCaffery in 1948. We have seven great children who are happily married to seven wonderful people. We are the proud grandparents of fourteen, four granddaughters and ten grandsons.. In 1987 I retired as Vice President with Swiss Re N.A...