

### Thirty Minutes over Albany

On August 10, 2005, I took a flight back into time. No, I didn't get into a DeLorean with Michael J. Fox or re-invent H. G. Wells' time machine; I took a ride in a vintage 1943 B-17.

My wife, Barbara, was listening to the radio and had heard that a B-17G, *The Sentimental Journey*, was visiting Albany International Airport this week courtesy of the Commemorative Airforce, a volunteer organization that restores and exhibits vintage aircraft all over the USA. As a former history major, it didn't take much urging on her part to get me to go see this Boeing four engine propeller-driven bomber which was known as the "Flying Fortress". Designed in 1934 and operational in 1939, it was state of the art for its time. Perhaps more than any other plane, the B-17 represented the power of American aviation in WW II. This one somehow had managed to escape the fate of her 12,730 sister ships who were unceremoniously shipped off to the scrap heap after V-J Day without as much as a "Thank You".

So, Barbara and I went off to Albany airport with my 88 year old mother in tow. To my everlasting surprise, when we arrived we found out that rides were available. At first I was a little bit hesitant, but again it didn't take much from Barbara and mom to persuade me to go aloft and "fly back into time."

As I stepped aboard the plane and took my seat in the bombardier's bubble, the first thing I noticed was how cramped the plane was. It really shouldn't have surprised me since the aircraft was only 75 feet long and has a wingspan of 103 feet, or about the length of the Wright brothers' first flight. I had to crawl to get into the nose compartment. I could not stand up. While bending forward, I had to pick my way forward over the navigator's small swivel seat to my own miniature eight-inch square seat with a tiny four-inch backrest. I had to avoid overhead navigational and bomb ranging equipment and the massive protruding receivers of two 50 Caliber machine guns. The two-man compartment was six feet long, four feet wide and not five feet high. I was in a glass bubble protruding from the very nose of the plane. The navigator, who sat on a jump seat no bigger than the top of a barstool, had a small works table, 2' X 3' attached to the port wall.

Once I had buckled myself in I was surrounded on all sides by protruding metal equipment, which if I did not take care to avoid, would hit my head as I swiveled around in the chair. There was a Norden bombsight in front of me that was about two and a half feet high and that had dials, adjusting wheels, sights, mirrors and all sorts of gismotrons and thingamabobs attached to it that made it both incomprehensible and alluring at the same time. It pressed upon my knees and made it impossible to stretch my legs. Attached to the skin of the plane just above my right ear was a bomb chart denoting the proper bombsight settings for 500, 600, 800 and 1000 pound bombs. To my right and left, about the height of my ears, were two 50 Caliber machine guns protruding through the ship's skin. The thought of those guns, which fired a six inch cartridge, going off in my ears as I was attempting to lock in on a target, was beyond my comprehension. The metal belts of ammunition dropped from the heavy receivers through the floors to hidden cartridge boxes below. Above my left ear was an intercom box and above my head was a maze of electrical wires and tubing that trailed rearward into the dark cavern of the plane. Oh, didn't I mention there were virtually no lights. All this further condensed the space allotted to me and aroused a justifiable feeling of claustrophobia.

The skin of the plane was made from 12 X 6 inch 1/4 inch aluminum rectangles held together with an unimaginable amount of rivets probably placed there by the real "Rosie the Riveter". There are no windows to open and the thin hull of the plane absorbed the sun's heat

most efficiently and radiated it into the stuffy and humid compartment. Only a small space around protrusion of the machine gun barrels and a three-inch hole in the bubble let in some welcome cool air. It didn't take long for the heat and humidity to build up. The air soon was perfumed with the smell of oil, gasoline and body sweat. I looked out and could see my mother and Barbara smiling and waving at me oblivious to my increasing physical discomfort.

I was relieved when the engines began to turn over as only "props" do and could not contain my excitement when we began to taxi down to the end of the runway. Even though I had flown propeller driven aircraft before in several 17-hour transatlantic flights to and from Italy in the 1950's, I was unprepared for what happened next. As we taxied onto the runway and stopped, the pilot revved up the engines to a deafening pitch that shook the plane in such a way that one thought the aircraft had developed Parkinson's disease. I couldn't hear myself think over the whine of the engines. The stationary plane strained and rocked against the brakes as the pilot increased the engines' RPM's. I could not communicate with the man sitting only two feet behind me in the navigator's chair. My stomach began to churn with the shaking of the plane and I was fearful that I was going to have an accident. I grabbed the machine guns just to stabilize myself.

Racing through my mind was this: "How could anyone have endured this for 10 hour missions?" Finally, when I thought the rivets were going to pop and my eardrums were going to burst, we began to lumber down the runway. It was like slow motion. We did not pick up speed like a jet nor did I feel any "G" forces. Cruising speed for a B-17G is 160-170 MPH, not even respectable for an average NASCAR racer.

We started to chew up tarmac and the end of the runway began to slowly loom up more and more clearly in my vision. As I was going to be the first one to possibly reach that point as the pilot and co-pilot were in their upper compartment above and behind me, I began to experience a sense of immediate personal danger. Just as quickly, my concerns were alleviated. I realized we were no longer in contact with the ground and had probably been in the air for awhile. I had never noticed the moment of liftoff and we continued to ascend gradually unlike the sharp angle of a jet plane.

Soon we were scooting over treetops and rooftops to the amazement of suburban housewives who were looking up from their backyards at this dinosaur in the sky and wondering, "What the hell is that?"

Little did these women know that 60 years ago Europeans looked up into the sky at a formation of hundreds of these ships and they recognized them for what they were and knew what was about to befall their cities.

As I was seated forward of everything else on the plane in this glass bubble which enclosed the front of the plane, I had a bird's eye view of the passing ground below. Even from several thousand feet, our slow airspeed made the landscape scroll slowly beneath the bombsight protruding in front of me. It didn't take long for me to play bombardier by lining up an oncoming building as an imaginary target. When it disappeared beneath the bombsight, I would squeeze the bomb trigger on my right and pretend that I had destroyed a Nazi factory with my 17,600 bomb load.

Very shortly, however, it dawned on me that if our slow speed and low ceiling made it easier for us to hit a stationary target on the ground, then enemy AA fire could just as easily target us. Also, enemy fighters, which could reach speeds of 350 MPH or more, made us sitting ducks. In 1942 and 1943 these planes had no fighter support, which is why over 3,700 B-17's with 10 man crews were lost in combat during WW II.

*delete* I was shocked back to reality when the flight engineer said our time was up in the bubble and we had to rotate back to the aft compartment. Crawling out of the bubble and into radio area that is below the pilot's compartment, was awkward, but doable. Then I had to negotiate the "Bomb Bay". The bomb bay is a windowless dark compartment between the wings that is about 15 feet long. One has to walk along a **SIX-INCH** slippery metal walkway while holding on to the overhead ship's ribs and compensating for the plane's rolling and dipping. One must be careful not fall either right or left into the bomb racks or, if you lose your balance, grab the guide wires from the pilot's compartment that strung like guitar strings above your head and attach to the ailerons and rudder. I was told that if I slipped and grabbed one or more of those lines, my weight pulling down on them as I dangled in the bomb bay racks, could cause the plane to either go into sharp bank or a steep dive.

With trepidation I successfully navigated that narrow path with as much skill as Baryshnikov on his best night. At the end of the walkway was a step down to the top of the "Ball Turret". This was a hideous place to be on an eight to ten hour mission. A ball turret was a Plexiglas sphere set into the belly of a B-17 and protruded below the fuselage. It was inhabited by two 50 caliber machine-guns and one man: a short, small man without a parachute. When this gunner tracked a fighter attacking his bomber from below, he revolved the turret; hunched upside-down in his little sphere and exposed to the world. He looked like the fetus in the womb.

I spent the rest of the flight seated on a canvas seat, akin to a beach chair attached to the fuselage that served as a landing and take off seat for the waist gunners. These men, one on each side of the plane, stood up in the plane aft of the wings and fired machine guns at incoming enemy fighters through a two-foot by three-foot hole in the fuselage. When I looked back into the tail of the plane, I saw a jumble of struts. However, tucked into the very rear of the fuselage was the tail gunner's station. As the plane's fuselage narrowed as it approached the tail, it became apparent to me that the tail gunner sat in what appeared to be the narrow end of a cornucopia. While over enemy territory, this poor guy had to KNEEL in the rear of the plane manning his twin 50 Caliber machine guns. Because the plane sported 13 50 caliber machine guns, it was supposed to be an impervious target for enemy aircraft and thus the nickname: "Flying Fortress".

While it may have been a difficult target for the enemy, it was not luxurious for the crew. Heat was a frill. At 22,000 feet, the non-pressurized-cabin temperature dropped to 20 below zero or more. The crew had to wear sheep skin jackets, pants, gloves and caps to prevent frostbite. To say that normal conditions were uncomfortable is a gross understatement. Abnormal conditions must have bordered on the unthinkable.

At cruising speed the ride soon became routine and the vibrations and the noise were commonplace. I soon fell into an unconscious habit of walking with the sway of the plane and to speak above the roar of the engines. We made a wide banking turn as the engines increased their pitch to an ear-splitting whine as the plane surged forward in response to the power of the four 9 cylinder air cooled 1200 horsepower engines. Our time in the Twilight Zone of 1943 was coming to an end.

Landing was as smooth as silk. As we taxied to the terminal, one could but wonder at what those young men went through for 20, 30, 40 or 50 missions sixty years ago. It is not too difficult to cast those fliers as heroes who fought the discomfort of 10 hour flights, the between mission boredom, the death and wounding of comrades and the sheer terror of combat.

In descending from the aircraft I had a tear in my eye. Having the opportunity to fly on a B-17 was something I will never forget.

**From:** "Ronald Berti" <RBERTI@nycap.rr.com>

**To:** "McSherry, Mikki" <mikki\_mcsberry@yahoo.com>, "Kovacs, Robert" <robert.kovacs@us.hsbc.com>, "Geist, Alan Robert" <n2slb@aol.com>, "French, Mary D." <mary\_french@juno.com>, "DeMetro, James" <profdemetro@hotmail.com>, "DelGrosso-work, Lisa" <LDelGrosso@herald.com>, "Delgrosso, Diana" <cynara36@hotmail.com>, "Brandner, Sandy" <sandybrandner@optonline.net>

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This week there was a vintage, 1943, B-17 bomber at Albany Intl. airport. I went over and was lucky enough to take a ride.

Attached is my thoughts on "going back in time" to WW II.

Ron