Bomber pilot tells plane truth

Clem R. Haulman lives on Bambi Street in Lafayette, a quiet, tree-lined street of neat yards and impressive homes. In his house, though, he has a special room. In it, a model airplane hangs from the ceiling, supported by a thin piece of wire. Around the room are various paintings, drawings and photographs.

All of this has a central theme - the B-24 Liberator bomber of World War II fame. And in October, Haulman will travel back to England for the 50th reunion of 5th Air Force veterans who flew and fought in Europe's skies during World War II.

For Haulman, actually Col. Clem R. Haulman (retired), the room, model and drawings remind him of a time when he flew one of the heavy bombers over the flattened skies of Nazi-occupied Europe.

"The B-24 was a great plane," he said, pointing to the model and the photos. "The B-17 Flying Fortress got all the good press, but the B-24 could fly longer, had more guns and carried more bombs. 'They were a hot plane though - not all like the B-17s.'"

Haulman, a native of Altoona, Pa., began his journey into combat from Lafayette in September 1942.

Like many cities across the United States in World War II, Lafayette suddenly found itself in the business of getting men and women ready for a two-front war. In Lafayette, an aviation school was founded to train future bomber pilots.

"I remember we arrived at the train station and everyone marched us from the train station to the base," Haulman said with a laugh, recalling his first impressions of "a small town of about 20,000 people or so."

From September through November he and the other members of his class trained on small military aircraft, learning the fundamentals of flight and military aviation.

And, he had time to meet his future wife - the former Cecil Breaux of Lafayette.

From Lafayette Haulman went to a variety of flying schools, including one in Blythe, Calif., where he trained as a co-pilot on board a B-17 Flying Fortress. From there, though, he moved to Clovis, N.M., where he began training on the ship that he would fly into combat - the B-24.

By modern standards of bomber aircraft, the B-24 is quite primitive, gunners firing .50-caliber machine guns were its only defense. It had four engines set on a high wing that started out thick at the joint where it was attached to the fuselage and tapered into a thin tip. The crew consisted of 10 men.

Its main protection was flying in large groups and pushing their way through enemy defenses to bomb their targets. They often fought at altitudes of 25,000 feet where the air was so thin the crew had to wear oxygen masks to keep from passing out and the temperature was well below zero. Someone pulling off their mask might suddenly disappear from the formation, nosing down into the clouds and not knowing if any of the ten men on board had managed to bail out.

"The people were mostly friendly on our trip over, except in Iceland," Haulman said. "They were just not friendly people - I found out later that the Marines had been there for about six months and they left the people really angry about their ways. So they were kind of angry with most Americans on their way to Europe."

Once at an airbase in East Anglia in England, Haulman and his crew began their combat missions with the 506th Bomb Squadron, 44th Bomb Group, 8th Air Force or as it became known - "The Mighty 8th."

At their base in East Anglia, Haulman's missions took him deep into Nazi Germany on attacks against Berlin and also inside France.

He said it was a sight that could not be explained to see a B-24 suddenly disappear from the formation, nosing down into the clouds and not knowing if any of the ten men on board had managed to bail out. The Nazis would use everything they could to break up the formations, including firing straight at the bombers.

"There was a saying on the B-24s, though, that if you lost an engine, just look down because that's where you were going to land."

-Haulman


Haulman and his crew settled into the day-to-day routine of a combat crew.

"We'd get woke up about 3 a.m. or so, have breakfast and briefings and then the plane would be armed and fueled and we'd take off," Haulman said.

"Once the 12 planes in the squadron were up, we'd need more time to join up with the other squadrons and then other groups and then we'd begin flying toward the target."

"We'd sometimes be up there eight hours or more. Because of the way the B-17s could fly, they could fly higher and closer together so they could help each other out with covering fire."

"Not with the B-24, though. We couldn't fly real close together and we couldn't fly as high as the B-17s, so we were always in for a rough flight. This was also before the days of the long-range fighters, so we went in alone. Sometimes there'd be as many as a 1,000 planes on a single raid. It was something to see - the whole sky seemed filled with planes."

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Please see Bomber B-3
engine, just look straight down because that's where you were going to land. The B-24 looked incredibly sturdy, but if you had to ditch the plane on the way back — chances are you wouldn't make it out — the hull had a habit of collapsing in on itself when the plane hit the water.

"Still, she was a great plane. She had a landing speed that was almost as high as some of today's jets — 130 mph. When you came in over the edge of the runway, you chopped back on the throttle and down she'd go just like an elevator."

By 1943 the U.S. was flooding England with bombers and aircraft as the allies began preparing for the eventual invasion of Europe.

B-24 pilots were considered luck to survive 15 missions over Europe.

“One squadron of the 44th, the 67th, lost all of its pilots, but one. I don’t remember his name, but it's hard to image those kind of loses.”

The 8th Air Force would end World War II with over 200,000 casualties, including 50,000 dead.

Haulman's luck ran out on his 15 mission when “I lost an engine on takeoff and we crashed.” He came back to the United States on board a hospital ship.

He gets quiet as he looks at a large photograph of his ship, the Pogo and his crew — pointing out the fact that Lt. Harry H. Putman, navigator, Staff Sgt. Glenn G. John, assistant engineer, would both die in action later in the war and that Tech Sgt. Walter E. Dunlop would be interned in Sweden when the plane he was on landed in the neutral country. Three other crew members would eventually be wounded in combat.

“It will be good to go back to England in October for the reunion. There aren't that many B-24 pilots and crews left and we seem to be getting fewer in number all the time. It will be good to go back and remember.”