

GEORGE MESHKO'S EXPERIENCE HIGHLIGHTS
EIGHTH AIR FORCE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
U.S. AIR FORCE ACADEMY
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On June 11, 2004, George Meshko shared his World War II combat experiences with his Eighth Air Force veterans. George enlisted in the Army Air Corps in September 1942 at 17 years old. He trained as a flight engineer/gunner; and became a waist and ball turret gunner and flight engineer on the B17. He arrived in England in September 1943 and flew his 25 missions over Germany/Europe between November 1943 and March 8, 1944. Jerry Nelson, Treasurer of the 8th Air Force Historical Society and former navigator, pointed out that George flew his 25 missions before many in the 8th AFHS started theirs. George was still 18 years old when he completed his 25 missions. He was the second youngest guy to fly 25 missions during the war and the one guy who was younger did it much later in the war.

Arriving in England: When I arrived in England, it was "pretty bad". We were basically replacements for the crews lost in August 1943 from the Schweinfurt raids, where we'd lost over 60 bombers. The bunk I slept in the first night had belonged to someone else who had used it the previous night but who hadn't returned that day. There were only 6 guys left in our barracks (of 18) when we arrived. 70% of the class of November 1943 didn't return. You learned not to make close friends outside of your crew. I am damned lucky to be here today to tell this story.

First Mission: I went on my first mission over Wilhelmshaven. The German 88MM anti-aircraft guns opened up on us and my first reaction was to say, "J---C---, they're shootin' at us!" The copilot, Jay Buttermore, said, "Yes George, they're allowed to do that!" He said it just as calmly as could be. I loved this guy! I named my son after him. He was so calm under fire. Jay had been a flight instructor on B26 medium bombers. He had over 2000 hours of flight time, far more than our pilot who had a little more than 230 hours, total. I have no idea why the Army Air Corps made Jay a copilot. We had flown our bomber across country and had to get a final review by a flight instructor before they'd let us cross the Atlantic. Otherwise, they would have broken up the crew and we'd have all been sent in different directions.

The Second Mission: Someone in the audience asked George, "How did you get back into that airplane for the second mission after you knew what you were getting into?" George said that you got back into the airplane because your crew was counting on you. These bomber crews were like blood brothers, like nothing else I've ever experienced. You got back in the airplane because Billie was going and Jay was going and they needed you there. These guys always told me, "Hey George, we wouldn't leave you in the ball."

The first 30 days: The first 30 days was critical to a crew surviving 25 missions. The bomber pilots often arrived with a total of 240 hours of flying time and maybe 40-50 hours in a B17. They always took off in the dark, usually with 12000 feet of cloud cover. The bombers took off in 30 second intervals under IFR conditions. They then started to circle and climb at 110 MPH and it often took over an hour to clear the clouds. It could take 2 hours to group up.

If you lost an engine or if anything went wrong, there was a bomber 30 seconds ahead of you and 30 seconds behind you and you couldn't see a thing. Accidents were common and surviving the first 30 days was critical to making 25 missions. The German fighters would often meet us over the channel and we were fighting them all the way to the target. Remember too, that you had to take off many times to get a successful mission. Between weather and mechanicals, I had to take off 60 times to get 25 successful combat missions.

Clearing the clouds: When you finally cleared the clouds, it was really strange to watch. B17s would just start popping up out of the clouds all over the place. We were supposed to join up on a lead ship based on specific color flares. One time we accidentally joined up on a B24 Group!

Flak batteries: The Germans used the 88MM artillery to defend targets all over Europe. The 88s were very effective and they used them for tanks, field artillery and submarines as well. When you got closer to Berlin, they also used bigger guns up to 155MM. You could see the 88s go off in batteries of 4. You could count 5 seconds or so and see each of the 4 shells explode right under you. Sometimes only 3 of the 4 shells would go off - we never understood why.

Enemy fighters: When the enemy fighters came in, they didn't stay long. You had only a few seconds to get off a shot. The fifty caliber machine guns that we had fired 850 rounds per minute (someone in the audience said 750) and there were only 350 rounds per gun on board the bomber. To make the ammunition last we had to make it count and usually were firing in bursts of 4-5 rounds. If you just held the trigger down, you had something like 22 seconds of ammunition, so you had to make it count. At first we used tracer bullets in order to see where we were firing. The tracers, however, were light and veered off course, but the armor piercing bullets went straight. When we realized the tracers were no good, we had the guns loaded with 4 armor piercing bullets and 1 incendiary bullet and no tracers. If we hit our target the incendiaries would explode and we could

see the hits. I was given credit for downing 1 fighter, 1 probable and 1 damaged.

Fancy oil in machine guns: The fancy oil that came in the machine guns became really heavy at altitude (60 below zero) and the guns fired real slowly. We replaced the oil with kerosene and the guns worked fine. When we left the states we had fire extinguishers and anti-icing equipment (full of alcohol) on board. We got rid of all the fire extinguishers and anti-icing equipment in combat because they became bombs. Essentially, the combat crews got whatever they wanted and everyone bent over backwards to help us.

Between missions: We got a 3 day pass about every 3 weeks or so. Sometimes, if we just done 3-4 eight or ten hour missions at 50-60 degrees below zero, we'd just catch up on our sleep. Sometimes we'd go into London. Whenever we left base, the crew would usually go together. Although officers and enlisted men slept in separate quarters (12 officers and 18 enlisted men per building respectively) the crews became very close and they spent time together in off hours. There was very little concern about officers vs enlisted guys. In fact, before we went to town, everyone emptied their pockets on the table. The money was split equally and we went to town. We didn't think we would live through it, so we were making the best of it. Money meant nothing.

After about 15-16 missions, man, it was really getting rough! It was about then that I decided I wasn't going to make it. It was really strange, but one day you'd be sitting at a table with 10 guys and the next day only 3 of them are left. The combat crews all had blue patches behind their wings visible to the MPs. The MPs had instructions to "just make sure they get home."

Fighter Escort: At first the British escorted us in Hurricanes and Spitfires. They could only stay with us for about 30 minutes. Then we got P38 escorts that could stay with us until Wilhelmshaven or so. We also had P47s and the early P51s (razor backs) which still couldn't stay that long. Then we finally got the bubble canopy P51s (P51D) with drop tanks. They were great and could go all the way with us to Berlin. In January 1944, General Jimmy Doolittle was put in charge. He changed the way the fighters operated by cutting the fighters loose and using the bombers as bait to bring up the German fighters. He implemented his strategy during February 1944 during "Big Week". It was slaughter, just slaughter. The fighters were able to leave the bombers and shoot up everything and anything they could find on or near the ground. The whole idea was to shoot the Luftwaffe fighters down as they were taking off before they could get to the bombers and to clear the skies of German fighters before D Day landings. It actually worked pretty well and bomber losses went down over time. Doolittle was quite a man and I admired him a lot. Later I had an opportunity as a Frontier captain to fly Doolittle and his raiders to Rapid City, South Dakota for a reunion. I was the first one off the plane to meet General Doolittle at the bottom of the stairs. I shook his hand and told him that I had gotten a DFC serving under him in the 8th Air Force.

My 25th Mission: On March 8, 1944, we flew our 25th mission to Berlin! I thought, "How can they do this to me?" We lost 69 bombers that day, which percentage-wise wasn't too bad since we had 1000 bombers on the mission. At one time we counted 134 parachutes in the air below us. Our bomber survived the 25 missions. We had to land at a repair depot once to get patched up.

Not like Gettysburg: These air battles were really strange. While the battle was going on, it was horrible. There was flak exploding everywhere, fighters coming in and lots of shooting and bombers and fighters going down. Unlike Gettysburg or any battle fields you might see in Colorado, 20 minutes later - it was like nothing ever happened. The sky was clear.

More on Copilot: Jay Buttermore, our copilot, was a real leader. He had over 2000 hours of flight time because of his extended time as a B26 flight instructor. On or about our 14th or 15th mission, it was very rough and our pilot dropped his wheels and pulled out of formation (to signal surrender to the Luftwaffe). We heard a screaming argument in the cockpit between Jay and our pilot. Jay pulled his .45 pistol and stuck it in our pilot's ribs and told him, "You get back into formation or I'll blow your G.D. head off!" The pilot rejoined his formation but did the same thing on our 18th mission. Jay was able to convince higher ups that we should stay together as a crew but they assigned us several pilots to get our 25th mission. Why they kept Jay as copilot I'll never know. Jay actually flew his 25th mission after mine and again, over Berlin. He was shot down and had to bail out. As he was coming down, he saw a ME 109 fighter heading his way and thought the fighter was going to shoot him in his chute. He spun around to face the fighter and figured he would make the pilot shoot him face to face - not in the back. The German fighter sped by and saluted Jay as he went by. Jay landed on a sidewalk in downtown Berlin and was a POW the rest of the war.

Return to the States: When we returned to the states, I tried getting into the Ferry Command, The ATC (which we called "Arnold's Timid Children"). Instead, they sent me to Texas to train on the B29 and head to Japan! The war ended before that happened.

After Service: George used his GI Bill after the war to become a pilot and spent 34 years with Frontier Airlines. He retired in 1984. He said he knows a lot more about what he did in the 8th Air Force by watching the History Channel. He said, "If had realized how important it was, I'd have done a better job."

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