

**THE AIR WAR**  
**A Memoir Of A Waist Gunner**  
**by Frontier Airlines pilot George Meshko**  
*(Taken from a diary kept by George during his WWII service.)*

**#1 - 3 Nov. 43:**

My introduction to the Big League begins today. The entire process would be new to me since this was to be my first combat mission. We were awakened at 0400 by the squadron C.Q. and I made my way to breakfast at 0500. Following breakfast we went to a briefing on the target for the day, Williamshaven, Ger. Then I checked out my 50 caliber gun barrels and got them installed on the aircraft. The ammunition had been loaded earlier by the ground crew. Typically I would have 300 rounds of armor piercing and incendiary shells and this quantity would last 20 seconds if the guns were fired continuously, which never happened. Short bursts were fired and the aim point was never directly at the enemy aircraft. To determine the aim point, the speed of my aircraft, the speed of the enemy aircraft and his direction of arrival or departure must be considered in one's head, since the waist gun was a hand-held or flexible gun unlike the top and ball turret guns which had computing sights. In most frontal attacks the aim point is some lead angle between where the enemy aircraft appears and the tail of my airplane.

This allows him to fly through the bullets as he continues to advance. We have finished our preflight and are preparing to taxi into position for takeoff. Moments later we are airborne in our new airplane 'Skyball' and on our way to Germany. It is quite a sight to see hundreds of B-17 and B-24 aircraft in flight. We had P-38 and P-47 fighter escort both ways and I saw no enemy aircraft. Eddie Shaver (BTG) had a malfunction; however, he field stripped the guns and got them working okay. My thoughts are on the extreme cold as we approached the target, however, due to the very heavy flak over the target I was sweating profusely. I saw a P-47 receive a direct hit and disappear in a black puff. We had no battle damage and the plane flew perfectly thanks to the ground crew. It was great to see England again.

**#2 - 5 Nov. 43:**

The target for our second mission is Gelsenkirchen, Ger. We have perfect visibility and air cover by P-47 and Spitfire aircraft. I almost fired on a Spitfire mistaking it for a ME-109. The heavy accurate flak, due to the clear conditions, downed three B-17s over the target that I saw, with no chutes visible. You could see those damn Ack-Ack guns on the ground coughing away and a few moments later flak bursting all around. I sure did sweat out our return and for awhile I thought I would never make it. Led me to believe in God and I prayed like hell as we went over the target. With all the activity I did not dwell on the losses during the mission; However, I had quite an anxiety attack that night. That damn flak will drive a person crazy. This mission was tougher than the first.

**#3 - 16 Nov. 43:**

Rjukan, Norway and a hydroelectric plant is the target for our third mission. There are no enemy aircraft or flak in our area although some flights are getting flak and I am still nervous about having no fighter escort. We hit the target smack in the middle and then later I saw a B-17 ditching in the North Sea. The flight duration was about ten and one half-hours and it was extremely cold. Most of the trip we were on oxygen and we sweat out the supply of oxygen lasting, especially, when the warning lights came on. We made it okay and overall the mission was a milk run. Gosh, only twenty-two more to go.

**#4 - 19 Nov. 43:**

Back again to Gelsenkirchen, Ger. with P.47 aircraft as escort, both ways, for our fourth mission. Our luck is holding since we have suffered no battle damage to date. I spotted four FW-190s but they were out of range, our guns are accurate to 600 yards, so I did not fire. I am kind of eager to get some shots at an enemy aircraft, however, the only trouble with that is that they shoot back. We had exceptionally accurate flak as we passed over "Flak Island" but the flak over the target was light, when we passed over. Later flights really got pasted. We bombed by PFF and I saw no planes go down.

**#5 - 26 Nov. 43:**

Uneventful inbound flight to the shipyards in Bremen, Ger. for our fifth except for the extreme cold (-67° F). Directly over the target my electrically heated boots and gloves blew out. I suffered some frostbite with the worst of it on my right cheek. There was a tremendous amount of very accurate flak every where. Our aircraft (Skyball) was hit by flak and I dug some shrapnel out and saved it as a souvenir of this mission. Back at the base I received the Air Medal for combat to date. The missions have settled into a pattern. The take-off was always suspenseful followed by anxious moments and boredom as the formation formed. Then the extreme cold as we flew to and from the target. Due to the damp English weather and flying through thick overcast, moisture would condense out and then freeze on the exposed metal surfaces of the aircraft. It had a concrete-like appearance and gave one a weird feeling. If attacked by flak or enemy fighters the cold was forgotten and in fact perspiration would appear during

the heavy combat. Following bombs away it is more anxious moments until we get back to base and land safely.

**#6 - 5 Dec. 43:**

My sixth mission was to an airfield in Bordeaux, Fr. with P-38 and P-47 escort about halfway to the target. The flak was light but very accurate - we were hit in the fuel tank located in the left wing but no fire occurred. The target was socked in so we did not drop our bombs. Just as we came over the target we were attacked by ME-109 and FW-190 aircraft, with one of the enemy aircraft downed, along with two B-17s. Following our return to base from the ten-hour flight, Eddie Shaver, the ball turret gunner, was hospitalized for exposure. Sleep for me is becoming tough since I am having bad dreams, some as bad as the actual combat.

**#7 - 20 Dec. 43:**

Seventh mission was supposed to be to Bremen, Ger. We were recalled due to bad weather so we dropped our bombs on "Flak Island". My ears are giving me trouble as we undergo altitude changes but I guess they will be okay. I was concerned that this mission would not count - it did.

**#8 - 22 Dec.43:**

The target is Munster, Ger. for my eighth mission. The flak is heavy over the target. I saw a direct hit on a B-17 flying on our left hand side resulting in fire in the engine area and another B-17 go into a violent spin with only one crew member getting out, although his chute did not deploy. I did not see any enemy aircraft thanks to the P-38, P-47 and P-51 aircraft that were providing escort. Our aircraft received some flak damage between the three and four engines and another in the right wing. W.J. Owsinski had a piece of flak ricochet off the skin of the ship and just miss his head. A.W. Cook experienced the same thing and if he had been two inches taller it would have hit his head. Again my electrically heated boots and gloves failed, resulting in more frostbite damage. I might note here that the wiring system for the electrically heated suit was similar to Christmas tree lights. If one boot or glove fails they all fail.

**#9 - 24 Dec.43:**

Our ninth mission takes us to Northern France and a target believed to be Hitler's secret weapons site. Uneventful trip until we returned to our base. We had to sweat out seven landing attempts before we were successful. I really thought my number was up on our third attempt. We were about to touch down when another B-17 was spotted directly below our aircraft. Our pilot took evasive action, resulting in our right wing tip scraping the ground before getting back into the air. LUCKY. It sure does not seem like Christmas Eve but I do feel a bit homesick.

**#10 - 30 Dec.43:**

The designated target was a chemical plant in Mannheim, Ger. The flak was light excepting for over the target where it was hell. I saw one B-17 blow up with no chutes visible. I did not see any enemy aircraft although they were reported to be in the area. Probably due to the P-38, P-47, P-51 and Spitfire aircraft flying cover. We had no casualties and back at the base I received my first Air Medal Cluster for combat to date.

**#11 - 3 Dec.43:**

Ending the year with a trip to Paris, Fr. for our eleventh mission. We had P-47 aircraft for cover and I saw a P-47 chasing an enemy aircraft around the Eiffel Tower and I also could see the Arc De Triomphe through the extremely heavy and accurate flak. I had never seen it so accurate previously. We were flying a replacement aircraft that blew the number two super charger prior to reaching altitude and then received flak damage to the number three engine and the oxygen supply to the ball turret blew out. I did not trust this aircraft to get us home. In spite of the air cover I saw a ME-109 shoot down a B-17. This mission was hell and I was concerned that we would not get back. We did our best and just hope our luck still holds.

**#12 - 4 Jan. 44:**

The New Year started with a diversionary mission to Munster, Ger. We were to draw the enemy fighters away from the main force going to Frankfurt. I saw two B-17 aircraft collide off of our right wing. One had its wing sheared off resulting in a violent spin with no visible survivors. The other had its tail section sheared off. Equipment and two crew members came tumbling out of the hole. One crewmember had a chute on and bailed successfully. The other had no chute and perished along with the other eight members of the crew who were trapped in the plane. We survived the mission without damage; however, the collision and resulting losses are hard to forget and I am quite jittery just thinking about it. Following the mission I went on a pass to London. On my return to base I found out that several crewmembers that lived in my barracks were missing since a mission on 5 January. The barracks is really empty now.

**#13 - 11 Jan. 44:**

My thirteenth mission is to Brunswick, Ger. Eight and one half-hour flight on oxygen. We had poor visibility except for over the target where it was clear. Flak was light but extremely accurate. I saw two aircraft go down over the target, one of which exploded with no survivors and I saw Lt. Ford's aircraft go down in the North Sea as we were returning to base. I did fire on an enemy aircraft and saw flames coming from the engine area. Since he seemed to be under control I did not put in a claim. We returned to base with a hole in the left wing and landed in a snowstorm. The Eighth Air Force lost sixty planes today but our luck is holding. Still having the terrible dreams.

**#14 - 14Jan. 44:**

Milk run to the French coast with only light flak and P-47 aircraft as escort, no enemy aircraft were sighted. It took us three runs over the target, because the lead bombardier was not on the ball before the bombs were released and then they missed the target. Everyone returned safely.

**#15 - 21 Jan. 44:**

Back to the western coast of France again for our fifteenth. The flak is light near our aircraft but a few miles off our course it is very heavy. The weather closed in over the target and after two runs over the area we returned to base dropping our bombs in the English Channel. We had no damage to "Skyball" but the crew is tired. When we landed I checked my mail. Ten letters marked with "MISSING IN ACTION" were awaiting me. That SNAFU sent cold chills up and down my spine.

**#16 - 29 Jan. 44:**

Our sixteenth mission is to Frankfurt, Ger. We took off after a "wonder" breakfast. We did not fly with our group as a result of a mix-up although we got straightened out after we arrived at the target and flew tail-end-Charlie. Flak is very accurate and in fact we picked up a piece in our left elevator. I saw three enemy aircraft but they were out of range so I did not fire at them. My electrically heated suit blew out over the target but luckily it did not result in more frostbite.

**#17 - 30 Jan. 44:**

Brunswick, Ger. is the target for our seventeenth mission. There is light and accurate flak with enemy fighters present. Extremely heavy fog, some from our own contrails, appeared as we headed home and we flew for some time on instruments. Our bombing altitude was 24,000 feet and then we went up to 30,000 feet to get better visibility. I saw one B-17 go down with no chutes visible. We were lucky to have air cover because the heavy fog had the formation quite spread out. We returned to base okay.

**#18 - 5 Feb 44:**

Romilly, Fr. is the target for today. We have heavy accurate flak on this mission. My oxygen supply failed and I almost passed out before being saved by the other waist gunner, W.J. Owsinski. The target at Romilly was cloudy so after being almost blown out of the sky there we proceeded on to our secondary target at Villacoublay about three miles from Paris, Fr. We again plowed through the heavy Paris flak but we did drop our bombs smack on the target. Four enemy fighters came after us but some P-47 aircraft chased them off. Then some rockets were fired at the formation and this is a real morale breaker since you can see them coming. I did not see any plane go down and again I got to see the sights of Paris such as the Eiffel Tower and the Arc De Triumph. I hope that I do not have to see these again since the admission price is too high. We arrived back at the base with flak damage but otherwise okay.

**#19 - 20 Feb. 44:**

Our nineteenth is to Tutlow, Ger. - unescorted. The ten-hour flight started with meager flak beginning at the Danish Coast and then with an attack by enemy aircraft. This attack lasted 25 minutes but to me it seemed like 25 days as I was sweating like hell, while playing a ragtime tempo on my guns. Rockets were being fired at us from some DO-217 aircraft, one B-17 took a direct hit. There were 20mm shells everywhere although we were lucky and had no battle damage to our aircraft.

**#20 - 21 Feb. 44:**

We took off for Brunswick, Ger. at 0400 hours for our twentieth. I had trouble with my oxygen supply almost all the way to the target, nearly passing out several times before getting the problem fixed. We battled heavy and accurate flak going to the target with one hit in the left elevator. Following bombs away, ME-109 and FW-190 aircraft attacked for thirty minutes. Our fighters joined the fray with dogfights going on everywhere. One B-17 flying on our right was being peppered with 20 mm shells and had a hole in it large enough for a man to walk through upright. That plane returned to base with none of the crew members injured, as did we. We are extremely tired.

**#21 - 24 Feb. 44:**

Our twenty-first mission was to Poznan, Poland and then onto Rostock, Ger. Flying this mission unescorted we met ME-210 aircraft at the Danish coast followed by some ME-110s. We fought like hell all the way to the target only to find it closed in. We then headed for the secondary at Rostock. We battled heavy flak and fighters pecking at us to beat hell all the way. Following bombs away we endured rugged flak followed by some D0-217 aircraft lobbing rockets in our direction. I saw a direct hit on a B-17 but I was too busy firing away to check for survivors. Then more ME-109s and some JU-88s joined the battle. Once out over the North Sea things quieted down and we returned to base with only one flak hole and otherwise okay. This I believe is the longest combat mission to date, about 1800 miles.

**#22 - 25 Feb. 44:**

The target is Regensburg, Ger. Fighter escort is missing due to a SNAFU condition. A dozen ME-109 and FW-190 aircraft hit us early along with some flak. We had a bitter battle up to the target. I saw five B-17s go down and three others blowup in mid air due to the enemy attack. I believe this is my roughest mission to date. I did not see any survivors from the planes that exploded. I also saw one FW-190 come apart in mid air with the pilot bailing out. Now at the target the weather is clear and I could see four P-38 aircraft battling away with the enemy. Flak is very, very, very accurate and we had hits in the windshield in front of the copilot and one whizzed past my noggin striking the electrical connection to my heated suit, resulting in a cold ride home. We also were hit in the right elevator by flak and the left elevator was ripped open by a 20mm shell that whizzed past the top turret gunner. This is the roughest of the twenty-two missions to date. We arrived back at the base with the tail of the a/c barely holding together but otherwise okay.

**#23 - 29 Feb. 44:**

Back to Brunswick, Ger. for our twenty-third. Eight and one half-hour flight with five of those hours on oxygen. We had perfect escort in and out but over the target the flak was real bad - nothing to be laughed at. I saw one B-17 go down over the target. We got hit in the number-three engine cowling and again my boots and glove heaters failed. In spite of this we returned to base okay.

**#24 - 2 Mar. 44:**

On our next to last mission we had perfect fighter escort from P-38 and P-47 aircraft on the way to Chartres, Fr. as a diversionary raid. We had a bit of flak starting at the French coast and becoming really heavy at the target. On the way out the flak seemed extremely heavy and accurate and I saw some ground rockets fired in our direction. Lt. Ragland and Lt. Smith finished their tours today as we landed back at the base okay. To date we have had 24 combat missions, 3 recalls after take-off, 3 aborted on the way to the target due to engine trouble, 3 that we flew spare and returned to base and 11 missions that were scrubbed prior to take-off. This is a grand total of 44 early morning wake-ups that are not a nice way to start the day.

**#25 6 Mar.44:**

What a way to finish. You could have knocked me over with a feather when I heard that Berlin is the target. The real "sweating it out" started in earnest after the briefing. We took off at 0800 hours and during the formation form-up over England there was some sort of screw-up over a recall. Some crews got it and some did not. Paul Dye, our radio operator, said that he got the recall message and notified the pilot. Some discussion followed and the decision was to continue to the target. We were the only aircraft from the 339th Squadron to complete the mission. We encountered some flak as soon as we reached the coast of Holland. Our escort consisting of P-38, P-47 and P-51 aircraft picked us up over Holland and stayed with us to Hanover where enemy aircraft attacked. Dogfights were all over the sky with both sides taking a beating. ME-109 and FW-190 aircraft were all around and every gun in every ship was barking.

Everywhere I looked B-17s were going down with enemy aircraft strafing them as they fell. I saw many B-17s blow up, a B-24 going down and two enemy fighters hit the deck. In just a few moments I counted 35 chutes before getting back on the trigger and our bombardier counted 140 chutes in one section of the sky. Those enemy fighters would queue up and come through our formation in what seemed like an endless stream just knocking the hell out of us. Four B-17s at a time dropped out of formation and blew up. The light flak over the city surprised me but it was very accurate and just off to our left the sky was black with anti-aircraft shells. The whole show unfolding around me looked catastrophic, I never expected to get back and I was sure that I would never see England again. However, over the target our escort reappeared to safely get us out of there. We arrived back over the base zooming the field as we fired about 200 flares to celebrate completion of our combat tour. Bill Adams, our tail gunner, was using a Very pistol to shoot flares and lobbed one round into the control tower, scrambling the Brass to our delight. Lt. Thompson, the pilot, put on a real show - swabbing the field back and forth.

On arrival back at our hard stand all of our buddies, ground crew and the Brass were there to congratulate us for completing our combat tour. We were greeted with laughter, tears, hugs, backslapping and silent prayers. Then after debriefing and chow we were off to the Combat Club to re-fight past battles, down a few enemy aircraft and to rehash whatever required our attention between drinks. In the wee hours of the morning our "gallant" crew crawled in loose formation, leaving strange contrails, across some muddy fields on the way from the Club to our barracks. Our tour completed, the only unpleasant task in my future was to survive the up coming hangover.

*(Sergeant George Meshko was awarded the Air Medal with three Oak Leaf Clusters and the Distinguished Flying Cross. He finished his combat tour fourteen days prior to his 19th birthday - at a time when 2/3s of the crews assigned to fly these missions were lost in combat.)*