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INTO COMBAT WITH THE 447TH BOMB GROUP

In 1944, the Eighth US Army Air Force was the largest, most powerful aerial armada in history. It included over 400,000 officers and men, and 8,000 aircraft, the majority of which were 4-engined heavy bombers (B-17s and B-24s).

After United States entry into WWII, General Hap Arnold (Commanding General of the Army Air Force) convinced the Joint Chiefs of Staff that the way to defeat Nazi German aggression was to destroy their war production effort by a strategic bombing campaign, conducted in daylight for accuracy. The British did not agree, thinking that losses would be too high and that their night bombing campaign against German civilian population centers (as the Germans had done to English cities in 1940-41) was the best method. But at the Jan. 1943 Casablanca Conference, they agreed to support the American effort. So the British began building airfields in East Anglia (the area south and east of London) for the coming "American Invasion". The 8th AAF began operations with a 12 plane raid against a rail marshalling yard at Rouen, France in August 1942.

The number of Bombardment Groups grew rapidly. One of these was the 447th Bomb Group, formed in mid-1943, with the crews ferrying to England in Nov. 1943 after a short training period. They set up at one of the new airfields (former farmland) near Rattlesden, England. During operations over the next year and a half, starting with their first mission in December, the 447th completed 6,867 B-17 sorties, delivered 17,100 tons of bombs on targets, and shot down 86 German planes (although many more were damaged). There was a cost for this effort: 153 B-17s lost in combat and to accidents, with 97 crews lost (850 men were POWs). A bomber crew consisted of 10 men until later in 1944, crew size was then reduced to nine by deleting one of the waist gunners.

The high loss rates initially experienced by the 8th AAF in 1943, primarily due to lack of fighter protection and heavy flak, meant that a steady flow of replacement crews had to be trained and then sent to the operational Groups. Since the skill and courage of these bomber crews was the reason for the success of the 447th Bomb Group (and of all the others in the 8th AAF), we will take a closer look at one of these crews.

In 1942, there was a tall, thin, young pharmacist in New Bedford, Mass. who had completed one year of college and who was a talented singer both on radio and at his church. Like many other young men at the time, he enlisted in the Army Air Force that June. He was not called to active duty until December, when he was given orders to report to Santa Ana, California for "pre-flight" training (equivalent to boot camp). After

learning about military' life for a couple of months, he proceeded to primary flight training in Phoenix, Arizona at Thunderbird Field (now known as Scottsdale AFB). So, early in 1943, Aviation Cadet Oscar J. Quintin began learning all about the theory and operation of Stearman biplane trainers from civilian flight instructors. Two and a half months later, after completing primary flight school, he and the other cadets went to Pecos, Texas, for basic flight training and to learn all about Vultee BT-13 "Vibrators". (One of his classmates was Tom Poston, who became a well-known comedian in the 1950s and 60s). After 3 months, Oscar and the remaining successful cadets were assigned to advanced multi-engine training at Douglas, Arizona (on the Mexican border not far from New Mexico). They then became proficient in the operation and peculiarities of the Cessna AT-17 Bobcat (the "Bamboo Bomber'). He and his classmates radiated on Nov. 3, 1943, receiving their pilot 's wings, and were promoted to 2nd Lieutenant.

During this training period, Oscar's experiences closely parallel those described in a very readable book, "The Lucky Bastard Club, a B-17 Pilot in Training and in Combat, 1943-45," by Eugene Fletcher (University of Washington Press, 1992)= They only had a short 10-day rest period, and were almost immediately sent to Hobbs, New Mexico, for B-17 transition training. It was quite a jump from the little twin-engine, wood and fabric AT-17 to the big B-17 (even though they were "war-weary" B-17Fs). Formation flying, night flying, cross-country, bombing practice, and classroom training on the plane's systems and engines took up all their time every day for the next 2 months. At the end of this period, B-17 pilot Oscar Quintin went to Salt Lake City where he was assigned a flight crew. They traveled to the Ardmore, Oklahoma, Operational Training Unit where, for the next 2 months, they learned to fly together as a crew.

At Kearney, Nebraska, in May 1944, they picked up a brand new B-17G, and began their long journey to England. First stop was in New Hampshire (at what was later known as Pease AFB), then to Gander, Newfoundland, and then they started across the Atlantic. Oscar was especially thrilled to be pilot in command of an aircraft crossing the Atlantic, because in 1927 as a 10 year old boy in Providence, R.I., he saw Charles Lindberg after his return to America following his historic flight, and Oscar determined to do the same. Now he was flying the same route! On their way to Ireland at 9000 ft, Oscar followed the navigator's course recommendation, passing in and out of the clouds while he listened to music from a radio station. Suddenly, the radio compass started spinning, and when Oscar looked down through a hole in the clouds, he saw a submarine. Later, he learned it was a German. sub trying to lure transiting planes down low enough to shoot at them. But they continued on their way, and arrived at a field outside of Belfast, where they were told to leave the new B-17, which they had thought was theirs!

Newly promoted 1st Lt., Quintin and his crew finally arrived at the Rattlesden field on 5 June. He and a buddy got a pass and headed into London, intending to return to base before expiration of "liberty" hours. They had a really good evening, over-indulged in alcoholic beverages, lost track of time, and then took a subway to the outskirts where they hoped to catch a taxi. They were able to find one without much trouble, because

almost every other military person in England was back at their various bases preparing for the next day's events (D-Day)! The taxi driver took the two drunken aviators all the way into the base to their ops room!

Assigned to the 708th Squadron of the Group, they started flying practice missions around England. On one of these, an RAF Spitfire made a practice run on their plane, then pulled ahead to go around for another one. Oscar made a really tight turn so he and the Spitfire were head on (the B-17G had four .50 cal machine guns that could fire forward). The surprised RAF pilot radioed "Good show, lad."

In the 447th, like many other units, the crews did not have particular aircraft assigned to them for every mission; they flew whatever was available. On 29 June, Oscar flew his first combat mission, as copilot of another crew on a long run to Leipzig, losing an engine and rudder control to flak. The ship directly above him was hit, fell back and then blew up, while one alongside him also went down.. He flew his first mission with his own crew on 8 July to a target in France (a Luftwaffe airfield). They endured flak on almost every one of Oscar's 30 missions, the only difference being how much and how long it lasted! More hazardous missions followed: to Munich (the BMW plant), Stuttgart, Munich; Regensburg (the Messerschmitt factory), and then a tactical mission on 24 July to the vicinity of St-Lo, France, to help the troops break out of the Normandy beachhead area. They were to release their bombs just ahead of the ground troops, but overcast prevented many planes from releasing, and of those that did, some hit friendly troops, due to a premature drop by the lead plane.

Another tactical strike was flown by Oscar's crew on 13 August, and then they were assigned to the 24 Aug. mission to hit oil plants at Brux, Czechoslovakia. It was going to be a long day! They were lead crew of the Squadron immediately behind the Group commander. After dropping their explosive cargo, Oscar felt the copilot hitting his arm, to draw his attention to a major fire from the No. 3 engine! Following standard procedure, and dropping out of formation, he feathered the prop, shut off the fuel and closed the cowl flaps while side-slipping the plane. The flames re-appeared when he opened the cowl flaps, so he closed and opened them two more times before the fire finally went out. They found out later that the fuel line had been cut by flak. By now, they were about 5,000 ft below the formation and somewhat behind, not a healthy place to be in enemy airspace! Switching to the fighter radio frequency (in case he had to call for help), he heard a lot of excited chatter: "What was that?"

"Did you see it?"

"Those German fighters were fast as hell and they don't have propellers!"

This was the first time the 8th AAF was attacked by jets. Fortunately for Lt. Quintin; the Group formation had been descending after leaving the target area, and he was able to rejoin them when they got down to his altitude.

German fighters were deadlier to bombers when they attacked, but the everpresent flak claimed more victims. Oscar's crew was attacked only once, by an Me-109 that was being chased by a P-51. His excited gunners fired at both! On their return from another mission, his radio operator, who was an older, nervous type, said "What a mission-the flak shells were so close, I could hear them whistling by!" Knowing that flak shells are not heard except when they burst very close, the other crew members examined the plane after landing, and saw a large hole directly under the radio operator position. Looking under his seat, they found where the shell had hit an LP oxygen bottle. The noise was from the escaping oxygen. When they showed it to the radio operator, he was so unsettled that he went to the hospital and never flew with them again.

During August and September, Oscar and the 447th BG visited a variety of places on the Continent: the rocket experimental station south of Rostock, industrial plants in Berlin, Bremen, and Mainz, oil plants in Leipzig (twice), and dropped supplies to Resistance groups in southern France (no flak that time!). On 17 Sep., flying in 3-plane formations, they dropped fragmentation bombs on flak towers around Arnhem, Holland, to clear the way for Operation Market Garden gliders.

Flak and fighters weren't the only dangers to the B-17 formations. Usually on return from their missions, southeast England would be covered with overcast, which they carefully descended through, guided by radio beacons from the individual fields. On one of these occasions, Lt. Quintin had told his crew to "Keep your eyes open" and then commenced a 500 ft per minute counterclockwise descent. Suddenly, the left waist gunner yelled "Pull up!" which Oscar did instantly, pushing forward on the throttles, just in time to avoid being hit broadside by another plane coming directly at them!

Finally, it was 19 October, and Quintin's 30th and last mission, to Mannheim. The weather forced the formation to go higher and higher, to 39,000 ft, with the plane getting mushy on the controls in the thinner air. They were still getting flak despite the cloud cover_ due to German fire control radar- Oscar's intercom wire had become disconnected. and while struggling to re-connect it, indicated to the copilot to take over. The crew, seeing his contortions, thought he had been hit, until the flight engineer helped him reconnect the wire. But they got back safely!

The major in charge of the Squadron offered to have Lt. Quintin promoted to captain if he would volunteer for another tour, but Oscar not surprisingly turned it down!

He was awarded an extremely well-deserved Distinguished Flying Cross, got his "Lucky Bastard Club" certificate for completing 30 missions, and one week later sailed on the S.S. Argentina for New York. After a short leave period, he went to Atlantic City for reassignment, and asked to go "somewhere warm and dry". Obviously, instructor duty training B-17 pilots at Hobbs, New Mexico, fit that description, and that is what he did until August 1945. It wasn't nearly as exciting or nerve-wracking as his combat tour, which Oscar describes as the "most intense and memorable period of my life".

Even instructor duty had its moments. In May 1945, one of his new students, while attempting to land the plane (Oscar was in the right seat), settled it in from too high (a "carrier landing"). Normally, the B-17 would just bounce back into the air, but this time it was too much stress for the plane, and when its landing gear collapsed, it just continued on down the runway, finally grinding to a halt! Observers told him that it trailed a sheet of flame 75 feet long all the way!

In September, there was a shortage of hospital corpsmen qualified as pharmacists, and so, based on the pre-war experience listed in his record, B-17 pilot Quintin spent his last weeks in service as the base hospital's only pharmacist! After being relieved by a corporal in November, he became a civilian again.

In post-war civilian life, Oscar Quintin was a pharmacist for a few years, and then was a pharmaceutical salesman until retiring in 1979. He is still a very busy man-- helping the Shriners, traveling, seeing his old 447 13G crew and buddies (if reunions, playing golf and best of all (for us!), being an active Colonel in the Old Dominion Squadron! He still has his Air Medals and his Eisenhower - jacket (seems to have "shrunk" a little!), and his B-17 pilot training manual. "en seeing National Warplane Museum 's B-17G in 447th BG markings at airshows, Oscar admits he gets a "little choked up because he flew three of his combat missions in the original "Fuddy Duddy "" He is completely confident that he could fly a B-17 today, if given the chance (he would go for it in a second!), and despite having a little problem with one eye. Oscar would consider that to be the perfect way to celebrate his 81st birthday on 12 June!!