

COMING **IN** LOW UNDER THE CLOUDS



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*With **his** B-26 crew, Francis stands second from right*

I ENLISTED **IN** THE ARMY AIR FORCE **IN** 1943. My first assignment was for training at an Air Force radio school **in** Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Radio school was distinguished by the fact that the field was on a 24-hour schedule, with reveille (wake-up call) at 12 midnight. Keeping awake during classes was difficult, and if you were caught dozing three times you were forced to finish the class standing up. Getting proper sleep was equally difficult when those **in** the barracks had days off and made a lot of noise carousing around.

When I was able to take Morse code 20 words per minute, I was shipped out to gunnery school **in** Laredo, Texas, a desolate area next to

the Mexican border. At gunnery school, along with weapon disassembling and reassembling, which had to be done blindfolded, there was shooting of all kinds, all day and every day: skeet shooting, shooting from a truck as it traveled a circuitous route, and machine-gun shooting, as an actual rear gunner from A-6 aircraft, where you were **in** an open cockpit behind the pilot, an experience similar to that of a World War I gunner.

That course completed, I was shipped to Barksdale Field, Louisiana, for assignment as a crew member on a B-26 Marauder bomber. There were six men to a crew: pilot, co-pilot, bombardier, navigator, engineer, and a radioman who also served as a waist gunner—all good men. They came from various parts of the country.

The B-26 was a medium bomber used **in** both the European and the Pacific Theaters. It had the best mission-survival experience of any of the combat aircraft, but it required an experienced pilot to get it off and back onto the ground **in** one piece. It was considered to be a “hot ship” and, as with many other types of World War II aircraft, was often referred to as “the flying prostitute” because it was said that it had no visible means of air support. It made up for this apparent lack of support by its speed. B-17s took off at 70 miles per hour, but B-26s had to get up to 120 m.p.h., which made it difficult to control on take-off and landing. At Tampa Bay airfield, where the runway ran to the water’s edge, the story was, “two a day at Tampa Bay.” High attrition during training at Barksdale was due to the fact that green pilots were at the controls, which greatly contributed to the frequency of crashes.

From Barksdale to Stone

When we finished training at Barksdale Field, we were deemed qualified to fly to Europe. We were picked up by Air Transport **in** Homestead Field, Florida. Our first leg was to Cuba, where I picked up a case of bourbon for the munificent sum of \$32. My idea was that we could celebrate successful landings each step of the way—which would take us to Brazil, then over the Atlantic to Africa, and finally up the coast to England.

From Cuba, the next destination was Recife, Brazil, located where the South American continent projects farthest east into the Atlantic Ocean. We slept under netting and were too exhausted to do more than tumble into bed at night.

After Brazil, the next leg of the journey was to the island of Ascension—a tiny speck of land close to Africa. It was a hairy trip,

and although we had gas tanks **in** the bomb bay where we would have carried bombs on a combat mission, the possibility of running out of gas while over the Atlantic was worrisome. But we had a good navigator and we made it.

After flying to Liberia and Morocco, we reached our final destination. It was night when we landed at an Air Force base **in** Stone, southern England. Stone was a large munitions depot staffed mostly by women. Great Britain was drafting women into military service and placing them anywhere they were needed for the war effort.

My bombardier crewmate and I thought we would investigate Stone and found our way to a hall full of dancers—90% of them women; **in** a minute it seemed that the whole dance floor's occupants started towards us. We looked at one another, recognized that we were hopelessly outnumbered, and rather than jeopardize British-American relations, beat a hasty retreat. England was obviously going to be a pleasant destination—although we soon learned of the jealousy of British servicemen, who said that American GIs were “over-paid, over-sexed, and over here”!

At our new base we were assigned to groups and squadrons. The men were glad to see us: we were the first replacements their outfits had received since they had arrived there. The length of their tours of duty before rotation had kept being extended. Tour length started at 25 missions, then went to 30 missions, then 40, and by the time I finished it was 65 missions. B-17 crews flew only 35 missions before rotation back to the United States, but their missions were longer than ours and they traveled greater distances. There was competition between us, and they railed against what they considered unfairness. We countered that they spent a lot of time over “Splasher 17” (Atlantic Ocean) and climbed to a safer 30,000-foot altitude, which took a lot of non-combat time.

Good guys, though.

We flew day-missions that focused mostly on bombing bridges that crossed the Seine. All the bridges (some seemed to be over cow paths) were soon down—from Paris to the Atlantic. This was to prevent the Germans from moving easily to counter the invasion that was expected to come. On some of our missions I was surprised to discover what an important part train traffic played **in** the War.

As D-Day approached, we would drop altitude making our way home, and we could see troops loading onto barges. Some of those poor guys stayed on their craft for two or three days before D-Day, appearing to be headed for Calais **in** France so that the Germans would

think that Calais was where the invasion would be. This was part of an elaborate effort to make the enemy think that General Patton would lead the invasion. It was believed that the German high command considered Patton to be the best general the Allies had and that they feared him the most; where he went was where the invasion would begin.

D-Day eve, the officers of our squadron came into our barracks and told us to get some early rest because big things were about to happen. And happen they did. Reveille was 12 midnight, and as we made our way to the briefing room we could see every plane that could fly being prepared and painted with identification stripes. Our group soon took off, and we found the skies around us over the English Channel loaded with airplanes scrambling into position. It was D-Day, and below us was a wide panorama of ships of all sizes and shapes, all headed **in** the same direction. It had to be seen to be believed.



B-26 Marauder bombers, as painted for D-Day

Our assigned target that eventful day was the big coastal guns on the bluffs overlooking the beaches **in** Normandy. Below us our U.S. Navy's guns were blasting away, and it was obvious that the invasion

was really under way. We were only over our target for two or three minutes, and after bomb release we banked sharply and headed home unscathed. That same afternoon we prepared for another mission. Because of the extended daylight hours at Britain's latitudes, we could fly until almost 10:30 p.m., and therefore very often flew two missions a day.

Our second mission on D-Day afternoon was with Col. Vance, the commander of the group; his presence was considered to be a great honor. Col. Vance had been on Corregidor with General MacArthur, and a story associated with him was that when MacArthur's staff flew from Corregidor, to make weight for Vance on the overloaded plane a hundred pounds of gold bullion had to be tossed out, making him worth his weight in gold. Col. Vance hated the Japanese and believed that the European Theatre was a sideshow in comparison to the war in the Pacific. The slogans in our group during that period were "Take a chance over France with Col. Vance" and "Two a day over the Pas de Calais."

This afternoon mission was to bomb a marshalling railroad yard in Amiens, a town known to have a beautiful cathedral. I remember that the weather on D-Day was terrible, with a ceiling of about 1,000 to 1500 feet. We normally flew at 12,000 feet. Altitude was of course important because the accuracy of the flak thrown up was much lower at higher altitudes: for every 1,000 feet of altitude the flak lost one foot of accuracy, so the level we came in at on a bombing run made a huge difference in the amount of danger from enemy ground fire. On this day, though, we had to fly so low that I could actually see their guys in foxholes aiming their rifles at us.

The usual routine in a bombing run over target was to follow guidance by the lead plane's bombardier. When he released his bombs, it was the signal for all the 36 planes in the group to follow suit. We hit our target that afternoon, destroying a German panzer division on its way to the invasion scene. Fortunately, all of our planes came home safely, although a few airmen were wounded by ground fire. We were put in for a Presidential Citation for accomplishing this dangerous mission; unfortunately, a few missions later, we dropped bombs on our own troops, so no citation.

My job on the B-26 was to maintain radio contact with our base. As we approached enemy territory, I left the radio and became the waist gunner, manning two .50-caliber machine guns, one on each side of the plane. My job also was to go through the bomb bay and pull the pins from the bombs, thereby arming them before they were dropped.

When the flak got heavy, the guys would yell, “Nick, pull **in** the gun!” so they could bail out quickly if we were badly hit; the parachutes we wore were chest ‘chutes that required lots of clearance for a quick exit.

Piccadilly

For relief from stress we sometimes had 48-hour passes, usually every ten days. Those times, we took off for London—where most of us headed straight for Piccadilly Circus and its many “ladies of the night.” There we were, young American flyboys on leave, many of us virgins, dickering with professionals for a new adventure and rite of passage **in** a city far from home. I remember one song that was popular with the Brits at the time. Here I’m including only the second verse of “The Piccadilly Hymn,” as the other verses are unprintable:

I don’t want to be a sojer,
I don’t want to go to war;
 Just want to hang around
 Piccadilly Underground
Livin’ off the earnin’s
Of an ’igh-clas leidy ...

Being a well-brought-up American boy, of course, for my entertainment I headed for the British Museum, with its magnificent sculpture, Parthenon friezes, and great paintings.

After the encirclement of the enemy and subsequent breakthrough **in** Falaise **in** northern France, we flew further beyond the front. Our outfit bombed targets **in** France, and then **in** Germany. The 9th Air Force was a tactical outfit (as compared with a strategic B-17 unit) that supported troops and focused on targets of opportunity. This tactical function was distinct from the strategic function of the B-17s, so we moved from our airfield **in** England to a decrepit French airfield near Pontoise, but this was not at all bad. Now when we had a pass, we could get to Paris instead of London.

The Battle of the Bulge

The big event, of course, was the Battle of the Bulge. The Germans had assembled 1,000 tanks and some crack troops with the hope of dividing the American and British forces and then carrying on to the North Sea. The Germans were blessed by bad weather because the flight ceiling, averaging about 1200 feet, severely limited Allied

tactical air support to ground troops. The situation became increasingly dire, so we were ordered to fly whatever the ceiling, meaning we had to go **in** to bomb enemy tanks. We did this **in** three-ship flights at low altitude and so were vulnerable to enemy ground fire. My leg caught some of the flak they threw at us, but we were able to get back to the field, where I received medical care and thus survived the ordeal.

The weather cleared, and General Patton was anxious to cut off the Germans from behind their advance, so the Air Force was able to start bombing again. War, of course, is a matter of luck and opportunity; we needed both so that generals like Patton could take advantage of the situation.

Eventually, when the War ended **in** Europe five months later, we went back to England and got on a troop ship that took us back to the United States. The ship I was on was crammed with freed American P.O.Ws, whose pockets were loaded with back pay, and card and dice games took place all over the ship. I recall that \$24,000 was **in** the pot **in** one of the crap games—far, far out of my league.

I finally saw the Statue of Liberty and was discharged shortly thereafter, having flown 65 missions and earned five battle stars and a Purple Heart.

*A native of New York City, Francis was educated there **in** public elementary schools, Stuyvesant High School, and New York University. After the War he worked as a lithographic printer and helped establish a large printing company. A volunteer **in** the New York Botanical Garden for many years, he developed a special interest **in** ferns. He is a gardener and raises orchids. Francis came to Kendal at Hanover **in** 1996.*