

# AERIAL WARFARE DURING WORLD WAR II

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War in the air was carried out from both land and sea. The main two theatres of the war were the European and Pacific.

The European Theatre (ETO) was carried out against Germany, while the Pacific Theatre was involved with Japan. The writer of this article was in the ETO and assigned to the 8th Air Force, which consisted of both four engine heavy bombers and fighter escort planes. All were based in England.

The 8th Air Force was divided into three main Divisions of fourteen Groups each, for a total of approximately 2000 four engine bombers. There were almost this many fighter planes. The three Divisions of bombers were B-24s and B-17s, divided about equally of each type. The fighter planes were P-47s, P-51s and P-38s.

Part of the Air Force based in England was made up of medium bombers such as B-25s and B-26s, and some of the fighter planes. These planes belonged to the 9th Air Force.

In addition to the 8th and 9th Air Forces of the United States, England had its own Royal Air Force of bombers and fighters. They had saved England from Hitler's attempt to add them to his occupied list.

It took a long time to get the Air Forces organized, planes and air fields built, and be ready to fight Germany from a bombing standpoint.

The first 8th Air Force bombing mission was flown in January 1944, against Germany and Occupied France. The group we were assigned to was the 453rd of the Second Division. This Division was all B-24s and flew its first bombing mission in February 1944.

A Group, such as the one we were assigned to, had four Squadrons. Each group had its own separate air field. Our air base was named Old Buckenham, and was near Norwich, England.

A crew on a B-24 consisted of ten men: pilot, co-pilot, navigator, and bombardier, all officers; then the engineer, radio operator, nose turret gunner, top turret gunner, tail turret gunner, and waist gunner, who were all enlisted men. All ten men were close companions and depended in part on each other.

Our crew was formed in the States and flew what was called the "southern route," because of weather conditions in the winter. This route was from Morrison Field, Florida, to Fortaleza, Brazil, then from Brazil (the jumping-off place) to Dakar, French West Africa. This leg of the trip involved flying over 1,970 miles and 10 hours of nothing but water. From Africa we went up the coast of France, Spain, Portugal, and finally to England. We had travelled 10,000 miles to come 2,800 miles.

We arrived at our assigned base, Group 453 (Old Buckenham), sometime in March 1944. We were there as a replacement crew for others who were lost in combat, etc. When reporting for duty at Group Operations, we were very surprised to see Jimmy Stewart as the Operations Officer.

After more training in combat technique, formation flying, etc., we flew our first mission on April 17, 1944. Being the pilot, I thought it plenty "rough" and I'm sure the other men did too. We found out later that there were many other missions

much worse than the first one.

Targets for the entire 8th Air Force were in Germany and Occupied France. Only about one-fourth of the 8th flew a mission together to hit the same target. Sometimes this would involve 400-500 bombers. Bomb loads were up to 8,000 pounds, depending on size of bombs and targets involved.

All the 8th Air Force flew their missions during the day and the RAF flew theirs at night. Our bombers flew their bombing mission at an altitude of 22,000-24,000 feet high. This seems plenty high, but the German anti-aircraft guns and German fighters still were able to inflict much dreaded damage. Enemy fighters were not too destructive as long as our "little friends" (our fighter escort) were flying along with us. The "ack-ack" or "flak" as we called it, was there every day, and the Germans were very good at aiming their guns.

None of the combat missions were easy. You flew in "tight" formation, straight and level, no evasive action, *no nothing*. You just sat there and took it. When "flak" or fighters got through, you would "cuss" Hitler awhile and then pray awhead.

The big day came on June 6, 1944 (D-Day). This was the day France was invaded by the Allied Forces based in England. Normandy, France, was the invasion spot. The entire 8th Air Force bombed not only Normandy, but all the French coast between Le Havre and Cherbourg as far inland as the City of Caen, just before our troops landed after crossing the English Channel.

Many ground troops lost their lives during this initial invasion. The Germans were prepared. They were in concrete bunkers and our bombs didn't destroy enough of them.

We flew our thirteenth mission on D-Day, 6th of June 1944. This day will never be forgotten. As our crew progressed in the number of missions flown, the feeling of not making the required amount kept growing. Almost every day some crew didn't make it back or came in all shot up. This feeling went on until we reached the twenty mark. The required amount was thirty missions. From twenty missions on, we really "sweated" them out. After thirty missions, we were to quit but no replacements were there, so we flew thirty-three missions until we were relieved. On July 25, 1944, we flew our thirty-third mission.

From April 27 until July 25, 1944, we flew these thirty-three missions in three months. Our combat hours on these missions ranged from 3.5 to 8.0, for a total of 192 hours.

We as a crew were extremely lucky. We had no injuries and brought the B-24 back "home" each day with little damage.

There were approximately 350,000 service men and women sent to England to support the air offensive against Germany. Not all these personnel were as lucky as we were. The total 8th Air Force had a loss of approximately 26,000 men, which included the 2nd air division which lost 6,400 men, and our 453rd group who lost 366 men.

It was a very difficult mission, when bombers were sent to bomb Hitler's aircraft factories, ball-bearing, and munitions plants, etc. Destroying these eventually "broke his back" and we had control of the air.

May the men who gave their lives, wherever they fought, be always remembered for their supreme sacrifice.