

*Bomber
Legends*

A Tailgunner's Story

by Otto Lemke



Photo Credit: J.K. Havener,
344th Bomb Group

**Armorer-Gunner
495th Bomb Squadron
344th Bomb Group
9th Air Force**



I was drafted into the Army on September 7, 1942, which happened to be Labor Day. Camp Upton, on Long Island, was my first assignment. From there it was Atlantic City, New Jersey for basic training. Close-order drill on the beach was a curse, this was quickly discontinued and the City Dump was our next drill field.

From Atlantic City, the next assignment was Fort Myers Florida - Fort Myers Air Base, for aerial flight training, in what was designated AT-6's. Upon graduation I was assigned to an Armament School, Lowery Field, Denver, Colorado. Having completed the prescribed "Third Air Force Aircraft Armorers (Bombardment)" course, the next assignment was back to Florida.

Lakeland, Florida, AAF MacDill Field, with classification of Staff Sergeant. In those days, all flying personnel were volunteers.

MacDill Field, was the training air base for combat duty. The average crew consisted of Pilot, Co-Pilot, Navigator, or Bombardier, Radio Gunner, Mechanic Gunner, Armorer Gunner, all trained in two fields or trades. (this was at the beginning of 1943). At this air base the 344th Bomb Group was formed. It consisted of four squadrons the 494-495-496-



497 Bomb Squadrons. I was assigned to the 495th BS.

Keep in mind that as all this transpired, I never volunteered for flying. In fact, while in Atlantic City, I was told that I was color blind to some extent. But as you can see, that was disregarded.

The positions, on the bomber for the gunners were as follows: Top turret - Mechanic/Engineer Gunner; Waist - Radio Operator Gunner; Tail- Armorer Gunner

I was assigned to the tail weighing in at 185 lbs. The sign over my position read 150-lbs. maximum. That is without flak suits and helmets.

In May of 1943 I was assigned to Walterboro Army Air Field, Walterboro, South Carolina for "Camouflage" training. Upon completion I returned to MacDill Field.

January of 1944 I was sent to New York City to board the

Queen Elizabeth for the trip to Europe, (only Pilots, Co-Pilots, Navigators, Radio Operators and Crew Chiefs flew overseas). After nine days of rough seas, we 15,000 troops arrived in Scotland, then by train continued to our new "home" at Stansted, England.

I flew my first mission over France, April 1944. By middle of May had flown 33 missions when the squadron Doctor ordered R&R and I was sent to Aberdeen, Scotland for recuperation.

June 6, 1944 I flew the first mission of the day (it took fifty years to find out that our group was the first bombers to bomb the coast of Normandy, at 6:00 am.) Weather that morning left a lot to be desired. Orders were to fly below the weather; they wanted visual sight of bombing. Our flight flew over the target at approximately 3,000 to 4,000 feet. Not being used to that low level flying did cause some concern, to say the least. Our normal height for bombing was between 12,000 and 15,000 feet. No oxygen was on board our B-26's. The flight was instructed to fly over Normandy (at all costs) and return, flying between the Guernsey and Jersey Islands. Needless to say at that point, the German's were not happy to see us, and showed their anger by the use of their flak.

Our worst enemy was the German Anti-Air 88mm Guns. To put it mildly they were damn good at their trade.

September of 1944 the 344th Bomb Group was moved to Pontoise, France, a former German air base.

Our first crew loss happened in September of 1944. Our Radio Operator Gunner was killed in action. Lucky I was not on that flight, but we did lose "Nick's Chick", our B-26.

During my 63rd or 64th mission, we were hit. The plane suffered damage and our Engineer Gunner and our Bombardier were wounded. An emergency landing was made in Reims, France and we all were taken to the hospital in Reims.

Just a side to this story. I was born in Germany and now found myself flying over Germany and possibly dropping bombs on relatives.

I was fortunate to have completed my 65 missions

before the Battle of the Bulge, in mid-December, 1944. Flew my last mission on December 6th, 1944.

After spending Christmas in Preston, England, I was returned to the United States on a Hospital ship. After a short leave was sent back to Atlantic City for processing to replace crews in the Pacific. The final examination by a Psychiatrist was in our favor. "You guys aren't going anywhere, you're all Nuts", was his diagnosis, and we were removed from combat duty.

From Atlantic City back to Tyndel Field, Panama City, Florida, assigned as a ships carpenter, repairing Air Sea Rescue Boats. Didn't know Bow from Stern. Found myself trapped, as this was an emergency outfit. Cooks were being discharged with 50 points, and Otto is down there with 129 points and ready to get out. Finally on September 4th 1945 I was discharged.

Was awarded the Air Medal with 12 clusters (9 oak leaf), European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign, with 4 bronze stars, Good Conduct Medal, American Campaign Medal and World War II Victory medal.

Our crew of seven men, when we became a lead crew, has dwindled down to yours truly, and that doesn't make me feel too happy.

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