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Flying the Box the B-17 Flying Fortress Came In

Nolan Lewis

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WHAT REVIEWERS HAVE SAID ...

'RARELY can a novel convey the realities of air combat in the way intended by the author. The living world is sharper, and frequently more unbelievable, than fiction. Sometimes, however, a writer comes along with direct experience of the wartime environment, the fears, deprivations, exhilarations and tensions. When they do, it is usually a successful cocktail. So it is with this book ...'

Reviewed © Aviation News - December 2006.

'If you like well-written, realistic war stories, you won't be disappointed by this author. There's a lot to be learned in subtle ways through another person's experiences. ... Forty-two flights over Germany and home by age 20. Unbelievable!'

Reviewed © Kaye Trout - June 20, 2006.

Compelling, dramatic and very readable.

For much of the book I was captivated by the hero of our story who was so young and within weeks became so old. ... This is not a novel just for aviation buffs; it's a compelling, moving and dramatic account in its own right that just happens to feature flyers drafted into the Army Air Corps in WWII. If the author has a sequel up his sleeve, I'll be the in the queue to buy the book.

Reviewer: Michael Watson- 22 Jul 2006.

1

The faint green glow from the instrument panel picks out Captain Mervin Hansen's ham-like hand on the wheel. The low angle lights accent his heavy features as he spits, 'Friggin Brass... Don't they know that sitting here burns up a hell of a lot of gas? Forty-eight hundred horses out there and we haven't made a half mile in the past fifteen minutes.'

Lieutenant Theodore Norman in the right seat, his hundred fifty pounds strung over a six-foot-three frame, looks skinny in spite of all of the cold weather clothes he is wearing. He runs his blue-gray eyes over the gauges and manages to keep his equally long face expressionless. Everything seems normal, including the Captain's attitude. The engine temperature is as near the limits as the Captain's, but there's nothing to be done. The cowl flaps are full open already. All that's visible out the windscreen in the predawn blackness is the line of faint blue taxiway lights, and the formation light on the tail of the Liberator ahead. He knows an answer is not expected.

'Son of a bitch! Why don't they put stop lights on these mothers,' from the Captain, and the nose banging down of the ship ahead are all the warning he has. Suddenly the twin fifties of the B-24 ahead snap down out of the darkness and look like cannons as the tail bounces wildly. Behind the guns, the wide eyes of one scared tail gunner are plainly visible. The separation between the two ships is suddenly inches rather than feet.

The long line of bombers snakes its way across the darkened field toward the active runway. They resemble nothing more than a line of fat ducks heading for water as they bob their noses and flick their double tails, and go almost nowhere.

The book says, 'You shall not use your brakes to maneuver a B-24, lest they fail you when you need them.' It's obvious that people are paying little attention to the book. If the bobbing noses are not enough of a give away, the bull moose squalls of the tortured brakes confirm it.

Ted finally hears the beginning rumble as the first ship of the lead squadron starts its take-off run. He says, 'Fifteen more minutes until it's our turn,' to no one in particular. The schedule calls for one plane per minute and they are third in the second squadron.

That's if everyone makes it. *Shouldn't be too bad today*, he thinks. *We are not too much over gross because this is supposed to be a short mission, and that's a long runway.*

He knows that a grossed-out Lib needs a lot of runway. Usually by the time it reaches the 130 mile per hour liftoff speed, if something goes wrong there isn't enough runway left to stop. With a belly full of bombs, and several thousand gallons of hundred octane, they don't do too well in an overrun or a crash landing in the rough area out past the end of the paved runway.

The Captain is impatient. By the time they reach the run-up area he has already run through most of the pre-take-off check list. He does a quick mag check at 2000 RPM; advances throttle to full momentarily. Stops at 2700, long enough to set the manifold pressure to forty-nine inches on the way back down, on each of the four engines. When he reaches the number three engine, Ted anticipates the Captain's order and drops the flaps to twenty degrees.

When the Captain hits number four, he doesn't bother to idle it back. He just shoves the other three forward, holds the brakes for a few seconds while the engines wind up, and begins the roll. Ted hurriedly flips the booster pumps on and closes the cowl flaps to thirty degrees, then holds the four throttles forward with his left hand as they pick up speed toward the east where the soon to rise sun is lightening the sky, precluding the Captain's usual, 'What you waiting for Kid?'

Ted holds the throttles full forward, runs a practiced eye over the gauges, and calls out the increasing speeds as the ship roars down the runway. As soon as the plane clears the ground he raises the gear. As they pick up speed he eases the flaps up and begins scanning the sky for conflicting traffic.

As they thunder out over the English countryside the Captain chuckles and says, 'Wonder how many Limey kids we are responsible for? We wake them up and keep them awake for over an hour. What the hell else are they going to do?'

As they gain altitude, the day begins to arrive. The Captain's bulky figure, in his leather flight jacket with the fur collar, worn over many layers of flight clothes, materializes out of the gloom. He's hunched over the wheel with his 'fifty mission crush' hat clamped down by his earphones, and a half inch dead cigarette butt hanging from his lips.

He begins a wide turn to the left, back toward the field, as they lift up through the ground fog. Assembly is at five thousand feet and somewhere up there an unpainted B-24, with large purple checkerboard squares painted on its slab sides, is circling. The checkerboard ship is the flying billboard they are to assemble on.

The sky's turning rosy in the east and as each ship rises in the cold crisp air it's picked out by the rays of the winter sun. Ted can feel the cold creep into his right leg where it's close to the thin aluminum skin of the plane.

Suddenly, out of nowhere another Liberator cuts across from their left. It's only a few feet above and slightly ahead, and apparently totally unaware of the near miss.

The Captain jams the wheel forward and lets go a string of cuss words that would make a mule Skinner smile. It's generally agreed, in this department he has no competition.

Sgt. Kominski, the diminutive Polack from Mississippi in the tail turret, reports in his usual slow drawl that the ship is a stranger, not from their base. The yellow tail fins identify it as from the 446th Bomb Group, stationed at Bungay, some five minutes flying time to the south. Close but not that unusual.

With forty-four planes from the 448th, and a similar number from each of several groups stationed at nearby fields, wandering around in the half-light and an occasional stranger from who knows where blundering through, two are bound to occasionally arrive at the same place at the same time.

Ted hasn't been around long, but has heard the stories from some of the old hands. It doesn't leave much. No one ever gets out alive.

The Captain joins the string of B-24s behind the assembly ship. 'Old Checkerboard,' continues to swing around in wide turns while the Group planes slowly find their places. It's beginning to resemble a formation, and so far no one has run down anyone else.

A thousand feet below and off to the south, another group is performing the same maneuver. At almost exactly an hour after they started their engines, the lower group swings out from their circle and climbs out toward the northeast.

After one more turn, 'Old Checkerboard' turns out and falls in behind the other group, and begins a slow climb. The third group of the Twentieth Bomb Wing is scheduled to move in behind the 448th and make up a formation totaling over one hundred planes.

The 448th is a new group. This is only their fourth mission since arriving from the States, and their first full wing effort. Planes are like yo-yos as they try to adjust power to maintain position, as they climb out at about 150 feet per minute. Planes lag and then apply too much power. When they have almost overrun the Lib in front, they cut speed too much and drop down and back again, so they have to start all over.

At the coast, as the group heads out over the North Sea, the assembly ship drops down and heads back to the base. The Captain (the-old-man) says, 'You got it. I'm gonna go back and feed the fish.' Truth is he doesn't like formation flying and likes over-water flying even less.

Ted has been watching the gauges so he knows that all four engines are doing what they are supposed to do. He eases the throttles back slightly and synchronizes the engines at just over 2300 RPM, with 35 inches of manifold pressure. With a slight nose up trim change she will almost fly herself. The air

speed is indicating almost exactly 170 MPH. ‘Let the formation settle down a bit before trying to hold it too tight. No Krauts out there yet anyway,’ he muses.

He settles back in his seat, pushes the sandy hair that’s inclined to wander back under his hat, and begins to relax. The cold ache in his right ankle is intensifying. Damn electric boots help, but there’s always that space at the top.

This is the boring part. Way back there in advance training he developed this thing he called his ‘overdrive.’ Let half of the brain fly the plane and the other half is free to wander.

He can feel the Captain’s weight shift as he moves around the back end. Probably entertaining the troops. He likes to BS the crew and almost always gets around to his favorite subject fairly rapidly, his prowess in the bedroom. Ted lets his mind roam back over the time since he first joined the crew.

A freak accident, too much alcohol and a fast car eliminated Captain Hansen’s copilot shortly before they were scheduled to go overseas. Ted was pulled from the left seat of a crew just starting their advance training. He’s not only the newest man on the crew, but the youngest. Nobody’s aware of his actual age. Also, his log book contains fewer hours than most anyone else’s in the group.

The Old Man, always a favorite of the men, is always cutting up. He was a truck driver from Beaverton, Oregon, before joining the Air Force. Hauled logs out of the hills above Astoria. Plans to start his own trucking company when it’s all over. Never enters his head that he might not be around. ‘No friggin’ Kraut can touch my ship. Just hang with me, Kid, I’ll get you through this shindig.’ He already had a pilot’s license before the war. His own plane also. An Aeronica Scout. Air Knocker he calls it. He claims that since the government grounded all civil flying he had no choice, he had to join the Air Force if he was going to get to fly at all. He’s big. 225 pounds and six foot three. Looks good in his uniform. There was that time in Salt Lake City. Stuck overnight at Hill Field for a minor repair on a cross country. Colder than hell. Most of the crew were looking for the Coconut Grove dance hall that was pretty well known by most of the men throughout the training command as the happy hunting grounds.

He said, ‘Waste of time. You spend all of your time and most of your money and still end up sleeping back at the base. You want to get your ashes hauled, I’ll show you how.’ He took up station at a street corner bus stop. The first girl who passed, he said, ‘Hello Baby... You want to wrestle?’ He pronounced it ‘wrassel.’

Somebody said, ‘Jeez, Cap, you’re crazy. No dame will go for that.’ He came back with, ‘Nine out of ten will slap my face, but I will find the tenth one before you do.’

Truth is, he didn’t make it back to the base until almost noon the next morning. Most of the rest of the crew slept by themselves in the barracks.

The crew spent the next two weeks listening to his descriptions of ‘Those Mormon broads who wouldn’t even drink a cup of coffee, but were sure not a bit slow about climbing into the sack.’ He claims his system will work anywhere. Some of the crew had another demonstration of it - he claimed successfully - on their one and only weekend in London.

Nobody ever asks to fly a B-24. Almost every man who enters cadets wants to be a pilot. Navigator and Bombardier are almost always second choices, and a good share of them are men who washed out from pilot training.

Every pilot in training wants to fly a fighter. They all want to get up there and tear up some sky and shoot down Germans.

The Air Force, in its infinite wisdom, decreed that all pilots over a certain size would end up in a bomber. If a man’s going to get stuck in a bomber, most think it should be a B-17. That’s the one to get all of the notice by the press. The pretty one.

To B-17 men, the Liberator is in the same class as the bumble bee. Fat and ugly and theoretically unable to fly. They also refer to it as the box that a B-17 came in.

B-24 men maintain that she will fly faster, farther, and carry more bombs than the B-17, and all with one engine out.

They might also reluctantly admit that when hit she’s more apt to fall apart. They have heard the stories; not too many come home with gaping holes as the Fortress is known to do. If damage is too extensive, they just don’t come home.

The B-24 is described by other detractors as a collection of assorted parts, flying in loose formation. It has acquired names such as Wavering Willie, and other pilots kid that it’s the friendly one. It waves its tails (it has two) at you as it flies by.

Captain Hansen likes flying the Lib. In his words, ‘He is a truck driver. The bomber’s a truck. It’s meant for hauling bombs and dumping them on Hitler. The B-24 is the biggest truck the Air Force has, and with it he can haul the biggest loads.’

He also says, ‘She’s like a woman. She needs a man with a strong hand to handle her, and he’s the guy can do it.’

But he still flies a plane like he’s driving a log truck.

2

Something over an hour after leaving the coast of England, almost two hours after take-off, the bomber stream reaches the briefed altitude of 19,000 feet. This time the planes are a little more precise in their maneuvers and waste less time assuming their places in the formation. Everyone knows they are beginning to show up on the German radar, and fighters are possible at any minute.

When they are almost to Norway, the formation swings south toward the coast of Denmark, all of this supposed to fool the Germans into thinking the formation is headed for somewhere else. The fighter escort is late in arriving, and everyone's feeling naked without them. Will the scheduled Spitfires or the expected Kraut fighters arrive first?

This is really only a decoy mission, meant to split the Jerry fighters. They are to think the formation is heading for Hamburg or Berlin and try to head it off. Not so many fighters will be available to intercept another formation going in to hit the Ruhr Valley, farther to the west.

After the turn, the formation tightens up and the airspeed is increased to an indicated 230 MPH. Many eyes anxiously scan the severe clear sky for fighters. Hopefully friendly fighters.

God it's cold! He has on so many clothes he can hardly make the moves necessary to control the plane, and even with the electric suit he's still not warm.

The outside air temperature is reading minus twenty eight degrees which is about normal, but today it feels colder. He can imagine what it's like for the gunners in the back, with the waist windows open for the guns, and the thirty below zero wind swirling around them.

The fighter escort suddenly appears overhead. They are several thousand feet higher than the bomber formation, and each of the Spitfires is dragging its long white tail of condensation behind. There's considerable concern when they are first spotted, and a great deal of chatter on the intercom until identification is positive. At a distance the German 109 doesn't look too much different.

Everyone is observing radio silence so the fighters don't move into gun range of the formation until they are sure they have been recognized. They are well aware there are close to five hundred nervous trigger fingers, on twice that many 50 caliber machine guns, pointing their way.

The Captain slides into the left seat, but makes no move to take the wheel. As if this is a signal, Sgt. Essa, left waist gunner, calls excitedly that a brace of BF 109s is coming in at ten o'clock and low.

The escort fighters bounce the Germans from above, so they don't ever get within firing range of the Liberators 50s. The formation is in range of four Heine bases at this point, so they are immediately replaced by another flight of four Messerschmitts.

Before long there are more than the Spits can handle and some of the Kraut fighters start getting through the Limey formation to press their unwanted attentions on the bombers.

As he cranes his neck to see out of the small windscreens, the sky above reminds Ted of skaters on the ice of the frozen mill pond at home. The contrails all start and stop between 20 and 25 thousand feet. As the fighters dart in and out of the cold layer of air, they make short angry arcs of white against the severe blue of the sky, similar to those made by the flashing blades of skaters on the pale blue ice of the pond.

Captain Hansen is on the intercom trying to keep some discipline as the gunners begin to get excited. They are new enough that everyone is calling fighters to the others and there are so many fighters they are soon talking over each other and no one can understand. He also keeps ragging on them to be sure they are not shooting down the Spitfires that make up the escort, or one of the other Libs in the formation.

Lt. Stocker, bombardier, is manning the nose gun mount. His twin fifties rattle like a jackhammer in the confines of the cockpit. His station is just below and in front of Ted's feet, so he gets the full benefit of the noise.

The ship vibrates almost constantly as first one and then another of her ten fifty caliber guns chatters away. Sgt Jameson, flight engineer, on the right waist gun, is complaining that he's missing out on the fun. He's on the inside of the formation and the Germans are too smart to get between the planes.

The Captain yells, 'Where the hell's Baker? What're you doing on that gun anyway?' Jameson doesn't answer, but it isn't necessary. Everyone wants to get their chance to claim a kill, so they all know why he has pulled rank and taken over the gun from Baker.

The favorite attack of the Jerries is two planes cut in four or five miles ahead and approach head on. Their 20mm cannon have a much greater range than the fifties of the bombers, so they get a few free shots before getting into range. They then 'split ass,' as the gunners say, and pass under and out of range to reform for another run.

Lt. Stocker is getting a workout as he tries to keep them out far enough so their aim is ruined. He then tries to guess which way they will break, so he can call them to the others; either Radio man gunner Sgt. Walker, who's in the top

turret, Sgt Essa, in the left waist, Sgt. Jameson or Sgt Baker in the right waist, or Sgt. Cowen in the belly turret.

Stocker starts getting excited. ‘I got one. I got the son of a bitch. He’s on fire. Somebody confirm him for me.’

There’s a sudden, ‘Brrap,’ and an explosion behind Ted. While Stocker’s watching the one he thought he nailed, the wing man comes on through and scores one on the ship from below. Ted isn’t sure just what he hit.

Ted’s slot in the formation is behind, slightly below, and to the left of Major Crane the squadron commander. Crane is a good pilot and steady as a rock, making it easy to hold position on him. As the only West Pointer and the only regular army flying officer, the stocky, slightly balding, thirty-year-old leads the squadron the same way on the ground.

The ship, christened ‘Hansen’s Whore,’ for obvious reasons, is running great. The book says safety comes from keeping the formation tight. Ted’s holding in so tight the Major’s waist gunner claims later he could have crawled out on the right wing, and they still get hit. So much for the book.

As the formation crosses the Frisian Islands, the escort fighters begin turning back. They are running out of fuel. Fortunately some of the Germans are also, but not enough of them. Their bases are close enough for them to refuel quickly, so they will be back shortly to hit the formation again.

The Wing has lost two planes already, but the 448th is lucky so far. Several have picked up some new ventilation, but they are still holding formation.

Sgt. Jameson, engineer, calls to say the Whore took a half dozen machine gun rounds, and a 20mm cannon round has wrecked about half of their radios. This when Lt. Stocker’s, BF 109 got through from low and ahead. He never gets his confirmation on the other plane.

‘Lucky. Damn lucky,’ Ted says, but the Captain chooses not to hear him. The Krauts have desecrated his untouchable.

A couple of feet forward and it would have exploded between him and the Captain in the cockpit. A couple of feet back would have been in the forward bomb bay where over two tons of high explosive bombs hang. Either would be fairly conclusive. The gunners claim another two probables, but there is no confirmation.

At Pellworn Island the formation turns southeast, still trying to maintain the deception they are heading for Berlin. The fighters are chewing them to pieces, but so far the 713th squadron appears to be intact.

The gunners start calling to say the fighters are breaking off. The reason is soon apparent. At 19,000 feet they are above the range of all but the heavier flak guns, but ahead it looks thick enough to walk across.

The Captain grabs the wheel and starts taking so called ‘evasive action.’ He weaves the plane back and forth and bounces it up and down ‘to confuse the flak gunners.’

Ted could never understand the logic of this. The fighters have relayed their altitude to the gun controllers. The gunners just fuse for that height and lay down a layer of fire. How do you dodge it when neither you nor the gunner below knows where the next round will explode?

With not much to do at the present, Ted’s looking out over the formation. He’s thinking, *flak in all of its colors is really sort of pretty. The tiny red flowers that appear magically, and soon grow into blossoms of black or gray with an occasional greenish marker round thrown in, against the deep blue of the sky.*

The Captain breaks in on his thoughts with a crack, ‘It’s always easy to pick out the clouds. Even if you come up through heavy dark clouds that are full of rain or snow, when you finally break out, they’re always soft and fleecy and white on top. That shit’s the same color no matter which way you look at it.’ The closest thing to poetic that Ted has ever heard from him.

Ted, studying on the wisdom of the remark and with nothing else to do, turns to look out and back from the right window. The ‘Lady Jane,’ flying the other leg of the ‘V’ on the other side of the Major, is bouncing around about the same as they. Suddenly the plane disappears. Just literally disappears.

She must have taken an eighty-eight round directly in the bomb bay. That’s nine pounds of high explosives into a couple of tons of explosives. All that’s left is a few pieces of sheet metal floating down, interspersed with some smoking unidentifiable blobs that must be the remains of the crew members. No chutes open. It has a sobering effect on the crew. Planes have gone down, but this is the first one of the original squadron to buy it so totally and so visibly. Suddenly everyone is feeling very vulnerable.

After about another fifteen minutes the formation reaches the IP (initial point) where they give up the pretense, and the three groups go their separate ways to their individual targets.

The 448th Group turns to the southwest toward their real target, the sub pens at Bremen. The flak goes on.

They pass out of the main flak concentration momentarily, and immediately the fighters are back. Sgt. Cowen in the ball turret hanging under the belly of the Lib, the smallest member of the crew at only five foot three, calls in his distinctive high voice. He has a pair of 110’s coming up from below. He fires his twin fifties briefly before he calls excitedly, ‘Breaking your way, Ski.’

Sgt. Kominski, tail gunner, calls almost immediately wanting someone to confirm that he got one of them, but everyone’s too busy.

The fifties keep rattling all the way to the edge of Bremen, where the flak starts again and the fighters break off.

Lt. Glen Shannon, the small, wiry navigator, the only Southerner of the officers, calls in his slow voice, ‘The ship is coming up on the aiming point.’ It dawns on Ted that Glen has it even worse than he. He sits there at his plotting table all bundled up in everything he can find to add warmth, he hears the reports of the attacks on the intercom, but not only is he unable to do anything to help himself, he’s sitting where he has to raise up to even see out of the ship. Spooky as hell.

At Glen’s signal, the Captain flips on the auto pilot and hands over control of the ship to Lt. Stocker for the bomb run. He is their intellectual bombardier from Pennsylvania, whose station is down under their feet in the nose.

It was almost better with the fighters. At least then you were too busy to notice the flak. With the fighters, you felt you could do something to help yourself. That’s if you weren’t copilot. At this point, Ted still has nothing to do, and feels like he’s just a passenger along for the ride.

Stocker calls ‘Bomb bay doors open’ shortly and Ted sees the little yellow light in the instrument panel in front of the Captain come on.

From here until the light an inch or so below signals the bombs are gone, there will be no deviations. Except for minor corrections made by the bombardier as he fiddles with his knobs, it’s as if they are on a rail pointing directly at the target, and they will be on it for the next several minutes. This rail is very familiar to the German AA Batteries, and they concentrate their fire to take advantage of it.

Suddenly all hell breaks loose. The bombardier, who was down under and forward of Ted’s feet is gone, along with the whole front of the plane. The temperature is somewhere around thirty degrees below zero and he has about a two-hundred-mile-an-hour wind blowing up between his feet. The ship begins to fall off on the left wing so he looks over at the Captain.

For the first time he realizes that the left windscreens is also gone, along with most of the Captain’s head.

Next, he gets a panicky feeling. He’s going blind! Everything is going dark. He wipes his hand across his face and realizes that it’s blood running down into his eyes from a scalp wound, but he doesn’t have enough hands to keep it and the ship both under control.

By this time the huge bomber is practically upside down. They are picking up speed real fast. He chops the throttles, hauls back on the wheel, and wracks it to the right, but realizes he’s fighting the weight of the Captain’s body that is slumped over the left wheel. He calls the navigator and says, ‘Jesus Christ, Glen, get up here and give me a hand.’

The spin has progressed to the point where Shannon has to fight his way forward. It seems like hours, but is probably less than half a minute before he reaches the cabin.

Shannon takes one look and says, ‘Holy shit!’ He stands frozen for a couple of seconds before he can digest the mess he has found and begin to move.

End of Sample

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