

RAYMOND V.HEITZ

MILITARY HISTORY

Raymond was born in January 1922 in Buffalo, NY. As a youngster he was somewhat fortunate during the Depression because his father William stayed employed as a delivery driver for the Buffalo Evening News. Life was by no means easy but a little better than for some of his friends. Ray excelled in all sports and was a natural athlete. He earned varsity letters in high school in football, track, basketball and baseball. He truly excelled in baseball and would eventually sign a contract to play in the Boston Braves organization after high school. Not only did the Braves draft him, Uncle Sam drafted him as well and Uncle Sam prevailed. He headed off to basic training with the US Army in December of 1942. While in basic, as Ray told it, he was "called out" of the barracks with several other men and they couldn't figure out what they had done wrong. A young officer lined up these guys and said "your records show that you are pretty good athletes and athletes make good pilots; you want to go to flight training?" Ray said what the hell, better to be in the sky above it all than being shot at on the ground. Little did these men know that the eventual mortality rate for aircrew far exceeded that of those on the ground.

So, off we go into the wild blue yonder in March of 1943 for preflight, primary, basic and advanced flight training. In '43 through early '44 Raymond was transitioning to the B-24 Liberator Bomber and the applicable Replacement Training Unit (RTU). RTUs were established by the Army Air Force to eventually deploy and "replace" operational aircrews lost in the war or returning after fulfilling mission requirements. In May of 1944, 22 year old second lieutenant, B-24 pilot Raymond Heitz and his crew headed for England in a newer model B-24. The trek involved stops at Bangor, Maine, Goose Bay, Labrador, Ireland and finally Tibenham, England, home of the 445th Bomb Group. As Ray told it, he was on the way to Bangor and flew over his home town, Buffalo, NY. He rolled the aircraft hard left to get a look at where he grew up. Before he realized it, he had rolled the aircraft a little too far and his co-pilot grabbed the wheel and said we don't want to crash on your parents' house!

When the crew arrived at Tibenham their squadron commander greeted them on the flightline and told them "get your stuff off this aircraft...guys who have been here longer get the newer planes." The commander pointed to an older, war-torn aircraft and said "that one is yours,

good luck." Looking back on history, good luck and the grace of God allowed only around 30% of the those who flew in WWII to survive.

Lt Heitz and his crew flew 30 missions between July 2, 1944 and October 17, 1944. Like many of his peers, Ray talked very little about his war experience. He often said to his sons as they were growing up, I only have one wish for you guys and that is you don't have to go in the service. He didn't get his wish as one son went in the Army and one in the Air Force. But, he was proud as hell of their service!

One of Ray's 30 missions was the well documented bomb run over Kassel, Germany, September 27, 1944. The Group lost its fighter escort and went in unprotected from an onslaught of German aircraft. The story of this mission is the only one that Ray would share with his sons. It clearly left its mark on him. Ray's wife Dorothy who he met in high school and married in June 1945, described how the war and that mission changed him. He was the smiling, joking, good times jock in high school and after graduation; but, not the same after the war. He saw so many guys killed (including one on his crew) and shot down or captured, it clearly left its mark. All this at the age of 22!

The Kassel Mission story as Ray told it was a true life horror story. The Group departed Tivenham for a supposed "milk run" which is code for an expected easy mission. The target was the Henschel tank production facility at Kassel. Thirty-five of the Group's assigned aircraft made it to Kassel. Nearing Kassel, the B-24s started encountering some anti-aircraft fire (flak). Suddenly the sky filled with German fighters. Many were shot down and a few survivors tried to limp back to Tivenham. Ray's crew aboard "Bugs Bunny" had 3 engines functioning after fighter encounters and one of his waist gunners was deceased. Again in Ray's words "one of the German fighters pulled up on my wing and looked right at me then peeled off and things got quiet. I told my crew to pray that we would make it home. Then I saw some dots in the sky coming right at me and I told my crew to say their final prayers. Turned out it was P-51s coming to our rescue. They made radio contact and said we're here to take you home big brother."

In the preflight briefing before the Kassel mission, crews were briefed that if they couldn't make it all the way back to Tivenham, Brussels had just been captured by allied forces so landing there was an alternative. That turned out to be fortunate for Ray's crew as they crash landed 15 miles east of Brussels. All but the waist gunner who was KIA were returned to duty. Ray and his crew needed 6 more missions to complete their required 30. As Ray put it, "the one right after Kassel on October 5th was scary as hell." For the Kassel mission he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal. If one looks at the historical archives for the 445th there is a document dated a week after the Kassel mission that indicates "morale is improving as aircrew and aircraft replacements are arriving." Good God! You just encountered

unprecedented, incredible losses of aircraft and men and morale is "improving" a week later. But, that was WWII. That's the way it was for the Greatest Generation.

Ray flew his last combat mission on October 17, 1944. He rotated back to the states and spent some time as a B-24 instructor pilot before leaving active duty. He took a shot at pro baseball but was essentially told you're too old to start in the low minors. Too old at age 24! Ray was married, had a new son and the minor league salary was not enough to warrant being separated from family so it was back to Buffalo, NY. Ironically, after the war, In June 1952, the 445th was activated as a Fighter-Bomber Wing at Buffalo, NY. Ray did a short stint with the Reserve unit and was promoted to Captain but decided not to continue serving. It's reasonable to assume he had enough war for one lifetime. He spent 37 years as a machinist at Westinghouse Electric. An athlete to the end, he excelled at golf and always led his league in bowling. Ray passed away in June of 2004 at the age of 82.

Submitted by a proud son,

Jim Heitz, Lt Col USAF (Ret)