

## *Lloyd Fidao, 416 Bomb Group's experience*

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June 1942 to October 15, 1945.

Decorations: Six (6) Battle stars and accompanying overseas ribbons Presidential citation Four (4) overseas stripes Sergeant's stripes

In the spring of 1942, I received a notice in the mail from the Greenwich Draft Board to the effect that my country needed me. I was ordered to report to the old National Guard Armory on Mason street for an induction physical. I was soon classified 1A (Perfect). Later on, if you could walk and talk, you were speedily 1A.

Another notice soon arrived directing me to be at the Stamford station at 8:00 a.m. to board the train to Fort Devens Massachusetts for induction into the Armed Forces. Dad took me to the train station and later admitted that he had tears in his eyes as he never expected to see me again. Fortunately he did, three and a half years later, with six battle stars (one for each major battle) and Sergeants stripes!

At Fort Devens we were given a canvas bag for our clothes which would be sent home, and ushered into a large warehouse where we were issued a new set of Army clothes and shoes. Then off to a Barracks to put the stuff on, and a label to send the civilian clothes home. Along with the clothes etc., we were given a standard issue duffel bag which traveled all over Europe with me and back to Devens three and half years later.

We were given an IQ test, Mechanical ability tests, etc.. I wound up in the Army Air Force with a choice of five or six training opportunities like Photography, Radio, Aircraft Mechanics etc. Aircraft Mechanics seemed like the best, so I opted for that.

After that we were shipped to an Air Force Training Outfit in Atlantic City and billeted in the Chalfont Hotel on the board walk, as were all the other Air Force personnel. Money was no object to the Air Force and still isn't 50 years later.

After another two weeks of shots and close order drill training, I wound up at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in Goldsborough NC., where I was sent to Aircraft Mechanics School. It was a very interesting course as to what makes an aircraft engine work.. The course lasted many weeks and as I wound up in the top 10% of the class, they made me an instructor. Aircraft carburetors fascinated me by the way they worked, keeping the flow of gas to the engine uniform at various altitudes, compensating for the change of air pressure at different altitudes. All this is why I was promoted to Corporal and made an instructor in carburetors.

In 1942, Goldsborough was a town of maybe 10,000 people with at least 30,000 men at the base. There was one movie house, one bar, one tank-town hotel, one bowling alley, and nowhere to go. Consequently, we traveled by bus to Durham, Raleigh, and Wake Forest for football games and toured the campuses of the various colleges which were all very pretty and well built.

After about eight months of training the same old stuff, I applied for a transfer to a bomb group to work on planes. The head of the school told me that I'd be overseas before I knew it, probably England. Well, that was O.K. as I wanted to see what was going on over there. We'd been reading of the 1000 plane raids on the German cities and it sounded exciting. As it turned out, it sure was.

I was shipped to a bomb group training facility in Lake Charles, LA in A20's (A for attack). An A20 was a fast twin engine, three passenger bomber, mostly flown with pilot and gunner. When flown with three, it included pilot, navigator with the gunner in the rear. The A20 had two Wright 18 cylinder air-cooled engines, six 50 caliber guns in the nose, four 50 caliber guns under the wings, and rear shooting, two up and two down.

At Lake Charles, they saw my teaching records and assigned me to instructing new pilots on the fuel system of the A20. With several gas tanks for capacity, gasoline could be transferred back and forth from tanks depending

on the pilot's needs.

Well, teaching became tedious again and I told the Captain in charge of the training section that I wanted to transfer to the flight line. Bingo, he arranged for my promotion to Sergeant as I had told him I was getting nowhere. A month or so later the whole Bomb Group (four squadrons of ten or so planes) was alerted to start training with ground crews for overseas duty. At that time, I was transferred to the Flight line as one of three mechanics to attend to the two engines on the A20. Our Crew Chief was a Technical Sergeant and two Sergeant mechanics comprised the crew. Wallace Ewing was the Crew Chief and Clark Marsh and I were the Sergeant assistants. Ewing was a farmer from New Mexico and a very competent and able mechanic, as were all the crew chiefs, practically all farmers, who had been working on combustion engines all their lives. Practically all these people were in their twenties and very able and hard working. Our job was to keep the ship flying, working all day and night if necessary, and many times we did. Our job was engines. The Armament crew, three people, took care of guns and bombs. The Sheet metal crew took care of flack holes and any skin repairs. The hydraulic crew took care of that end, etc..

We started out with a brand new A20, Number 692, and stayed with it until it was worn out after eighty missions over France and Europe. Our flight training and repairs, etc. were constant as our Squadron spent a few months on submarine patrol from our base in Lake Charles LA. We soon became accustomed to constant flying and maintenance of the aircraft. It wasn't long after that we were alerted to go overseas.

In the fall of 1943, we packed our bags and were loaded on a train to Camp Shanks, somewhere not far from Hoboken, NJ, where we were outfitted with new warm clothes where necessary, which to us meant cold country, not the Pacific.

We were loaded on a transport in Hoboken, NJ and joined a convoy, which when we were out to sea, spread as far as you could see, Aircraft carriers, Destroyers, Cruisers, everything. Our whole Bomb Group, about three thousand men, were on the same boat, a small refurbished steamer taken over from the Vichy French at Martinique. Each deck, and there were several, was stacked from floor to ceiling with bunks, one on top of the other. The air was stifling. Half the men were sea sick, some so bad they had to be fed intravenously. I felt queasy and got myself named Sergeant of the Guard on deck where the fresh air was a new way of life. We were in the Gulf Stream and it was nice and warm. The food was the worst, hot dogs boiled, chunks of cheese, and various stuff anyone with an iffy stomach could not touch.

Five days out, the whole convoy turned around and headed back. The information was that we had run into a German submarine wolf pack. It finally took us ten days from New York to Glasgow, Scotland, where we boarded a train for England. Our base turned out to be Wethersfield, six miles northeast of Braintree which is about fifty or 60 miles northwest of London.

On the train the conductors pulled down all the curtains, blacking out the whole train. At the time we thought it was silly, but we soon learned differently.

At our base in Wethersfield, we were assigned to Quonset huts which held about twenty-five men and were heated by coal burning pot bellied stoves, much like the ones in our country stores in the States. Shortly after, we were assigned to bunks and settled down to a little rest before the evening meal. The Air Raid siren went off and we were herded into an underground air raid shelter. We were packed in like sardines. Due to the darkness and closeness of each, some of the men were on the edge of hysteria, talking wildly, some shouting "Let me out of here". Due to the way we were packed in, no one could move. Fortunately in a short while the all clear went off and we climbed out. That was the last time I ever went into a shelter in England. Right behind our Quonset hut was a sunken road used to provision the field during the "Battle of Britain". A good friend and myself dashed into the sunken road each time the Air Raid went off, which was about every night when the weather was clear. We would lay at the bottom of the road on our backs and watch the most spectacular show of anti-aircraft guns going off and shells bursting in the sky. A Fourth of July display was nothing compared to one of these barrages. We could see German planes being hit and coming down in flames. Some sight! The British guns were set up on a cement platform about an acre square, and they shot the guns off all at once with the exploding shells covering

an area high in the sky about a mile square. We could tell the hits as the German planes came down in flames like a burning comet.

Our A20 planes arrived in a few days and the flight line was set up and we went to work, and I mean work. Night and day if necessary. Once the planes came back from a mission it had to be ready to fly again the next day, and we worked steadily all night if necessary. Our planes were bombing Buzz bomb sites in Northern France. One mission in particular stands out, one Sunday from our base in Wethersfield England, which we labeled "Bloody Sunday". It was classified by intelligence as a "Milk Run" meaning not dangerous. When what was half of the planes started coming back, the sky was filled with red flares warning of wounded men aboard. On landing, some skidded off the runway because of flack holes in tires and damaged wheels. We lost one-third of our planes that day, with at least two crew aboard; terrible carnage and loss of life.

After eighty missions, the A20's were replaced with a newer model A26, also a twin engine bomber, with fourteen 50-caliber guns shooting forward and four in the rear carrying twenty-five hundred pounds in bombs. Our crew had eighty-four missions on the A26 which we had until the end of the war. We bombed sites in Northern France once and sometimes twice a day.

A Buzz Bomb was a miniature plane with no pilot with a 1000 pound bomb in the nose, and where it ran out of gas was where it came down. We developed very sensitive Buzz Bomb ears. If one went over we were OK, if the engine quit we dove for cover. The engine on one of these devilish things had a very distinctive sound and we could tell them miles away.

We worked this way from the fall of 1943 until August of 1944 when we went to France.

D Day on June 6, was a round-the-clock operation. Planes were loading up and flying back, supporting the troops. We spent the day before painting large white stripes on the wings for identification, and it worked well. The pilots reported an unbelievable number of planes of all kinds over the landing area. Fighters, DC3's full of paratroopers, our Bombers, and many others.

Flying Fortresses of the Eighth Air Force assembled over our fields in England until the sky was solid with these great large planes before taking off for Germany. These raids added up to one thousand planes, all dumping bombs on Germany.

One night in London before D Day, a friend and I were in a pub when an air raid siren went off. We started out the front when I said no, this way, Lord knows why, and dragged my friend out the back door. A bomb landed in the street at the front door, fortunately it was an incendiary bomb, and we ran off scott free.

On our trips to London we were always picked up by trucks from our outfit at a given hour. On one trip a couple of British soldiers asked for a ride back to their base, right on our way. As the driver wasn't too sure how to get back to our base in Wethersfield, we picked them up. Well, after driving over half of England, we dumped them off and had to ask the MPs how to get home, another hour's drive.

Keeping warm in England the winter of 1943-1944 was a real chore. It never froze, but it was always damp and cold. I wore two pairs of pants and long johns, two sweaters, and a sheep skin Air Force jacket. The rest of our stay in England was work, work, work, keeping the plane flying. It was mostly engine work and sometimes hydraulic work. These were 18 cylinder engines, two spark plugs to each cylinder which had to be changed every 25 hours in addition to all the other maintenance. Each morning at 5:00 a.m. one of us would have to go out to the Flight Line and pre-flight the aircraft, warm up the engines, check the propellers, flaps, magnetos and many other things.

Well, sometime in August 1944, we were alerted to go to France and support the ground troops fighting across France. We were all shipped to Southampton England where there were at least a thousand ships all being loaded with troops and supplies headed for Normandy.

I vividly remember climbing down a rope ladder over the side of the boat with a full pack on my back, carbine, metal helmet and, at the bottom of the ladder, waiting for the waves to bring the Lighter level with the bottom of the ladder, then jumping. Well, I made it, although many didn't and a few drowned, too loaded down to swim between the Lighter and the ship.

We landed at Omaha Beach near the French town of St. Mere Eglise. The devastation was incredible. On the beach were discarded machine gun belts, burned out trucks, Personnel carriers, blown up 155mm cannon, tanks, everything you could think of. After assembling on the beach, from the invasion docks laid down on June 4th, we were lined up and marched ten miles to a landing strip made of wire mesh, waiting for some DC3's to come pick us up. We waited for at least a week eating canned K-rations and starving. After several days on this diet, we threw up everything whenever we opened a can. Then the cans ran out and we raided some French gardens near by and lived on cabbage, carrots, etc. until finally the DC3's arrived and picked us up.

I remember flying around the Eiffel Tower on our way to our base at Melun south of Paris. This air field had just been evacuated by the Germans and we took over their quarters and set to work repairing the runways and putting the base in operational order.

Our living quarters were in tents all through the winter of 1944-45. Try sleeping in a tent with six inches of snow on the ground and you will know what we went through. We converted pot bellied stoves into oil burners by mixing one hundred octane gas and crank case oil from the planes. A fifty gallon oil drum was the oil tank, attached to one quarter inch hydraulic lines from busted up planes, with a spigot set to drip on a pan of nails and bolts to make the oil splatter and burn. They burned RED all night.

At this time we were getting occasional air raids and dashed out in the snow and dove into bomb craters as shelters.

After General Patton had driven the Germans back into Germany, we were moved up to a field near Laon, France near the Belgian border from which we operated until VE Day. We were flying one and two bombing missions a day this entire period.

One day in Northern France I saw a German jet shoot down four B17 Flying Fortresses in five minutes. The tiny white parachutes way up looked like white cookies and gradually got bigger and bigger as they came down. Our outfit was very active during the Battle of the Bulge. Flying conditions were terrible; snow, fog and freezing rain kept us grounded for several days, but when it cleared up we hit the Germans with everything we had. We were attack bombers supporting the troops and we worked every day dawn to dusk.

There were many harrowing experiences. One in particular comes to mind. A young gunner was trapped in the rear of a burning B25 that had just bellied in due to a shot up landing gear. The exit hatch for his position was in the bottom of the plane beneath his seat position. He could not crawl forward because of the fire. We had to chop the rear of the plane to get him out, but I'm afraid it was too late.

New Years Eve 1945 was a real thriller. It was a beautiful clear evening and the Germans were out strafing and bombing everything. An ME109 German fighter flew right past our tent with all his guns blazing and thank God he missed our tent. We heard him coming back and dove under our cots, even though they would have provided little cover. After another pass at us, missing again, the pilot took off. It was a hair raiser, and we spent a long time after that in a bomb crater used as a bomb shelter in the freezing cold.

Another strafing attack later on had us sliding back and forth on the ice of the crater, huddled up against the banks depending on which way the plane was flying. This went on day and night, weather permitting, until the end of the war. At this time we were based in Laon near the Belgian border and a close trip to Reims. We were all given leave to go to Reims on VE Day. I was put in charge of several trucks going to town where there was great celebrating going on. The French opened all the Champaign cellars and everyone had a high old time. I told the truck drivers to pick up all the men too drunk to walk and bring them back to our base. I was amazed that there were not too many.

After the war was over we were shipped to Antwerp where we boarded a ship for home. The ship was a floating gambling den, converted by the men. We played craps and 21 with nothing else to do.

Darned if we didn't land in Hoboken right where we started from, then back to Fort Devens, also the same place we started from three and a half years earlier.

I'll never forget the train trip home on October 15, 1945. New England was a riot of fall coloring and a tremendous home coming to God's country.