

# Cruising the skies in 'Aluminum Overcast'

*Sentinel reporter  
describes his flight  
in a World War II  
bomber plane*

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MT. VERNON — It's not every day that you get to fly in a piece of history.

I was one of the lucky few who were able to fly in the B-17G Flying Fortress "Aluminum Overcast" while it was at Mt. Vernon Outland Airport over the holiday weekend.

Not only was the experience exciting, but I was also able to learn quite a bit about the aircraft through talking with the crew and researching the Sentinel archives.

I learned that "Aluminum Overcast" is one of only 13 Fortresses still flying, and it is a symbol of the Allied strategic bombing effort in World War II. The aircraft was made in May 1945 in Burbank, Calif. The plane, though designed for warfare, never saw combat and would later be sold in 1946 to an operator for \$758.

Apparently after being sold, the aircraft went on to perform some mapping through the African continent. It was also used for ant spraying in Alabama, and then carrying cattle from

Florida to Puerto Rico.

An interesting fact I experienced firsthand was how smooth the flight was. Would you believe me if I told you that a bomber plane built back in 1945 offered a smoother flight than half of the commercial flights I've been on?

It is true. Though "Aluminum Overcast" offered a noisy ride that had me thankful ear plugs were handed out, the takeoff, flight, and landing were as smooth as I've ever experienced over the dozens of commercial flights I've taken.

I read and was told a lot of facts about "Aluminum Overcast." I learned about the history and technical specifications of the aircraft, but what I really took away was the experience of riding in a real bomber plane.

Someone on the flight asked me if I could imagine what it would be like actually be a crew member on the B-17 when it was in combat.

To be honest, I couldn't, at least not in a real sense of grasping the totality of the danger, sacrifice, and commitment that went into going into combat in that kind of plane.

I had enough of a struggle wrapping my head around the idea that I was able to be on the historic aircraft, let alone imagining "Aluminum Overcast" being in combat and myself being one of the brave soldiers operating it.

When the B-17 was in the air, we were allowed to move

around and take pictures. It was hard enough to maneuver the tight spots, like the catwalk over the bomb bay, and not bump my head. I cannot fathom the intensity of moving back and forth across the plane as battle rages all around and below.

Sitting in the ball turret gunner area was surreal. I looked down at the land of Jefferson County feeling as though I was in a floating glass orb, albeit one with a heavy duty gun and machinery.

The view was breathtaking. The courage it must have taken to sit down there and shoot at enemies while they are trying to shoot you down cannot be quantified. For me, the experience was beautiful. I could have spend the entire flight looking out the ball turret gunner seat, but I can't comprehend the stress of actually manning that post in combat.

After the flight was over and I was able to get past the wow factor of the flight and think about what it meant, my thoughts were those of thanks. A sweeping appreciation for the men and women who have flown in such planes, not for a fun tour, but to protect our Country.

I am thankful for the service of all veterans, however, my flight in "Aluminum Overcast" made me especially appreciate the dedication World War II pilots and crew had. Their service allowed my fun flight to even occur.  
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Sentinel Photo/GREG PETERSON

**ALUMINUM OVERCAST** — Crowds of people came to view the B-17G Flying Fortress "Aluminum Overcast" at Mt. Vernon Outland Airport over the weekend. The B-17 was built in 1945 and is one of only a dozen or so B-17s still flying.

7/5/15