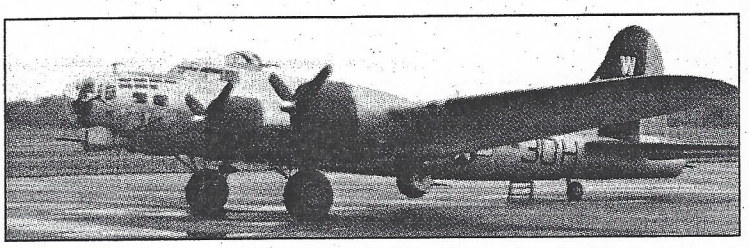
A PIECE OF HISTORY FLIES TO MT. VERNON

BY SCOTT PINKOWSKI



The Experimental Aircraft Association of Oshkosh, Wisconsin brought a living piece of history to Mt. Vernon's Outland Airport over the Fourth of July weekend to honor all veterans — especially those who flew dangerous combat missions in WWII, fighting the Axis powers all over the world. This B-17 Bomber known as Aluminum Overcast was at center stage as fascinated visitors flocked to get a glimpse of this mighty war bird. It's a rare war bird at that, as there are fewer than 12 airworthy B-17s left in the world out of the more than 12,000 that were built between 1936 and 1945. The EAA conducted ground tours and flight experiences throughout the weekend during their stop in Mt. Vernon as part of their nationwide tour.

Thanks to EAA, I had the privilege of riding in Aluminum Overcast. As a WWII history enthusiast, it was a dream come true, but I could not help but think that my short experience was nothing next to what it must have been like to be in combat in the freezing, thin air of 24,000 feet. Romanticized as aerial combat sometimes was during WWII, it was still horrible and deadly. For the boys in the Mighty Eighth, sometimes the downtime between missions and the dread of when the next mission was and where the mission would take them was every bit as stressful as the missions themselves. I've often read of the dread the men felt as they sweated out their 25 mission tour. Fewer planes came home each day than went out, friends and acquaintances were lost, and one couldn't help but wonder if your next mission would be your unlucky one.

All in all, I came away with a greater appreciation of what these brave young men accomplished during these trying times.

The four-engined B-17 has surely earned itself an iconic image and has become almost synonymous with the Army Air Corps daylight bombing campaign in the European Theater of World War II (much to the chagrin of the B-24 boys!) But the B-17 has truly earned the reputation of a tough fighter — just like the men who flew her and crewed her. It seems that during World War II, fighting men tended to develop a love affair with the machines that they rode into battle, and the machines themselves take on an almost mythical status. And it's this very admiration that is still going strong today, helped along by the EAA and its efforts in preserving aviation history and honoring the men and women who are part of it.

After a bumpy start, the B-17 became one of the most successful warplanes in military history and is credited by many as playing a huge role in winning the war in Europe. Operated largely by the Eighth Air Force which flew from dozens of bases in England, B-17s were able to pound Germany's war industry and seriously hamper its ability to wage war. The Army Air Corps developed the technique of flying what was known as a box formation, which allowed a squadron of bombers to provide maximum mutual protection from their gunners without hitting each other and still bringing their bombs on target in the needed concentration. Those bombs were targeted with the top secret Norden bombsight, which was a technological wonder for its time. It allowed the B-17's bombardier to place his salvo of bombs on target from high altitude, thus increasing the chances of survival for the crew.

Each B-17 carried into battle a crew of ten: a pilot, co-pilot, flight engineer, navigator, bombardier, radio operator, ball turret gunner, two waist gunners and a tail gunner. They were to work seamlessly together to carry out their missions. Each man knew his job well and did his utmost to get it done, sometimes having to step in and administer first aid or take over a battle station if a comrade was incapacitated.

Large, tight formations of these bombers, sometimes extending beyond the range of their fighter plane escort, penetrated deep into the heart of Germany itself to deliver their payload of bombs, relying only on their own machine gunners to provide mutual protection for themselves. In fact, that's how the iconic bomber got its moniker, "Flying Fortress." When the Army Air Corps was unveiling its new bomber to the public, bristling with machine guns and turrets, a reporter allegedly remarked that it was a "regular flying fortress!"

As the war waged on into 1944, the battle hardened and experienced German fighter pilots, some of which had been flying in combat since 1939, discovered a vulnerability of the Flying Fortresses and started attacking them in vicious head-on attacks en mass. The closing speed of the planes moving towards each other minimized the enemy fighters' exposure to the formation's guns and exposed the bombers' engines, the vital crew in the nose, and the pilots to direct gun and cannon fire. The Allies countered by adding more guns and a powered turret to make the Germans at least think twice, but it was still not enough in many cases.

One danger that the machine guns could not protect against was German anti-aircraft guns or "flak." Using a sophisticated system of radar, acoustic detectors and spotters the Germans were able to accurately put up a barrage of anti-aircraft shells, each one exploding at a predetermined altitude and peppering shrapnel into the formations of bombers. While the B-17 was known for absorbing incredible amounts of damage and keeping airborne, an unlucky direct flak hit could spell instant doom for a bomber and possibly its crew. It was not uncommon to hear crews talk of "flak so thick you could get out and walk on it." The worst part of it was there was little you could do to avoid it while flying in formation. All one could do is hope that the next shell to come up didn't have your name on it. In the later months of the war, the Allies experimented with various technological countermeasures to fool the German radar and send the deadly shells off target.

As if spookily accurate flak gunners and expert German fighter pilots weren't enough danger for these young men to face, there was just the danger inherent in flying in large, tight formations while carrying several thousand pounds of explosives. Many men were lost to mechanical failure or mid-air collisions. Underscoring the importance of good formation flying is the fact that some B-17s were brought down by falling bombs when one or the other bomber drifted out of formation.

Lastly, the elements themselves were brutally dangerous. The temperature at the altitude at which B-17s operated could reach 50 below zero and the thin atmosphere meant that if the crews' oxygen masks malfunctioned or froze up, a man could be unconscious in a matter of minutes and die a short time after that.

Although Aluminum Overcast was on center stage this past weekend, remember that it would mean nothing without the brave men who crewed thousands of planes just like her. They are just one category of the many heroes of World War II. Don't forget the men who kept them flying and supported them, too. Together they faced overwhelming odds and through pure bravery, determination and grit, they persevered. I believe all these qualities are what EAA stands for and is trying to preserve and bring to the forefront through their efforts. To learn more about EAA, visit their website at EAA.org.