



D-Day Bombing Mission Notes

Recollections from a bombardier of the lead Pathfinder that led the 8th Air Force over Normandy on D-Day.

Interview; George F. Weller, former bombardier officer
8th Air Force.

D-day for us included a view of the Normandy invasion from two miles up. We were an air crew of ten men in a B24 pathfinder aircraft of the Eighth Air Force. Our particular group of pathfinders included 10 to 15 air crews, and was located in Hethel, England. The group was organized to provide specially trained and equipped crew/aircraft units, capable of placing bombs on targets obscured by clouds or bad weather. Because most air bases in England had bombers equipped only for visual sighting, they could navigate and bomb only when the ground was visible. Therefore when visibility was poor, they followed a pathfinder bomber and dropped their bombs, on signal, when the lead pathfinder dropped bombs and marker flares.

In the European theater before and during the invasion, the practice of flying in heavy bombers was extremely dangerous. An airman was very lucky to survive his tour of flying duty. Normally there was a natural fear of the unknown; each mission might be his last. Also every member of the crew felt the need to perform his individual duties calmly and so as not to endanger the mission or the lives of his mates. The airman with previous combat experience had an additional reason to be worried: Always there was the possibility for recurrence of previous mishaps such as:

- . Enemy fighters diving at us out of the sun.
- . Flack, seen first as a tiny, extremely black speck, expanding in a frightening millisecond into a large grey cloud close to or momentarily upon the bomber.
- . Ground fires burning in circles around blackened ground, each representing the spot where a bomber and crew had impacted the ground.
- . A malfunction of one of our bomber's engines, suggesting that we might have to leave the protection of the bomber formation.
- . Near collision with another bomber appearing suddenly out of condensation trails.
- . A fellow crew member hurt, when struck by anti-aircraft fire.
- . The anxiety of watching and counting the opening parachutes trailing from a burning, spiraling, tail-less bomber.
- . Noting the empty bunks when friends fail to return from a mission.

However the apprehensions that were with our crew on that D-day eventually evaporated into the routine of a well run mission, whereas the terrible happenings were to occur far below. On top, there was a peaceful blanket of clouds.

It was possible for us to know what went on below, because each pathfinder was equipped with a special radar device by which the radar operator could see a somewhat distorted image of the world below. In size, the radar scope was like a 9 inch TV. In appearance, the image resembled a sonar picture such as seen in submarine movies. There was a bright line rotating about the center of the screen, rebrightening the picture each time it swept around. Water appeared dark with tiny bright spots representing ships. Land was a lighter shade with bright spots representing towns. The water's edge was clearly defined by the break from darker water to lighter land. So the entire image resembled a portion of a map of England, such as seen in geography books.

As we flew during the previous week, we had seen the action below through the clouds and from our vantage point on high. There below was the gathering and maneuvering of many groups of ships along the shores and waterways of southern England. On that special D-day however, the number of ships had appreciably multiplied. There below us, was an armada many times greater than before. The invasion forces, thousands of white dots, were gathered along the southern edge of England and proceeding at ant's pace across the English channel. As we each took turns at the radar scope, it was our chance for a privileged perspective of history in the making. This was the scene promised us in the briefings.

A briefing could be defined as the occasion when we, the participating air crews, were instructed on how the mission was to be flown. Also a briefing included all other pertinent information presented by a staff of specialists. On the occasion of D-day, there were two briefings followed by the actual air combat operation, but the three were so alike as not to not require repetition in the telling.

The mission:

Since the background is already presented, it is now expedient to step through the happenings of D-day with the events related in the same order as they occur.

June 5, 1944, Hethel, England:

General Eisenhower declares "Go" on the D-day plans, which are complete in detail and optimally timed, despite threatening weather conditions. Our crew is designated to lead the 446th Bomb Group, which, for this mission, is the leader of the 8th Air Force. We fly from home base to the 446th home base.

June 6, 1944, Bungay, England:

We are briefed on all aspects of our mission:

- . Our heavy bombers are the first wave of the invasion. Parachutists and gliders have already been dropped inland.
- . Our primary targets include 100 foot high cliffs of Normandy, including heavy guns and emplacements on top. We have specially prepared target maps and pictures.

- . The weather is clear above a full cloud cover at 5000 feet. Flight temperatures and winds are given. No contrails at flight altitude.
- . No friendly fighter protection is provided.
- . The presence of enemy fighters is not expected.
- . Our flack maps show little predictable antiaircraft except on an island north of our track.
- . Standard armament is a capacity load of 500 pound bombs. For the pathfinders, armament is four 500's plus marker flare bombs.
- . We know the disposition, size, and schedules of the invasion fleet. The first landing craft are to be beached immediately after our bombing; so we are warned: No accidental bomb drops short of the shore.
- . Our escape routes (if we are downed) are over the Spanish border. We carry appropriate escape kits, including food and unmarked maps.

Our bomber takes off at about 4:00 AM and flies to a specified altitude and location (above England) for forming. "Forming" is a necessary operation, because bombers at various locations about England must take off one at a time and all end up flying in the same formation of bombers. Our group, about 25 bombers, seeks the brightly colored forming bomber of the 446th bombing group. It circles continuously firing two specific colors of flares. Gradually a formation gathers around it. During the same time, but at different locations, other groups are forming about their own brightly colored bomber (striped or polkadotted) which fire different codes of flares. The forming bombers are non-combatant and eventually drop off.

On the English countryside below, everyone recognizes the great throbbing and roaring overhead which occurs whenever the heavies are forming. Eventually the great throbbing decreases magically and in but a few minutes; when, at a marked time, all bombers leave to join up into one massive formation and proceed toward their targets.

For today, D-day, the plan for the approach to the target is different from any other mission. Today's approach is designed so that all bombers arrive at the target at about the same time. Thus all of the bombers, moving shoulder to shoulder so to speak, approach the shore of Normandy in a line parallel to the shore. This operation might be visualized by comparing it to a maneuver often performed by marching bands on football fields. They march down the field in a formation until on a signal everyone makes a quick left turn, and subsequently all members of the band reach the edge of the field at the same time. So it is with this great number of heavy bombers. They all arrive at the Normandy shore within minutes of each other. Looking to our right and left, we can see a long line of bombers flying beside us.

The final approach to the target is normally controlled by either the lead bombardier or the lead radar operator. This time, a first time, the two combine. For this mission, it is necessary

to combine the accuracy of the bombsight mechanism with the cloud penetration of radar, but a mechanical combination of bombsight and radar is not yet available. Therefore a new technique is born, a procedure already practiced over England and tested by our crews over the shores of France at Pas de Calais. The technique is an approved procedure: The radar operator gives target range information to the bombardier who inputs it to the bombsight mechanism, makes corrections, and drops the bombs. Meanwhile the bombardiers in the 25 bombers flanking the lead ship are watching the lead plane's bomb bay and salvo their own bombs instantly as they see the bombs and flares leaving the lead ship.

Flying over a scheduled route, the bombers return to their home bases. There they are debriefed, telling what happened. Shortly thereafter they are assigned to another new bombing mission to be completed this day.

Sgt. J. Weller 2-11-49

Dear Jared,

In your letter you asked: how many died, lived, signed up?

Died: We were kept very well informed in all things except that, such "bad news" was not normally distributed except by "grape vine". We know when friends were lost over England. When crews did not return, they could have landed in Switzerland or Scandinavia or escaped from Germany on land. For D-day (two missions) I estimate we could have lost as much as 10%, equal to one or two planes from our group.

Lived: I would like to think that 50% of the crews we flew our tour with, survived the war. This is because a good number of those interned in neutral countries came through our base in late 1944.

Signed-up: The only time we signed-up was when we entered the Army Air Force; although maybe 15% transferred from the other army units. Of those signed-up, about half were "washed out" during training, some continuing as gunners. We were assigned and did not normally volunteer for particular missions.

In the pages I already sent you, I did not discuss a couple of disappointing incidents which occurred on D-day:

One: Bombing accuracy. A senior staff officer, (thinking that he was saving American's lives) ordered us (at the last hour) to put a delay in our bombsights which would cause our bombs to be dropped 1500 feet further inland.

Two: On D-day afternoon, we did not bomb our target at St. Lo. Delayed by engine starting failure, we could not get our bomber off in time; so that the 446th was never formed in time to meet the deadline for departure.

We were disappointed on both counts. We could have saved American lives if the cliff-top fortifications could have been demolished by our bombs. If we could have destroyed the marshalling yards (railroad) at St. Lo, much fighting and loss of lives would have been avoided in the considerable ground fighting that occurred in and around St. Lo after D-day. It was not to be.

There are peace groups today whose members say that bombing is wrong under any circumstances. I don't argue with them. I remember, with regret, how our national hero, Charles Lindberg, was subjected to humiliation which he hardly deserved. He had, before Pearl Harbor, spoken of peace and his opposition to our getting into the European conflict.

With due regard for opposing opinions, I must now try to explain why I believe it was morally right for us, during World War II, to drop bombs, some of which fell on innocent people.

Basically we were committed to fighting for our lives and those at home. We did not know that we would win the war. We had to do the best with what we had available to stop the war and stop the killing. It would have been nice if we had a really humane way of stopping the fighting - like capturing Hitler - but that was not our option. The Eighth Air Force adopted a somewhat humane method of warfare. It was to accurately drop bombs on military targets only. This reduced loss of civilian lives but could only be accomplished in clear weather. When we did wait for clear weather to bomb, the enemy fighters and anti-aircraft could take advantage of the lull, concentrate in great numbers, meet us in the air and decimate our bombers. Subsequently continuous bombing through good and bad weather was adopted, the Americans by day and the English by night. Radar bombing, through the clouds, was less accurate, and civilian casualties were greater. As a result of our continuous bombing and attacks on critical war supplies (such as refineries and ball bearing plants) the German Air Force was decimated.

Thereafter, German air power was not too serious a threat to our invading forces on the ground.

As I have now tried to describe, it was a tactical necessity for the Americans to use bombing to stop the enemy. Now I mention that we, the air crews, only followed orders, and when we bombed while following such orders, we did no more than the enemy had done. But such excuses were not necessary; we were concerned with doing our part of a plan which we believed in and understood.

We the six regular officers of the crew were pilot, co-pilot, navigator, radar operator/navigator, bombardier, and observer (the guest commander was not regular). We had been trained stateside by the Air Force Training command. During a year in the U.S. we had been in intensive training with instructions, tests, examinations, and eliminations; so that about half of our original number had been "washed out". We had been trained and conditioned to withstand the rigors of combat and to protect the secrets we had been entrusted with.

When we arrived in England, the 8th Air Force provided months of additional training and ground school. We were taught extensively about the warfare tactics used in Europe. We learned in great detail the whys, and how air battles were conducted: The training included diverse courses such as English air base defenses and emergency procedures, air/sea search and rescue, fighter support methods, air formations and related fire power control, aerial communications, new armaments, and how to respond when Germans flying U.S. bombers would joint our formations. We learned how to be cool if captured and subjected to the tricks of German interrogation: Give only our name and serial number. Don't carry pictures of our family which could be taken from us, then exchanged for information. Don't concoct "clever" false stories which the Germans would most certainly use to extract information. Avoid revealing even insignificant tactical information which the interrogator would seize upon to destroy our confidence and reserve.

When we finally got into combat, we appreciated the extra schooling. On every mission, at least one unplanned, unexpected, and unexplained situation occurred and often produced in us an alarming fear, alike to that a youngster might experience when lost in a dark wood. For me (like any other airman) in my private battle against the unexpected, my knowledge of the tactical situation reinforced my self-confidence - the self-sufficiency born of conscientiousness and my ability to do the many things that my loved ones, my friends, and I approved of.

Well Jared, this letter explains some of the reasoning behind our bombing during World War II. It also gives information which I think can be helpful. It is long and I hope not too complex. Good Luck.

Love,

Gramps