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## WWII veteran recounts missions, crew

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Spokane resident Louis Anderson flew a B-17 bomber over Germany with the 305th Bombardment Group during World War II. (Holly Pickett / The Spokesman-Review)

**By Cindy Hval**

Correspondent



The black-and-white photo shows a B-17 flight crew looking impossibly young and irrepressibly confident. Their 22-year-old leader, first pilot Louis Anderson sits on his haunches in the front row. The photo was snapped as the 10 young men prepared to depart for Chelveston, England. It was May 1944 and the crew  of this G-model Flying Fortress eagerly anticipated defending their country.

Thirty-five missions later, Anderson returned home, having lost only one of his original crew. From his north Spokane living room, he recently recalled his tour of duty. Tall, broad-shouldered with silver hair sharply parted, the 86-year-old still cuts a commanding figure, but his smile is warm, his voice is soft and his blue eyes twinkle.

The twinkle dims, however, when he recounts the first time he and his novice crew saw a plane shot down. They were flying in a 12-ship squadron. His friend Clifton Alford, a music professor at Central Washington University, was piloting a nearby aircraft. "They got hit," Anderson said. "We didn't see any parachutes. We'd all gone through training together," he paused. "It hit the fellows pretty hard. The romance wore off and they ceased to believe the movies pretty quickly."

His crew was part of the 305th Bombardment Group. Their mission was to bomb German railroads, oil refineries and switchyards. Now, all these years later, Anderson ruefully shrugs off the danger he and his crew endured. "In 35 missions there was only one that I didn't get shot at."

"On one mission," he recalled, "we got 300 hits on the right wing alone. On that day we probably had over 1,000 hits." While his crew made it back without a loss, others weren't as fortunate. "That same mission a friend of mine had only six holes in his plane, but he lost his navigator."

Flight crews can be notoriously superstitious. Anderson laughs when he recalled the time his crew didn't want to take off until he was wearing the greasy, stained cap he usually wore. But he, too, realized he could use a little extra protection. He sheepishly admitted, "I carried a New Testament my grandmother gave me on every mission."

They were right to be concerned. The first time they saw a plane shot down disturbed them, but nothing prepared them for the horror they witnessed on a subsequent mission.

“A ship in our left wing got hit,” Anderson said. (Pilots usually refer to their aircraft as “ships.”) He and his men watched in dismay as the ball turret gunner fell from his turret and hung suspended by his foot. Many B-17 crew members considered the ball turret the worst position on the aircraft. The gunner was confined in a sphere fastened to the underside of the plane.


Anderson cleared his throat. “I had to explain to the fellows that he was no longer with us.” After 45 seconds the gunner fell from the aircraft.

“We had quite a bit of difficulty talking the crew into getting back in the plane to fly a mission the next day,” he continued. “We had to have several conferences with the chaplain.”

On a later mission, one of his crew members had a piece of flak go under his helmet and essentially scalp him. “He was really bleeding,” Anderson said. They got him safely back to base and after he recovered he was transferred to a different aircraft. Later they found out he’d been killed in action. He was the only member of the original crew who didn’t return home.

Anderson himself was wounded while on a mission. “Flak went through the floorboard of the cockpit and out the windshield, shattering it,” he said. “I was hit in the back of the leg and a small piece of flak lodged there. It felt like someone hit me with a baseball bat.” He paused and rubbed the back of his leg. He thinks it’s still there somewhere. “For years I could move that piece of flak around.”

In December 1944 they completed their missions. Anderson returned home and trained to fly B-29s. He was scheduled to be deployed to the Pacific when the war ended.

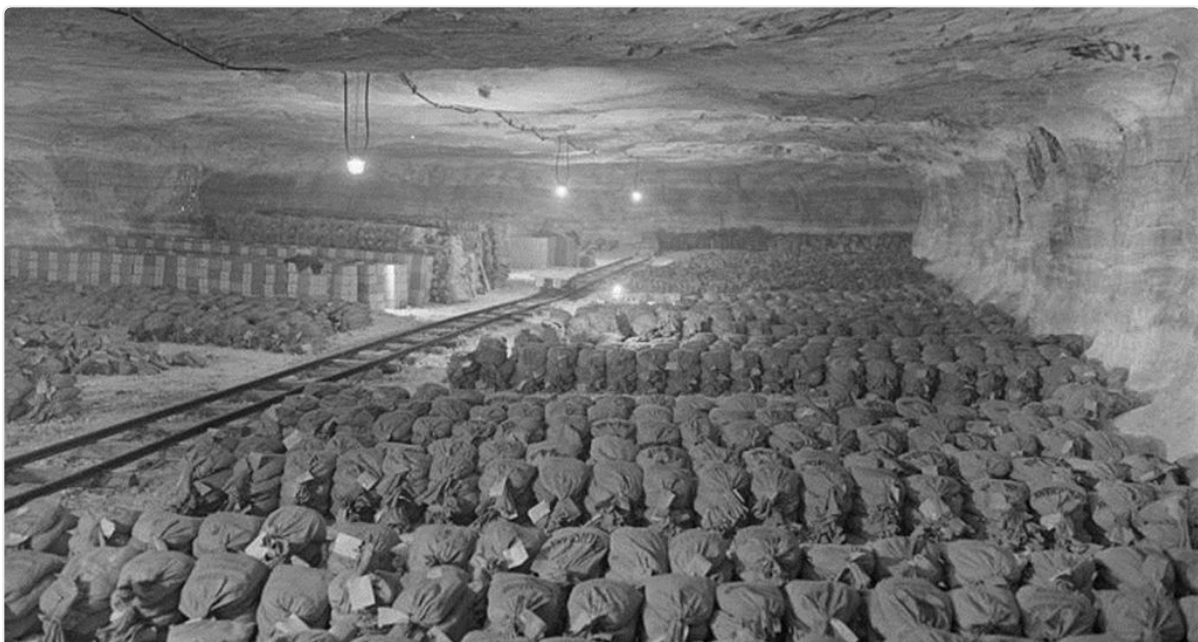
He married Barbara in 1946 and graduated with a teaching degree from Washington State University in 1950. He served 21 years in the Air Force  reserves and taught at Mead High School for 30 years. “When things got boring in class,” Anderson said, “the students would get me to talk about my World War II experiences.” He laughed. “It was a good strategy.”

The couple raised their family in Green Bluff and enjoyed being part of the farming community. The Anderson family still has military ties. His granddaughter is married to Lt. Col. David Banholzer, who currently pilots Air Force One. Anderson smiled and said, "He's the only one who'll really listen to my war stories."

As Veterans Day approaches, Anderson believes the best way to honor our veterans is simple. "Remember those who didn't make it back," he said. "Remember those who weren't quite as fortunate."

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