

Robert Winstead

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FLYING MEMOIR

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Bob Winstead
291 Bahia del Mar Cir. 904
St. Petersburg FL 33715

During my flying training and later combat flying with the Fifteenth Air Force in Italy there were numerous events which occurred that I believe would be of interest to my family and others. I will cover some of the events that remain etched in my memory.

I was born in Wilson County, NC in 1922 on a tobacco farm owned by my grandmother. There was a millpond and a country store near by. At that time there were very few airplanes and not many cars. Lindbergh flew solo across the Atlantic in 1927. I would have been five years old that year.

My dad told me about his first airplane ride with a barn stormer and how thrilling it was and how the oil splattered on his Sunday white shirt. I have a twin brother and when we were about nine or ten years old a ford tri-motor airplane came to Wilson and landed on a grass field. Rides were a dollar and dad bought two rides, one for my brother and one for me. What a wonderful event. I was already very interested

in flying and of course this only confirmed my desire to become a pilot

I built models of planes and read about the World War I aces and their battles in the air. When the United States declared war on Japan and Germany on December seventh 1941, I had already begun to prepare for the requirements to become a pilot in the Army Air Force. At that time a minimum of two years of college was required plus the passing of a written examination. Atlantic Christian College now called Barton College was in Wilson and I had attended for about a year and a half when the two-year requirement was eliminated but the exam was still required. During this time I was living at home and working a 40-hour week. In the spring of 1941 I went to Norfolk VA. I worked on a construction job located at the Norfolk Navy Base. I needed the money to pay school debts. I returned to Wilson and on August 19th, 1942 I drove to Raleigh NC and passed the entrance exam three days before my 20 birthday. This action placed me on a track that was to change my life forever. On September 14, 1942 I received notice of acceptance into the cadet pilot training program. From September to mid-March, 1942 I worked at several jobs and waited anxiously to be called.

On March 15, 1943 I was ordered to report to Nashville TN which was a cadet processing center. After nine days at the center we were transferred, by train, to Maxwell Field AL. a preflight training center that required nine weeks of non-flying training. We arrived at Maxwell

on a train about midnight on March 26, 1942. I will never forget stepping off the train and being greeted by upper class men in full dress uniform, including side sabers worn by cadet officers. At that moment we were in under class [43k] and subject to all forms of hazing, such as eating square meals which required eating with eyes straight ahead, no looking at the plate. All food was taken from the plate to the mouth by raising the fork straight up to mouth level and then a 90-degree turn to the ~~outh~~^{outh}. Upper classmen were sitting on each side to be certain that there was no movement of the head. All walking was at double pace and along the curbs. Upper class questions were answered most of the time with three responses: yes sir, no sir and no excuse sir. Ground school was held most days and if any cheating was observed the cadet was brought before the total class at midnight, stripped of any ~~ank~~^{ank} and drummed off the field. This occurred while I was there in class 43k. We were called out of our rooms in full dress uniforms with white gloves and marched to a platform where the ceremony was conducted. Very impressive, the message was clear, no cheating.

The severity of hazing caused some cadets to request a transfer out of the cadet program. Men that had entered the program from previous army service had more trouble being subjected to the hazing than those of us who were civilians with no previous Army experience. After about four weeks we became the upper class. During our training at Maxwell we

we were allowed some open post time and Norris Watson, one of my roommates from Heflin AL, and I were dating two Huntingdon College students. As we were walking across the campus he saw a girl from his hometown and stopped to speak to her. The girl's name was Lois Harper. I fell in love with Lois and on February third 1945 we were married and have now been so for fifty-six years. She graduated from Huntingdon and taught school in Montgomery while I was overseas. Meeting and marrying Lois was the best thing that ever happened to me.

At the end of nine weeks, on May, 28 1942, we were moved by train to Douglas GA for primary flight training in a PT 17 Stearman, a bi-wing, canvas covered single engine plane with two open cockpits, wire struts, and a gravity type fuel System. This was a dream about to come true. Would I actually fly this beautiful airplane? The answer was yes and I flew solo after eleven hours of flight training. There is nothing that I can compare to flying the Stearman. The wind, the noise and the low level of most flights gave the feeling that I think birds must have. My instructor was a civilian named O.C. Thompson, a very good instructor. I practiced emergency landings of all kinds, acrobatics, navigation, and flying techniques. I was sent up on a solo flight one day to practice acrobatics, including spins. I saved the spin to the last and it almost turned out to be my last act of living. I pulled

the nose up and, as it stalled, I kicked in some rudder to start the spin. Several rotations were made then I set up the recovery, stopped the spin and pulled back on the stick to bring the plane from a dive to straight and level. At this point the plane went into another spin in the opposite direction. No problem, I still had some altitude remaining so I proceeded to duplicate the above recovery and all went fine until I again pulled out from the dive. Once again I began to spin in the opposite direction.

At this point I remembered my instructor's description of the problem. I was pulling too hard and fast on the joystick and setting up a high-speed stall. I only had space above the ground for one more try, this time I slowly but firmly pulled back on the stick and recovered with perhaps five hundred feet remaining above the ground. This experience added to my knowledge and taught me the importance of learning from ground school and flying instruction. If there were any losses in the class during primary training, I am not aware of them.

On July 30th primary training was complete and we began our basic training at Cochran Field in Macon GA. The BT13 Vultee, metal construction, low wing, single engine, with sliding canopy and wide landing gear was the plane in use. This was a large step up from the Stearman. The BT13 was known as the vibrator for its flying characteristics. It was also considered to be underpowered.

I have several memories about some events while flying this plane.

One day while practicing acrobatics I decided to do a snap roll, which is performed by a quick, back pull on the joy stick while at the same moment giving a hard kick on the rudder. When this maneuver is done correctly the plane will very quickly rotate about its lateral axis. The snap was instantaneous and produced a very loud noise. I suddenly realized that a snap roll is a normal speed maneuver performed when in level flight. I made the mistake of diving to gain speed that was not needed and could cause the wing to fail. That ended practice. I returned to the field hoping the wings were ok. Cadets made many mistakes while flying and were very lucky that most were not fatal. Experience is acquired in many ways and failure is a great teacher.

A second and more traumatic event occurred while making our first night solo flight to an auxiliary field some distant from the home field.

Those of us who were scheduled for the late flights were transported from Cochran Field to the auxiliary field by bus and when the early flight landed we would use their planes and fly our night mission at the auxiliary field, land and then return to the home base. This would be our first solo night flight between two fields. On the bus ride from Cochran my friend Robert Springer gave me a candy bar to take on my

flight and enjoy while flying above the auxiliary field. Our assignment was to fly to a given altitude and wait until called to land. The night was wonderful with a full moon and comfortable temperature. I was at the top of the stack waiting for my turn to land. As I was in this holding pattern I heard a call from a landing plane that said, "My controls will not work". This was repeated perhaps two times and was followed by a crash and an explosion near the end of the field. I was instructed from the tower to hold my position until called. I held at several thousand feet above the field for about an hour and then the tower began calling those below me to land. I was the last to land and cut my engine off. I will always remember how quiet it was and my concern over who was in the crash. I walked into the ready room and learned that my friend, Robert Springer, was killed in the accident. We were then told to go back to our planes and return to Cochran Field. The take off direction was over a peach orchard and as I cleared the field, just above the trees, my engine began to misfire. At this point I opened the canopy hoping to gain sufficient altitude to bail out, in the meantime I was making every adjustment to the engine controls that I could think of. Finally, when the carburetor heat was increased, the engine returned to normal and I proceeded to make my return flight to Cochran. As I was on my final approach for landing the field did not look familiar and I thought I was at Warner Robins, a field in sight of Cochran. I could well imagine

what would happen to a cadet who landed at the wrong field, so I gunned the engine and took off, as I gained altitude I realized that I was at the correct field and continued in the pattern and landed.

I climbed out of the plane and was so shaken by all that had happened that I considered whether I should remain in the program. The thought did not last long. I proceeded to my quarters and considered the night another step in the experience of becoming a pilot. Certainly there were dangerous events ahead but none were more frightening than those that occurred on that night. The difference was by the time I reached combat I was better prepared for the job to be done. Before my training was completed at Cochran, we learned to fly formation, land in formation, take cross-country flights and fly with instruments.

My next post was Moody Field in Valdosta Georgia for advanced twin-engine training. The AT10 was built by the Globe company and was made mostly of wood. It was a nice plane to fly and after check out most flights were made by two cadets sitting side by side with one as pilot and the other as co-pilot. At some point the positions were switched so each pilot could log first pilot time. Advanced training concentrated on navigation skills, flying the beam, and other multi-engine requirements. The most difficulty I had at Moody was flying the beam by using radio for navigation. I will avoid the details but the basics are

- 1- identify the range station;
- 2-identify your position as north, east,

south or west of the station by the level of radio sound, fade or build
3- intersect and identify a beam leg and 4-fly this beam leg to the
station. This is an over simplification of the requirement to do all
this by listening to code sound and strength of the sound. I am devoid
of music talent and this required similar skills. The day of my final
check ride, prior to graduation, I was greatly concerned about my
ability to pass and thus earn my wings. I believe the large investment
they had in my training was most beneficial in passing even though I
did fly the beam better than usual. We did a great deal of flying day
and night but by this stage we were all reasonably good pilots.

Cadets that were having problems with flying and or ground school
were eliminated [washed out] early in the training process. On
December 5, 1943, I earned my silver wings and was commissioned as
a second lieutenant.

During the entire training period between preflight at Maxwell field
and graduation at Moody I had three very close cadet friends who were
roommates and always available for open post and discussions of our

flying problems and successes. Their names were Norris Watson,
Jesse Wyatt and Bill Winkler. We
shared many experiences and all four of us were sent to the 15th Air
Force in Italy. Bill and I flew B17s ; Norris and Jesse flew B24's.

None of us were located on the same field. Norris and Jesse were both killed in action. They will always be remembered. Norris was the one that introduced me to Lois. I continue to be grateful.

>From Dec. 5 until Dec. 18 I was on leave and visited home and then took a train to Heflin AL to visit with Lois and her family. I arrived on a Sunday, had lunch, visited and departed for Montgomery AL where Lois had to teach school on Monday. We had a great time. A few days later we went to the train station for my trip to Salt Lake City, where the Second Air Force replacement wing was located. I was assigned to a combat crew as a co-pilot on a B17. There were no planes at this location. We went to some meetings and met role call, but did not have much to do. On January 29, our crew along with others was ordered to report to Ardmore Oklahoma for twelve weeks of combat training. My first flight in a B17 was at night. We started down the runway and shortly after wheels up there was an engine failure. The instructor was standing behind the pilot and co-pilots seats. He immediately jerked me out of my seat and began the procedure of feathering the propeller and making the turn needed to return to the field, an exciting introduction to the B17. Before we finished at Ardmore we had numerous engine failures and I became very adept in filling the co-pilot role. We flew many nights and would return to the field in the wee hours of the morning. The missions included long flights to given

targets, daytime formation practice, and target shooting assignments for the gunner crewmembers. All of the flying and ground school was to train crews to learn how to operate the equipment and work together. We gained all the knowledge we could about the B17 and its flying characteristics. We practiced emergency procedures of all types. During my stay at Ardmore I had the mumps and was in the hospital for 21 days, which was the required time for the quarantine. I was fearful that I might not be able to rejoin my crew due to the time lost from flying and ground school. Fortunately I was allowed to rejoin the crew. On April 2, 1944 we were transferred by troop train to Kearney Nebraska for a B17 allocation, which we would fly to our overseas destination. The allocation did not occur for our crew because the number of planes was limited and as usual were allocated in alphabetical order of first pilot's names. The last available plane went to some pilot whose last name began with an "s". These crews were assigned to the Eighth Air Force and flew there new planes to locations in England. My first ^Rilots name was Jay Weese.

On April 26, 1943 those who did not get planes were transported by a troop train to Camp Patrick Henry near Newport News, VA. There were thousands of troops from all branches of the army.

On May 2, 1944 we were moved by truck to the Norfolk Navy Base for

embarkation. Over 100 ships were waiting to be loaded. I don't recall how long it took to board all the men but once under way ships could be seen in all directions. The speed was to be about eight knots to accommodate the slower vessels. We were 22 days at sea and sailed in an ever changing course in hopes of avoiding submarine attacks. Destroyers were used for our escort and on several occasions did drop depth bombs but we were never told of the results.

We were on a liberty ship, which is small, and in bad weather rolled like a tub. The seas would crash over the bow and as the wave passed under the ship the stern would rise and the props would be above the surface of the water and turning at a greatly increased rpm. There was little to do other than write letters and after dinner there were always card games in progress. I learned to play black jack and teamed with a friend on the basis that we would split our losses and winnings. the dealer has an advantage and could often be bought from the person that had earned the deal. As I remember, the deal cost about twenty-five dollars and could be held until you lost. I sent over one thousand dollars home.

We arrived in Oran, Africa on May 24, 1944. The harbor showed the first signs I had seen of the war. There were sunken ship hulls visible and there were balloons floating above the harbor for defense against low flying

aircraft. I do not believe a threat from enemy attack was very likely but possible. We were in Oran for about two weeks waiting for the troop ship that would take us on the next leg of our journey.

On June 6, 1944 we embarked from Oran to Naples with over 7,000 troops aboard a British liner that had been converted to a troop carrier.

Austrian and Japanese Americans were aboard and I remember what a great combat record the Japanese earned fighting in north Italy. Three days later we arrived in Naples and were loaded on boxcars bound for Foggia. We arrived well after dark and spent the night in a bombed out railroad station. The next day we were moved by truck to our final stop which was in the middle of a previous wheat field now occupied by the 99th bomb group. There were four squadrons in the group with each about 1 mile apart. Our crew was assigned to the 346th squadron. All crews lived in tents with four officers to a tent and six enlisted men in tents located a short distance from the officer's area. Jay Weese (WV), first pilot, Bob Winstead (NC), co-pilot, Tommy Thompson (NM), bombardier, and Bob Whyet (SD), navigator, were all assigned to one tent. We were the officers of the crew that had been together since Salt Lake City.

The base had one steel mat strip for take off and landings. All the B17's were located in an area adjacent to the taxi strips. A typical mission flew four squadrons, with nine planes to the squadron, flying

in a 'box' formation. There were 21 groups in the 15th Air Force at different locations over most of southern Italy. When all groups were scheduled for a mission there would be over 700 B17's and B24's plus fighter support. Living in tents did not provide the comforts of home. They were cold in the winter and hot in the summer. To take a shower required walking about one hundred feet. The toilet was in the opposite direction and was a small two-hole outhouse tent. The dining building was in a third direction with officer accommodations and enlisted men in separate tents. The dining room was also the designated Officers Club with a bar. I did not drink in those days and did not make much use of the bar. Lois and I wrote each other almost every day. I spent many nights writing to Lois. When we were not flying missions we could go to Foggia and spend time at the Red Cross Center and visit other small towns along the coast. Our crew and others were given a week of rest on the Isle of Capri. All of our crew was together. It was a wonderful week of relaxation.

The following is my attempt to describe some of my mission and provide a better understanding of what combat flying was really like:

1- During the first mission that I flew, an incident occurred that was one of many that was caused by pilot error. We had dropped our bombs and were on the way back but still over enemy territory. The planes were all in formation and we were in typical 9-plane box formation that

requires constant adjustment to the planes around you. In this case a B17 ahead of us began to drift back toward the plane behind him and made the fatal mistake of allowing his tail section to come in contact with the props of the following plane. The plane went down and I do not know how many were able to bail out.

2- My first experience with a German fighter attack was on a mission to Montpellier in southern France. The target was a railroad yard.

After we came off the target we had a head-on attack by a German FW190.

I could see his guns firing when suddenly our top turret gunner began to return fire. The noise from the upper turret was very loud but stopped within a few moments. We did not get hit and I doubt that the fighter was hit. There was no confirmation that the plane was shot down. The attack was quick and unexpected; I did not have time for fear.

3- I don't remember what target we were bombing but it was very heavily defended. Some oil refinery targets like Polesti and Vienna had over five hundred 88mm and 105mm anti-aircraft guns. The target approach was made at a constant air speed, altitude and heading.

Rarely did anyone return without damage from flak. Often nothing critical was damaged but there were plenty of holes. This time we had a direct hit in an engine by a 88mm or 105mm shell that completely penetrated the engine from the bottom and out through the top. The engine was on fire and inoperative. Because of the altitude the fire did not last long. We could not maintain position in formation and

were fortunate to have a P51 fighter for cover on our return home. The prop shaft was fractured and other damage existed.

4- By the time I flew this

mission I had qualified as first pilot. On the bomb run over the target, a piece of shrapnel penetrated the oxygen tank located under my seat. Immediately the cockpit filled with what I thought was smoke and probably fire. I reached for the bail out button that signaled the crew to jump out but I was also scanning the instrument panel and noticed that the oxygen indicator was not working. I realized that what I thought was smoke turned out to be dust that had accumulated on the floor of the cockpit. Without oxygen we could not stay at 28,000 feet and had to descend to a lower altitude of about 10,000 ft. We were escorted home by a P51 without any further problems.

5- we were on a mission to Munich Germany to bomb an airfield and when we reached about ten thousand feet we entered clouds. This made flying formation very difficult. The planes were floating in a fog without any ground reference. A condition called vertigo can occur.

I had a new copilot who was not very skilled in formation flying even in good weather. He was of no use to provide relief. I did get vertigo, where up was down and level seemed to be diving or climbing.

My brain lost its ability to tell up from down. Many pilots have suffered this condition and as a result lost control of the aircraft.

The normal solution is to rely completely on instruments but flying

in formation requires holding a position on another aircraft that limits the use of instruments. Therefore flying close formation with the aircraft that had been assigned as my position was the best solution. I was flying off the lead aircraft that could take advantage of using an automatic pilot or instruments. After about thirty minutes we broke out into clear weather. Shortly after and near the target I saw my first jet; a twin engine ME262. A B24 group was to our right and as he passed through the formation he shot down two B24's and then passed in front of our airplane. His speed was most impressive. The nose gunner could not track him. The trip back was uneventful.

6- The invasion of southern France was on August 15, 1944. I flew the mission and it was what was known as a "milk run", in other words, not very dangerous. The events that occurred prior to the mission were a series of flights that were dangerous and memorable. The invasion was scheduled for attacking the beach after sunrise. The schedule would require a night flight and thus the assembly into formation over Foggia and then a flight to Corsica for the final assembly of the total Air Force, including the heavy and medium bombers plus fighters. Prior to the invasion we began to practice flying night formation. There were several problems. First, our planes only had very small lights on the wing tips and tail and none were the flashing type. Second, the assembly of one group of thirty six planes even in daylight requires a circling and climbing pattern while each squadron

of nine planes join in formation and each of the four squadrons that make up the group must assemble and then join into the wing. Each formation group of thirty six planes has a given position to fly in a trail that becomes the wing. During our night practice there were B24's and B17's searching for their squadrons and groups. The British who flew night missions from our strip never attempted night formation and thought we were making a big mistake. On the first night of training two bombers collided and exploded near us. The light from the explosion was, for a moment, bright enough to read by. One night in searching for our squadron mates, we were joined by a B24, which was interesting since we were a B17 group. On the morning of the ~~ev~~asion we took off from Foggia around four AM and began our assembly. There was plenty of confusion with attempts to find your squadron by calling on the radio with messages such as, "I am now south of Foggia where are you?" Three bombers in formation hit the top of a hill and exploded. As the sun rose we were near Corsica and the sky was filled with all types of planes and the sea was covered with every naval vessel imaginable. We discovered that we were in formation with a squadron other than our own. The sun rise that morning of August 15, 1944 was the most beautiful I have ever seen, I was so thankful to see it after a night of tremendous tension. The bomb run was easy and as we approached the beach we could see our fighters down below strafing the beach. I was very pleased to return to the base and

enjoy a rest in my cot.

7- There were not many easy missions and flak was always present. I was credited with 51 combat missions but some difficult targets were credited as a double mission. Therefore, I was actually over the target 39 times. I flew 27 single count missions and 12 double count missions. During these flights engines were shot out, wing structures damaged, oxygen tanks destroyed. Bomb bay doors had to be cranked up manually when damaged. On September 14, 1944 I was promoted to the rank of First Lieutenant. I was also checked out as a first pilot about that time and logged one hundred hours as a first pilot. I had a total of 344 hours of combat flying and bombed Vienna, Ploesti, Munich, Blechhammer, Budapest, Brod, Nova Sad, Southern France, Athens, Genoa, Bologna, Regensburg, and others. Some of these places were visited more than one time.

The following awards were earned: Air Metal with 3 Oak Leaf clusters and the Distinguished Flying Cross [DFC].

Campaign ribbons: Rome-Arno, Appenines, Northern France, Southern France and Rhineland.

December 3, 1944: My final mission was flown to Blechhammer, Germany and was the longest that I ever flew, lasting over nine hours. It was a double count mission and considered one of the worst targets because of the concentration of flak. On this same date I was relieved from combat flying to return to the United States for a period of rest and

rehabilitation and an assignment in the U.S.

Looking back on all the experiences I had and realizing I was only 22 years

old (August 22, 1944 was my 22nd birthday), my entire future was influenced by these few months, like no others. There were other difficult times ahead but they were not life threatening and knowing that kept things in perspective. After returning to the U.S., Lois and I married on Feb 3, 1945. The rest of this account is shown in my "Summary of Air Force Service."

Foot note:

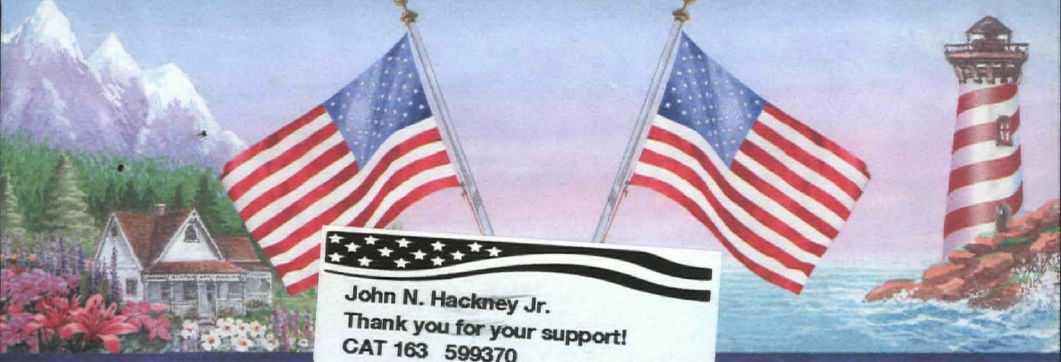
During my tour I always slept well and when flying over a dangerous target, I did not experience fear as such. A high level of concentration and the need to be prepared for critical failure were paramount, whether flying as the first pilot or co-pilot. The stress was high but we were well trained to handle emergencies and did so when necessary. I had a high regard for our crew and a desire to perform to their expectations. The few times that I had serious doubts about returning there was acceptance and thoughts of my family, home, and the hope that I would survive. After I completed my last mission, I did not sleep well. I began to realize that I had survived and recognized that I had been under great stress. It was several months after returning to the States that I began to feel normal. The return trip home was on a large passenger liner. Every available cubic of

space was occupied. My bunk was the top one. There were six bunks below mine. Prior to embarking we spent about one week in a school house located in Naples. Christmas was celebrated while we were there. On Jan. 1, 1944 we passed the rock of Gibraltar homeward bound to Lois and our future.

I write about this experience for my children, grandchildren and future descendants of our family. I pray that each of you will enjoy happy and peaceful lives.

Bob Winstead

September 9, 2001



John N. Hackney Jr.
Thank you for your support!
CAT 163 599370

06/09/08

Hi Betty Ray

Put this with
the Bob Winstead
story

Thank
you

Bob Winstead



ALL FROM WINSTON NC

THIS PHOTO WAS LOST

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BOB W. FINE WOODARD HERBERT SHARP

99 BG - 346 SBD

John Thank for the
information

Bob Winstead



Mr Robert W Winstead
6291 Bahia Del Mar Cir
St Petersburg, FL 33715-3311

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