



## The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman  
Columnist

### 12 O'Clock High

Some things are so intrinsically American they have helped define the way we understand ourselves. The B-17 Flying Fortress is one of them. Though there are only about 15 of them still airworthy today, for a few years in the last century the B-17, and the men who flew them, did enough of the hardest work to cement their rightful place in our national identity.

Last week I had the opportunity to fly over Central Oregon in the Aluminum Overcast, a restored B-17G now operated by the Experimental Aircraft Association. For me, it was less of a joyride with other media-types than a rare chance to achieve a kind of synesthetic appreciation of the conditions and environment experienced by Army aircrews in the Second World War.

That's a dicey proposition. No one was shooting at us from the ground. We were not fighting al-fresco in the waist-gunner positions at -50 degrees Fahrenheit, with frozen guns, while angry hives of Nazi Focke-Wulf's perforated the fuselage. No one

was packed into the lonely world of the ball turret.

There is, admittedly, a limit to how much one can really learn in an exercise like this, but a determined mind can sometimes find a moment, a takeaway, a direct line into the past that resonates.

The Aluminum Overcast itself did not participate in the war because she was delivered to the Air Corps too late to join the fight. Nevertheless, she has enjoyed a varied career in the skies, serving on aerial mapping operations in Africa and South America, hauling cattle in the Caribbean, fighting fire ants in the deep south, and now as a fully restored flying museum.

Her service history is irrelevant, of course, because today she serves in honor of those planes and their crews who were in the fight. The Overcast carries the colors of the 398th Bomb Group, and flies in honor of a sister ship shot down over Le Manior, France, on August 13, 1944. It was her 34th combat mission.

Despite their reputation for absorbing extraordinary abuse and returning home, some 4,700 Flying Fortresses were lost in combat, and another 4,000 in training accidents. In August 1943, on a raid over Schweinfurt and Regensburg in Germany, the 8th Air Force lost 60 B-17s out of an original flight of 376 bombers. In October of the same year, in a similar raid over Schweinfurt, they lost 60 more. Between the two disastrous raids, which led to a temporary halt in American daylight bombing, 1,200 empty bunks were left behind at bases in England.

The magnitude of World War II is, I fear, somewhat lost on many of us who did not live through it. It is hard for us, in this age, when we fight simultaneous wars that require almost no personal sacrifice, commitment — or even attention from the average citizen — to wrap our heads around the enormous losses incurred in the struggle against the Axis powers. During the war America lost an average of 6,000 servicemen every month, and from 1942 onward we lost 170 airplanes each and every day. A staggering total of 43,581 airplanes were lost during the war.

And still they flew. And fought on.

Men such as Clark Gable, who flew five combat missions as a waistgunner over Europe, and Tom Landry, legendary coach of the Dallas Cowboys, who flew 30 missions as a pilot and lost his brother in a B-17. And there was Jimmy Stewart, who was a B-17 instructor before flying 20 combat missions in B-24s. Or Norman Lear, producer of "All in the Family," who flew as a radio operator out of Italy, or Gene Roddenberry, who created "Star Trek," and who piloted B-17s in the Pacific Theater.

These were among the more famous men to fly in the Fortress, but for each of them there were thousands more whose service and sacrifice is lesser known, if at all. Men such as Brigadier Frederick Castle, who was awarded the Medal of Honor, posthumously, for remaining at the controls of his



PHOTO BY CRAIG RULLMAN

The Aluminium Overcast B-17 G visited Central Oregon last week.

damaged aircraft so that his crew could bail out. Or 2nd Lieutenant David Kingsley, a firefighter from Portland, Oregon, who became a bombardier, and who also received the honor posthumously, for tending to his injured crewmates and giving his parachute to a comrade as the plane went down over Romania.

Eight decades later, the legacy of this iconic aircraft, and its heroic crews, men capable of serving up astonishing acts of selflessness in the middle of unconscionable and inescapable horrors, miles above the earth, remains with us. There is an entire science dedicated to the appreciation of B-17 nose art, from Betty Lou's Buggy of the 91st Bomb Group, to the Hell's Angels of the 303rd. There are countless books, television shows, and movies.

And then there are the guys like me, who thumbed the ink out of books as a

child, studying the pictures of B-17s in the skies over Europe and the South Pacific, desperately imagining what it might have been like to sit in the open plexiglass nose as a bombardier, seeing the world rush by and manning the secretive Norden bombsight.

For my patience, some 40 years later, I was rewarded with the opportunity to explore the plane at length, to feel how she took to turbulence, to stand in the bomb bay somewhere over Redmond, to take in the radio room, the flight deck, and finally to crawl down beneath the pilots into the most astonishing view in the nose. I was able to sit for a time in the bombardier's seat, and to watch as we came in over the green pastures of Powell Butte, quieter now with the four giant radial engines grinding away behind me.

See BUNKHOUSE on page 24

COME IN OR CALL TODAY FOR YOUR  
**FREE INSURANCE COMPARISON!**

541-588-6245 **FARMERS** INSURANCE

257 S. Pine St., #101 | farmersagent.com/jrybka  
AUTO • HOME • LIFE • BUSINESS

YEAR-ROUND  
**FIREWOOD SALES**  
KINDLING

SISTERS FOREST PRODUCTS  
541-410-4509  
SistersForestProducts.com

**20% OFF DOG BED SALE**

Orthopedic • Long-lasting  
Removable, washable shearing cover  
Canvas stain block and water-proof  
Invented in Sisters

401 E. MAIN AVE., SISTERS | ALI MAYEA

**BLACKSMITHING**  
Fireplace screens, tools, andirons, and grates,  
Handforged hardware, handles, hinges,  
lighting, gift items, and much more!

**WELDING**  
Structural Steel • Welding Repair  
CNC Cutting • Machining • Fabrication

**Ponderosa Forge**  
Sisters, Oregon  
541-549-9280 • PonderosaForge.com  
Sisters Industrial Park • CCB# 87640

**Pet urine? No problem!**

We've invested in state-of-the-art equipment to get rid of stains **AND ODORS** — so your pet is less likely to tinkle there again.

CALL FOR A FREE QUOTE

**Core Carpet Cleaning**  
We cover Central Oregon all the way to the coast! **541-588-6232**

10% PROCEEDS TO FURRY FRIENDS FOUNDATION