Old Soldiers of the Skies

by Alfred Balk

Enemy guns shredded but couldn't stop World War II's B-17 Flying Fortresses, toughest of all airplanes. Even today, outdated by the jet age, this 25-year-old hero gallantly refuses to die

THE BIG, UNGAINLY BOMBER had just "laid its eggs" on a Nazi aircraft plant. Suddenly anti-aircraft fire blasted its rudder, stabilizer, half the control wires, its landing gear, and even slashed a basket-sized hole in one wing. One of the airplane's four engines failed. Then another went. With 40 fighters attacking, the plane seemed doomed. But—shattered and shaking—it got home.

What manner of plane was it? In all the annals of aviation, only one warplane has written such fantastic tales of indestructibility. Only one probably inspired the song, *Comin' in on a Wing and a Prayer*; and only one, nearly a quarter-century after its birth, remains today on jet-age military and civilian duty, doing everything from aeronautical testing to the bombing of forest fires—the B-17 Flying Fortress.

The Fort was the most fabulous combat plane ever built. Like Douglas' unretirable DC-3 airliner, the B-17 is history written in metal, a pivot of progress which helped influence an entire generation.

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The Flying Fortress

Perhaps more than any other plane, the B-17 beat Hitler. Its 640,036 tons of bombs on Europe, nearly the total dropped by all other U.S. planes combined, knocked out much of his industry, oil and railroads. Seventeen Forts once were our entire post-Pearl Harbor long-range air offensive in the Pacific, and one made Colin Kelly our first World War II hero. The Fort unveiled the era of strategic air power, and turned man's eyes toward the stratosphere and beyond.

Gen. Henry H. Arnold, wartime Commanding General of the Air Forces, wrote in his memoirs: "It had only one predecessor of equal importance in air history . . . the first 'military aircraft' of the Wright brothers."

No plane did a tougher job better. The Fort became queen of the air—attacking battleships, shooting seven Nazi planes into the Bay of Biscay in 12 minutes, spearheading history's first 1,000-plane raid. More than 12,700 B-17s were built, second only to B-24 Liberators in the number of bombers ever produced. And 4,750 were lost, a grim toll that reflects the B-17s' heavy fighting assignments.

Hardened in the fiercest battles, the B-17 was also a child of controversy—among Congress, the War Department, and the press. In the mid-Thirties, America was not only isolationist, but also demilitarized and almost anti-air power. Even a twin-engine bomber was a costly toy. Why talk of $600,000 for one airplane? Least of all, a behemoth we would never need for coastal defense?

But the Boeing Airplane Co. thought differently. In 1934, when the Air Force announced a competition for a "multi-engine" bomber to

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be judged a year later, the struggling firm decided to gamble. Five years earlier, an admiral had chided Clairmont Egtvedt, then Boeing's vice president, that America had built no airplane with a battleship's punch. The time had come to try it.

Secretly, Boeing set to work. In three busy weeks, promising designers such as 24-year-old Edward Wells planned most of "model 299." In almost every way, it was revolutionary. Bombs would be carried inside. Pilots and crew would be enclosed in heated quarters. Machine guns would jut from all angles. Four engines, a 69-foot length and 104-foot wingspan, flaps, automatic pilot, retractable wheels with brakes, oxygen equipment, the ability to fly all day—all were built into this craft —and on July 28, 1935, it flew. Gracefully. Awesomely. Effortlessly.

Immediately, controversy raged. After a nine-hour hop from Seattle to Wright Field, Dayton, Ohio, that caught even military welcomers off guard, the XB-17 made its first Air Corps evaluation flight an ignominious one. Controls locked, it crashed on take-off. Over Congressional protests, the Air Corps ordered 13 anyway. Boeing, $500,00 in the red because of its gamble, began turning them out slowly, and added improvements such as a supercharger for high-altitude flying.

In 1939, with the threat of war hanging heavy, Boeing also marketed "giant" four-engine Stratoliners and Pan American Clippers. But the Fort made the headlines: five world records in two months; a ceiling of 34,000 feet; coast to coast at 260 miles an hour; and a dramatic seven-plane "goodwill" tour to Rio de Janeiro—all with aeronautical ease.

But could the Fortress fight?

Britain doubted. Its aviation rep-

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resentatives, either from self-interest or monumental bad judgment, pooh-poohed the B-17's supercharger as "untried," ridiculed its "frightfully secret" bombsight, declined to visit the Boeing plant, and called the plane, "The Flying Target."

The B-17 did have too few guns at first, and "bugs" such as grease which thickened in stratospheric cold. So when untrained English fliers tried 20 Fortresses in combat, the bombers did so little damage—and incurred so much—that the 12 Forts which survived were grounded.

Great performances, however, sometimes depend on great challenges. Three days after Pearl Harbor, with all but a handful of Forts crippled and burned, Colin Kelly, in his B-17, attacked a Japanese warship at first thought to be the battleship *Haruna*. His foray was largely futile. But soon, in one two-week period, refugee Fortresses on seven missions destroyed 22 Japanese planes, two transports, a tanker and two lighters, plus damaging a battleship, cruiser and two other craft.

In Europe, until mid-1942, Allied bombing had been limited to night "area" raids. But with the B-17, high-altitude daylight bombing became a reality. Unescorted Forts even reached an unexpected range of 200 miles east of Berlin, smashing a Focke-Wulf plant without touching an adjacent prison camp. They leveled a target in Regensburg without harming a hospital within the target area. Forts went down—on some raids like leaves. But they blasted their targets first.

THE MORE VITAL THE JOB, often the more certain a Fortress was to draw it. When Gen. James Doolittle and 11 staff officers headed for Africa, a Fort delivered them—after damaging three of four Messer-

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schmidts which attacked. Gen. Douglas MacArthur, his family, staff and Manuel Quezon, President of the Philippines, escaped from the Philippines via PT boat and Flying Fortress. One Fort, "The Swoose" (half swan, half goose), was 50 percent rebuilt from scavenged parts at Clark Field and fought all over the Pacific, then became Lt. Gen. George Brett's personal plane.

Winston Churchill lauded the Forts before the House of Commons. General Arnold proclaimed it the "toughest plane in the air." Radio Tokyo, in perhaps the ultimate tribute, termed it "a four-engine pursuit ship, used for all purposes!"

In this country, where a Presidential "Fireside Chat" told of Capt. Hewett Wheless' B-17 which shot down six Zeros and wheezed home despite 1,500 bullet holes, three firms became Fortress builders: Boeing, Douglas and Vega (a Lockheed subsidiary). Regularly, even on production lines, modifications were continually introduced: a "bathtub" belly gun for a B-17C; more guns, leakproof tanks, and more speed for the B-17D; the now familiar dorsal fin, tail guns, and a ball turret below and power turret on top for the B-17E; some 400 changes for a B-17F; and a "chin" turret, 310-mile-an-hour speed, and 10-ton bomb capacity for the B-17G.

Ask any former crewman about a B-17, however, and he won't mention these—only the airplane's "personality" and amazing stamina.

As dramatized in the movie, *Air Force*, and the book, *Queens Die Proudly*, Forts could absorb so much punishment, fly so faithfully and die so hard, that they seemed almost human. "Werewolf," for example, despite wings like a sieve and three

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engines out, limped from Brest on its one good engine and landed in an English garden. "Flaming Jenny," after a raid on France, returned home with part of a wing and one engine gone, 2,000 bullet holes from 50 planes it had fought off, and flames raging from nose to tail.

One B-17 collided with a Messerschmidt over Africa and knocked it down. Then, its slashed tail section hanging only by control cables and a walkway, the B-17 fluttered home—where, the next day, the slam of a door broke it in two.

"Suzy-Q," the "fightingest Fortress in the world," which never had

a hangar or a fighter escort, set a record for long-range missions against the Japanese, never turned back from a raid, claimed more Japanese planes than any other, flew around the world and even sank a transport with a bomb aimed by its radioman-gunner.

The B-17 became such a legend that GIs in Italy once suggested that the Allies load four propellers into a B-17 bomb bay, then drone into ack-ack as usual, but confound the already-frustrated enemy by "losing" the props and still flying.

Ultimately, as in all things, the bell tolled for the Fortress' days of glory. Big brothers, from B-29s to jet B-52s, have replaced it. Yet surprisingly—for it was our first heavy bomber, designed in 1934—the Fortress won't quit. Nearly three dozen, in fact, still are on active duty in the Air Force alone. In Korea, they performed vital weather reconnaissance

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missions. With 27-foot boats slung against their aging bellies, they were the unstoppables of the Third Air Rescue Squadron.

In the Pacific, radio-controlled models have bucked mushroom clouds over Bikini to measure A-bomb forces. B-17s have been trainers, transports, iceberg-trackers, weather planes, launchers for Air Force glide bombs and missiles, and some have gone down as targets.

As a dramatic guinea pig, one Fort had its nose sawed off, the pilot's compartment moved back four feet, and a Wright Typhoon turbine engine installed in the opening—making it a "five-engine" bomber. With its four conventional motors switched off, the B-17 still flew perfectly with the extra one.

For a time, in the postwar scramble for large aircraft, a racket in surplus B-17s grew enough to merit a Drew Pearson "exposé." One Fort allegedly bound for illegal export, was impounded by the F.B.I. in New Jersey. Trans World Airlines, however, got one legally for an executive plane. And Col. Robert R. McCormick, late publisher of the Chicago *Tribune*, flew about the world in a B-17 plushly modified with a swivel chair in the "picture-window" nose, seven-foot beds in the bomb bay, and a portable bar.

Aerial mapping firms, particularly, have leaped at the chance to buy long-range, steady-flying B-17s for high-altitude operations.

"It's the best high-altitude photo platform now available," says R. M. Sturges, former Boeing field service representative. "For spray projects, its capacity of 3,000 gallons will net $400 an hour, or $2,000 for a five-hour day. For spraying forest fires with borate and water, it's good for $1,350 an hour. It's a warbird, but

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it really pays its way!"

"The Fort," explained William C. Wold of New York City, one of the nation's leading brokers of multi-engine aircraft, "is a classic design; it is known as a forgiving airplane that corrects all your mistakes that it can. Not many aircraft will."

Former mechanics or crewmen have not forgotten the B-17. A few years ago, a photo of one old Fort in a national magazine caused a cascade of letters. When "The Swoose" was discovered rusting in the Government salvage yard at Kingman, Arizona, Col. Frank Kurtz, its former captain, arranged to fly it to Los Angeles as a war memorial—and later its entire crew assembled to fly it to its present permanent berth in the Smithsonian Institution's National Air Museum.

"More than any plane ever built," said James Doolittle on a CBS-TV *Air Power* program, "this plane had a rendezvous with destiny."

It was a fabulous plane—and it may never stop flying.

Coronet

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