

B-17 Stories

© 2016 by Robert A. "Bob" Christiansen, update by RAC 10 May '16.

Here is more B-17 history than most readers want to hear, motivated by my never-to-be forgotten ride on the World War II B-17 bomber *Sentimental Journey* on December 8, 2013. The ride was my 78th birthday present, courtesy of my dear wife Martha, siblings, all five children, and Martha's special cousin, Carole.

Our group consisted of four crew and seven passengers, with two passengers in the very front and five of us behind the bomb bay. I sat at the radio operator's position, appropriate considering my service in the Army Signal Corps from 1954 to 1957. I had good visibility through the small window above the left wing.

We left from Falcon Field in Mesa and buzzed the parking lot of the nearby Wal-Mart. We flew east over the east face of the Superstition Mountains, circled over Canyon Lake, and returned to Falcon Field without incident. Airborne time was less than half an hour but Martha, Sam and I were at Falcon Field for several interesting hours.

During the flight those of us in the back stood and lurched about breathing the plane's fumes, ears buffeted by the engine roar and eyes admiring the view as we flew over this very scenic part of Arizona. I thought of the intense physical discomfort of those who flew in a B-17 seventy years ago (bitter cold, bulky clothing, minimal bathroom opportunities, high altitude gas). Not to mention the fear factor – on the average 2% to 3% didn't come back from the typical mission and I can think of better ways to die.



Sentimental Journey (courtesy FineArtAmerica.com)

Sentimental Journey History:

The *Sentimental Journey* is a B-17 Flying Fortress, which was an early four-engine bomber, designed by the Boeing Aircraft Company of Seattle. The first B-17 prototype flew in 1935, the year I was born. Over 12,000 were built before the end of World War II in 1945. Only about 13 are flying today.

During World War II, the U.S. built so many military aircraft that airframe assembly often was done by other companies. Thus the Douglas Corporation and not Boeing assembled the *Sentimental Journey* in late 1944, probably in Long Beach, California. The plane didn't get the name *Sentimental Journey* until 1978; initially it was just B-17 serial number 4485314.

The *Sentimental Journey* was sent to the Pacific Theatre, but arrived too late to see combat. It was stored in Japan until 1947, when it was sent to Clark Field in the Philippines where it flew photomapping missions for several years.

The commander of the 13th Air Force at Clark Field during part of the *Sentimental Journey*'s stay there was General Howard Turner from Avoca, Iowa, my hometown. We three Christiansen siblings knew nephews or nieces of Howard Turner.

After Clark Field, the *Sentimental Journey* went to Eglin Field in Florida for use in search and rescue and to control drones during nuclear tests. In 1959 it was sent to the bone yard at Davis Monthan Air Force Base on the south edge of Tucson. Soon the Aero Union Corporation bought it and used it extensively to fight forest fires.

The Arizona Wing of the Commemorative Air Force (CAF) is based at Falcon Field in Mesa, Arizona, about 20 miles northeast of our house. The Arizona CAF acquired and named the *Sentimental Journey* in 1978.

The CAF was started in Texas in 1957 and was originally called the Confederate Air Force. In 2002 it changed its name from "Confederate" to "Commemorative", some say to be more politically correct.

The name *Sentimental Journey* comes from a 1944 song made popular by Les Brown and Doris Day. The nose art shows Betty Grable, the most popular World War II pinup.

The *Sentimental Journey* travels a lot, usually by short hops between air shows or CAF wings (it costs \$2,000 an hour to operate). A few months after my trip it was at the airport in Council Bluffs, Iowa, my birthplace.

I didn't know until after my flight that the *Sentimental Journey* has been in two accidents, once when landing and once suffering a brake failure while taxiing.

I had already been on the *Sentimental Journey* several times, once at the Chandler Airport with grandkids (perhaps Julia and Matthew; possibly Rachel and Ben).

My most memorable peek inside the *Sentimental Journey* was on my last excursion with Vernon Hanson, the late husband of my dear cousin and honorary older sister, Kathryn. Vernon and I had a docent to ourselves when we visited the CAF museum at Falcon Field and climbed into the *Sentimental Journey*. I remember that afterwards, when we drove back to Tempe, we stopped at a fruit stand and bought a large box of very tasty but extremely small oranges for just a few dollars.

B-17s and the 8th Air Force:

The 8th Air Force based in southeastern England did most of the U.S. heavy bombing of northwestern Europe during World War II. Around 2/3 of those assigned to 8th Air Force flight crews were casualties (killed, captured, wounded).

Those 8th Air Force crewmen shot down and captured included Henry Norgaard (uncle of my childhood playmates, Carol and Kay Spencer) and Roland Pusey McGee (several of my aunts stayed with Roland's family while living in Council Bluffs in the 1920s and early 1930s).

Warning – The following is a major digression, although some might find it interesting.

Stephen Wurtz from Underwood, Iowa sometimes attended the same rural Lutheran Church, St. Paul's, as my family. Stephen was also an 8th Air Force crewmember who was shot down, captured, and survived. He was the only survivor on a B-17 that was carrying eleven men.

The normal B-17 crew size was ten. Stephen Wurtz's plane had eleven on board because that day his plane was carrying the 305th Bombardment Group commander. Stephen Wurtz was the lead bombardier for the group, which at full strength would consist of 72 planes. As a bombardier he was in the very front of his plane, and thus was better able to eject than some crewmembers.

Colonel Curtis LeMay had taken the 305th Bombardment Group to England earlier but had been promoted out of his old job before Stephen Wurtz's plane went down. If Curtis LeMay had still been group commander on June 18, 1944 when the group commander's plane was shot down, the population of Japan would be a bit larger today; after leaving Europe, General LeMay honed the technique of fire bombing Japanese cities. Later, in the early years of the Cold War, he moved to Omaha and commanded the Strategic Air Command from 1948 to 1957.

The 8th Air Force losses of men and airplanes during the strategic bombing of northwestern Europe were enormous. For instance, Stephen Wurtz's group, which would have 72 planes at full strength, lost 154 planes to fighters, flak accidents and mechanical failure.

In October 1943 the 8th Air Force losses became so large that most bombing was suspended for several months until ways of effectively utilizing the new long-range P-51 Mustang fighters to escort the bombers were developed.

B-17s and the 15th Air Force:

My cousins, Alvin, Donald and Phyllis Petersen, had two cousins named Ronald and Rodney Paulson, inseparable identical twins, who grew up in Ames, Iowa. They managed to join the same B-17 crew, which was assigned to the 15th Air Force near Foggia, Italy east of Naples.

The late Ronald Paulson was one of about 18 bombardiers trained to drop the AZON, the first guided bomb the United States Air Force used. Rodney Paulson was the tail gunner on the Paulsons' plane. They both survived World War II, although Rodney Paulson was killed in 1954 in an Air Force training accident.

Some Other B-17 Crewmen:

I'd like to mention four other World War II B-17 crewmen who survived World War II:

Our late friend, **Jim Pattis**, was an illegal immigrant who earned his citizenship while serving as a waist gunner on a B-17. Jim told me his most memorably experience occurred when his plane flew General George Patton across the Atlantic.

Daniel Slater, the father of our friend Mitch Slater, was an 8th Air Force mechanic on a ground crew who was sometimes assigned to fly as a tail gunner. Since he didn't fly regularly, he never accumulated enough missions to be sent back to the United States.

Dale Wallenbrock, the late father of Martha's friend, Penny, flew a B-17 with the 8th Air Force. Dale told me he was flying a B-17 before his 19th birthday.

David Snow, formerly married to my cousin, Sylvia, was an Air Force navigator who cross-trained to be a B-17 pilot.

Several General Comments:

Precision Bombing: I remember that during World War II we were always told that the United States practiced daylight *precision* heavy bombing, while the British specialized in nighttime bombing, which was less accurate and more likely to cause collateral damage and unintended deaths. The adjective *precision* always seemed to be used. However, precision bombing was actually the exception, not the norm. Our heavy bombers usually flew high to avoid enemy flak and fighters and often bombed through clouds and smoke that obscured the ground. Moreover, wind might deflect the bombs in unanticipated directions as they fell. The result was generally area bombing rather than precision bombing. Precision bombing became even less likely when the toggler system was used. With the toggler system, the unit's lead bombardier, such as Stephen Wurtz mentioned above, would decide when to drop the bombs and that instant yell "bombs away" into his radio, whereupon the other bombardiers in the unit would simultaneously toggle the switch used to release the bombs their plane carried.

Precision bombing was possible if done at low altitudes in good weather with concurrent suppression of fighter attack and antiaircraft fire. Those who visit Pointe du Hoc in Normandy can observe how closely clustered the bomb craters are.

The B-24, the B-17's Competitor: The United States had a second heavy bomber during World War II. This was the B-24 Liberator, designed by Consolidated Aircraft of San Diego and built by Consolidated and by Ford Motor Company at their enormous facility in Willow Run, Michigan and probably at other locations. The B-24 exceeded slightly the B-17's performance in speed, range, payload and other areas. The B-24 was designed five years after the B-17 so the B-24 designers could exploit the experience gained with the B-17. Unfortunately the B-24 had some drawbacks. It was not as sturdy, reliable, and easy to fly and repair as the B-17. On the intangible side, it did not have the early and extensive publicity that the B-17 received and was less photogenic than the B-17.

Despite its shortcomings and its shorter production run, about 18,000 B-24s were produced compared with 12,000 B-17s. Today at most three B-24s, maybe only one, are still flying.

Here is a contemporary photograph of an airworthy B-24 in the foreground, along with a B-17, a B-25 Mitchell medium bomber made by the North American Aviation Company, and in the upper-right a North American P-51 Mustang fighter. This photo, found on Google, is from the Collings Foundation, an organization that, like the CAF, is dedicated to the preservation of aviation history.



Photo courtesy of the Collings Foundation (CollingsFoundation.org)

The B-29, the B-17's Successor: The successor bomber to the B-17 and B-24 was Boeing's B-29 Superfortress, which entered service in 1944 and was not used in Europe. However, the Enola Gay and Bockscar, the B-29s that dropped atomic bombs on Japan in August 1945 were not built by Boeing. Rather the Glenn L. Martin Company built these two planes at their bomber plant at Fort Crook, now Offutt Air Force Base, south of Omaha, Nebraska.

Lewis Rhode, the father of my cousins Edwin and David Rhode, Jo Ellen Kill and Richard Lane, worked at the Omaha Martin Bomber Plant before joining the Merchant Marine in 1944.

Reuben Iversen, briefly my father's hired man early in World War II, was a B-29 copilot. He was based in the Mariana Islands and flew 35 missions against the Japanese homeland.



The Boeing B-29 (*B-29 in flight.jpg* courtesy of [commons.wikipedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org))

Epilog:

If you have read this far, I'd like to share with you this passage from my *St. Paul's Boomer-Neola World War II Veterans* document:

I am grateful to each and every veteran of World War II. They all put their lives on hold, left their home and families, and endured the rigors of training and the tedium of normal military life. Many experienced the misery of life in the field and the terror and exhaustion of combat. Some gave everything.