

Flying Fortress revives memories of first 8th AF mission to Berlin: First mission was roughest

Article and photo by MSgt. Tom Allocco

In the chronicles of airpower, March 4, 1944 will forever be pivotal.

Like a thunderclap, the world heard that for the first time 8th Air Force heavy bombers had stabbed into the heart of Nazi Germany to take the war to Berlin. During the Great New England Airshow, John O'Neil of Trumbull, Conn., rested a hand on the tailgun of a B-17 Flying Fortress and recalled his role in the battle 25,000 feet over Berlin in "the first mission to the Big B."

"We called Berlin 'Big B'. 'Little B' was Bremen," O'Neil said. Missions to Bremen were tough. But the Berlin mission upped the ante for both sides. Berlin was a "deep penetration raid," far from home bases in England to the capital where Goering concentrated his ack-ack and Messerschmidts. Like Polesi and Doolittle's Tokyo raid, going to Berlin was a genuine act of heroism for every airman.

O'Neil went to Berlin as a tailgunner behind twin Browning .50 caliber guns in a Pathfinder. His Flying Fortress was equipped with advanced radar to lead the other bombers to the target in bad weather.

"We knew the Berlin mission was coming after Jimmy Doolittle became commander of the 8th Air Force in January. He wanted to lead the first mission to Berlin, but Eisenhower wouldn't let him, in case he was captured," O'Neil said.

"On March 3 we were alerted. Everyone got their equipment ready and we flew that night to the 94th Bomb Group at Horam. We slept a couple hours and got up at 4:30 a.m. For breakfast the pre-mission special was eggs, which you normally couldn't get in England," O'Neil said.

"In the briefing they would pull the curtain back from the map and there would be a red string to the target. If it was a tough mission everybody would go 'oh oh!'"

"It was an unhappy feeling. We had never bombed Berlin before and the Germans said they would defend it to the last. I had the same feeling as the rest...it was one of those things everyone knew had to be done, but nobody especially wanted to do it," O'Neil said.

"The British had done it with Mosquitoes, only at night. We were going in the day," he said.

The bombing of Berlin was possible after the introduction of the long-range P-51 Mustang in January to keep the Messerschmidt 109s off the B-17s.

The first mission to Berlin went awry from the beginning. "We started with 700 planes. Bad weather turned all but 30 back," O'Neil said. Five of the 30 were lost over Berlin.

"The P-51s saved the rest of us...Chuck Yeager shot down a German fighter that day," O'Neil said. Sixteen of the P-51s were lost, mostly due to icing, wind and clouds.

"We were just very happy to be back and just thanked the Lord," he said.

"Two days later the 8th Air Force went back to Berlin and lost 69 bombers out of about 750," he said.



WORLD WAR II TAILGUNNER — Eighth Air Force tailgunner John O'Neil of Trumbull, Conn., tours the airshow's B-17 Flying Fortress, similar to the bomber he flew in on the first mission to Berlin in 1944.

"The German fighters came from 12 o'clock high straight at you, lobbing 20 millimeter shells at you. If B-17s got out of formation they would collide. There were even collisions between fighters and B-17s," he said.

O'Neil continued as a tailgunner until the end of the war, when he flew home to Bradley to a waving crowd. He later recounted his harrowing experiences in a book "Bombs Away: Pathfinders of the Air Force."