

## The Ballad of My Uncle Bob

I grew up thinking my dad's youngest brother was the cowboy I wanted to be. But he wasn't a cowboy; he was a carpenter like my dad. But he looked like it, he talked like it, he smoked like it, he wore the hat and boots, and he sang some most convincing ballads. I memorized the lines in those songs as definitive of my early aspirations to ride through tumble weeds on the back of a horse. One had been sung by Burl Ives, and its title was 'I've got no use for the women.' Marty Robins sang it much later with lyrics somewhat more muted because even by standards of the time its misogyny was appalling. But I still remember some lines of my Uncle Bob's version sung to the strumming of his guitar:



**My Uncle Bob with Aunt Betty and cousin Sharon**

*I've got no use for the women;  
There's seldom a good woman found.  
They'll stand by a man when he's winnin'  
And laugh in his face when he's down.*

The ballad ended badly when a cowboy, whose *heart was upright and true*, turned to a *hard shootin' gunman on account of a girl named Lou*. The fault was all deflected onto the woman, and after a few more verses it ends with:

*O, bury me out on the prairie  
Where the coyotes can howl o'er my grave  
But cover me over with boulders  
And from them my bones please save.*

Another of my favorite ballads he sang was,

*Jack, he was a cowboy  
with a heart so brave and true.  
He fell in love with a maiden  
whose eyes were heaven's own blue.*

This ballad ended badly too, with 'true' and 'blue' hardly saving the day. After a few more sad verses, it also ends with burial out on the prairie. But in this one the fault is laid squarely on the cowboy. I loved those songs.

Aunt Betty would look away as he sang these ballads with his peculiar blend of conversational speech mixed in with the nasal twang of his singing—an approach that Willy Nelson was later

able to market. Aunt Betty knew the person who sang the songs and of his undying love, that differed so dramatically from the persona he portrayed.

Having grown up and abandoned the notion of punching cows for a living and realizing that girls like Lou and Aunt Betty were very far from the norm, I still carried that image of my Uncle Bob. I knew it wasn't a very good image and that it wasn't a very accurate depiction of him, but I had yet to totally disassociate that image from the man. I knew that he had been a gunner on the B-17 flying fortress bomber that had been so decisive in the allied victory in Europe. He had never been a cowboy, although probably he came as close to it as one could in Washington state in the twentieth century. He had run away from home in his mid-teens and when he registered for the draft he had listed his residence as the unincorporated town of Carlton, Washington. That was up the Methow river between Pateros and Twisp, a location where his parents had lived at one time or another. He had been employed guiding horseback treks at the upper end of Lake Chelan at Stehekin when, at 19 he was drafted. For misbehavior during basic training he was forced to volunteer for high altitude parachute experiments – jumping out at altitudes that hadn't been tried before. That's what he told Kay and I twenty some years later.

I knew that he had survived a crash into the North Sea and once after the plane had barely made it back across the channel to crash at the base in England when he had had to rattle his guns so his crew would get him out of the ball turret when his lungs had collapsed and he was injured. The more I learned, the more he became a new kind of hero for me. My dad had worked at the shipyard in Bremerton during the war, but that didn't warrant that same hero status for me.

After Kay and I had married and were living in student housing while I finished my schooling, Uncle Bob was in town on business and came for supper. We had not been married long at the time, and I was thrilled to be able to introduce Kay to my uncle. He was about to show Kay a photo of Aunt Betty; in getting it out of his wallet, the duce of hearts from a wolf pack fell out. Seeing the nude woman on the card, I asked whether Aunt Betty knew that was in his wallet.

“Oh yeah, she does,” he said. “She loves that card. You see before we flew our very first mission, they dealt out several wolf pack decks of cards – one card to each crew member. Of all of those, this duce and a jack of diamonds [as I recall him saying] were the only two cards to make it through the war.”

During World War II, a B-17 Flying Fortress bomber typically had ten crew members. The positions included the pilot, a co-pilot, the navigator, bombardier, flight engineer (who also served as top turret gunner), the radio operator, ball turret gunner, waist gunners (initially there were two waist gunners, but later in the war this was reduced to one), and the tail gunner. A typical (United States Army Air Force) bomber squadron during World War II consisted of around 12 to 16 aircraft. Therefore, with each B-17 having a crew of ten, a squadron would have over a hundred total crew members, depending on



the number of aircraft assigned. So, according to the wolf pack statistics, casualties of the war among crew members had to have been catastrophic.

He finally got Aunt Betty's photo out of his wallet to show Kay after some more fumbling, nervously exclaiming what a wonderful woman she was. They had married before his deployment to England. She was there to meet him when he returned and had had to help him recover from what would not yet have been called PTSD.



I maybe shouldn't have, but I asked him about his experiences in the war. He was reluctant at first, but after a bit he got going and ended up describing experiences that he had not been able to talk about in the twenty years since. He had sometimes been tail-gunner, at other times a waist gunner, and sometimes in the ball turret, where he was located when they crash landed on base after completing a mission. He described having to rattle his guns to get someone to risk their life to come and get him out. They had thought he was dead and that the plane might explode but risked their lives again to get him out. He had a collapsed lung for which he was hospitalized for a time.

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A6302

**S/Sgt. Robert G. Vaughan, Carlton, Wash., is tired from the long trip to Frankofrt and is in a hurry to remove his guns from the turret and then join his crew at interrogation. ofollowing this, he can get that long-needed rest.**

[Typos were in the original record]





waist gunners



Of course I didn't know much about the war, the Korean conflict had worn down by that time and Viet Nam would not become a major involvement for a year or so. Heller's 'Catch 22' would have been published a year or two earlier (in 1961). Heller initially claimed it had been purely a work of fiction, although many of the characters and events in the book paralleled his own experiences in the conflict. He too had joined the USAAF at age 19 in 1942 and would have had experiences much like my uncle's. "Looking back on his service Heller reflected: 'People think it quite remarkable that I was in combat in an airplane and I flew sixty missions, even though I tell them that the missions were largely 'milk runs'.' He neglected to mention that he experienced heavy anti-aircraft fire on over half of them. 'L'il Critter From the Moon' [the name they put on the plane he flew] was ultimately lost in a mid-air-collision on 21 January 1945."

After the war was over, I have a very vague memory of a celebration in Bremerton, Washington, probably more associated with this picture that has my sister at the center in the back and me (either at the front center, or as running behind trying to catch up—probably the latter). On the photo it says it was VJ Day which was when things could finally go back to normal.



But they didn't go back to normal for my uncle. He was evidently housed at some hospital back east with Aunt Betty lodged nearby. I asked whether it had been the collapsed lung, but no, that was not enough to end the war for him, he said. It went on. In fact, he said that after flying 25 missions they were allowed to opt out. "But my heart was bigger than my head by then, and I signed up for another 25."

He talked rapidly in describing their missions, one in particular during which they had taken a lot of flack on their bombing run. The plane was limping back at low altitude trying to make it to the North Sea before crashing. He said the gunners were shooting clock towers in the towns as they passed, irrational acts to keep their minds off what was probably their ensuing doom. They did finally make it out over the sea before crashing and were ultimately rescued by an allied ship.

He told us that he had never mentioned any of what he had told us in the last twenty years and seemed surprised that he had been able to talk about it even then. He said his hospital experience had been so they could work on him for a while to convince him that sometimes the sky is just blue. He would be with Aunt Betty whose eyes he would have thought 'were heaven's own blue' in the daytime and then at night would sleep in the hospital till he could handle the nightmares associated with the blue skies he had become more familiar with. He didn't describe them, but I imagine it wasn't just his own fate and that of fellow crewmen that gnawed at him each night. The fire-bombing of Dresden and other atrocities, rightly attributed to other sources and beyond his control, had had to weigh heavily.

I imagine I asked him to sing one of his ballads. I did have a guitar in the apartment that I had never been able to master. But I don't remember whether he played and sang that night or not. But if he had, it would have included the last verse of 'Jack He Was A Cowboy'.

*Your sweetheart waits for you Jack  
Your sweetheart waits for you  
Out on the lonely prairie  
Where the skies are always blue*

By the time I was old enough to formulate that I wanted to become a cowboy, he had already been home plying his trade as a carpenter, but he came across as a cowboy to me. In later years he and his crew built my sister's beautiful home on Deer Lake. He was into horses—mostly for his granddaughter by then, and I think he became of some influence in Washington Quarter Horse circles. They were different than the Thoroughbred racing circles we would later become involved with—but horses, nonetheless. Experiences in those circles were probably as close as either of us ever came to realizing childhood dreams of becoming cowboys.

I'm sure neither of us ever aspired to become a hard shooting gunman. But one of us did.

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Robert G. Vaughan was born August 8, 1922, in Winthrop, Washington. He was five feet eleven and a half inches tall and weighed 156 pounds. He had a scar on the right side of his lip. He registered to serve in the military on June 30, 1942. He married 17-year-old Betty Eilene Hanneman on November 3, 1944, to whom was born Sharon Kay on November 17, 1945. His detailed military records have very likely been lost as noted here:

**Please Note:** On July 12, 1973, a disastrous fire at the NPRC destroyed approximately 16-18 million Official Military Personnel Files. The records affected:

Branch	Personnel and Period Affected	Estimated Loss
Army	Personnel discharged November 1, 1912 to January 1, 1960	80%
Air Force	Personnel discharged September 25, 1947 to January 1, 1964 (with names alphabetically after Hubbard, James E.)	75%

See [1973 Fire](#) for more information on the records affected and the alternate sources used to reconstruct basic service information.

The United States Air Force became a separate branch of the U.S. military on September 18, 1947. This was established under the National Security Act of 1947, which reorganized the military and intelligence agencies in the post-World War II era. Prior to this, what became the Air Force was part of the Army, known as the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF). The creation of the Air Force as an independent service recognized the increasing importance of air power in military doctrine and operations.

I obtained a trial membership to 'Fold3 Ancestry' to find as many military records as I could about my uncle's tours of duty. This included his registration and WWII US Air Force Photos of records; they are not all that legible but with effort one can read them. Among them are many eye-witness accounts by members of the crew of planes who saw the incident of a plane being hit and crashing. This involved many with fireballs in the air and crashes that end in fireballs upon contact with the ground, some with the tail section missing with the plane fish-tailing to the ground, etc. These accounts include the number of parachutes seen, if any and the location of the crash, with a makeshift map made by the witness at mission debriefing.

In 1943 he was deployed to Kodiak Alaska to what were called "Dangerous Waters." There is an account of my uncle being hospitalized in March of 1944 that stated the cause as laryngitis. It did say, "acute." He returned to the states on 31 March 1946 and was discharged in April.

There were some eye-witness accounts of planes being severely 'crippled' and yet proceeding at low level until they were out of the eye-witness's view. It seems that Uncle Bob must have been on one or more of these. The next page is an example of such an account in which the crew members were subsequently listed as missing in action.

STATEMENT OF EYE-WITNESS

AFPO 140, U.S. Army,  
24 February 1945.

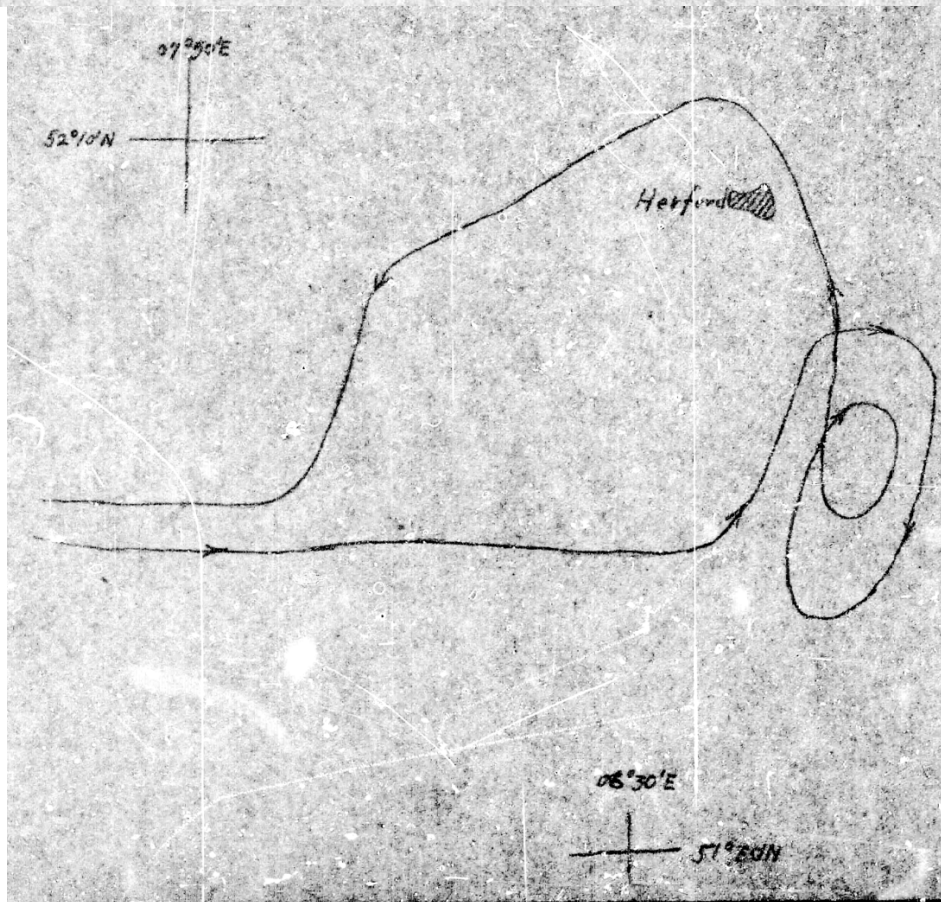
On Wednesday, 21 February 1945, I was flying as turret gunner in an A-20 plane. We were flying in the No. 3 position of the first flight, second box. Lt. Murphy's plane was flying in the No. 4 position of the same flight and box—just to the right of our plane.

Just after we left the target, I happened to be watching Lt. Murphy's plane when suddenly it was hit by flak. The flak was very intense all around us. Lt. Murphy's plane received a direct hit by flak under the pilot's cockpit. The flak-burst blew a large hole in the bottom of the plane—approximately two feet in diameter—and also blew a large hole in the plexiglass canopy.

The plane made a slight bank to the right and slid out of the formation. There was no fire coming from the plane. I could still see the pilot sitting in the cockpit through the hole in the canopy as the plane slid off to the right. The plane seemed to be under control as we made a steep bank to the left; and that is the last I saw of it.

*Wayne H. Humphries*

WAYNE HUMPHRIES,  
S/Sgt, ASN 39907965,  
642nd Bomb Sq (L),  
409th Bomb Gr (L).



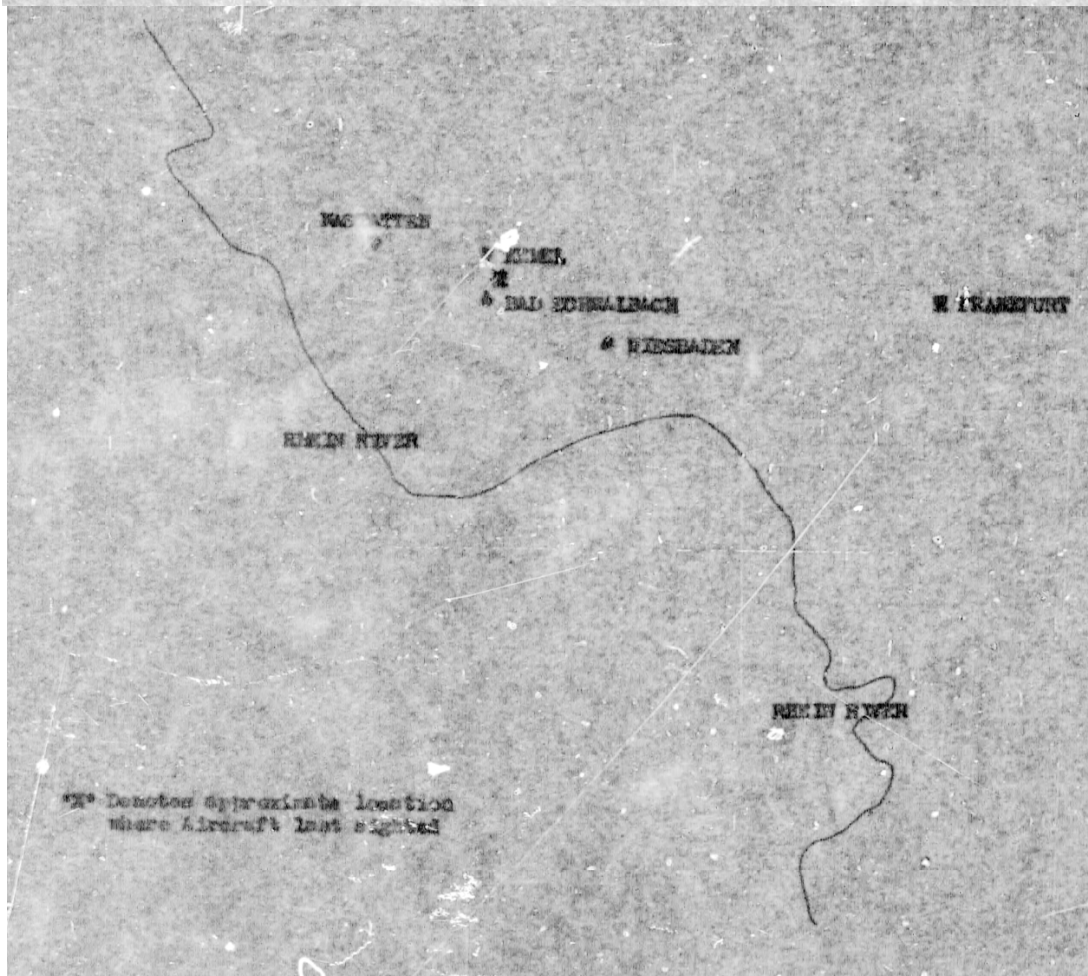
# CONFIDENTIAL

## STATEMENT OF EYEWITNESS

U. S. Army,  
27 January 1945.

On 25 January 1945 I was flying as leader of the third flight of a mission of six flights. Lt. Downing was flying in the number six position of the second flight. His flight was about two miles on our left at ten o'clock. Approximately eight miles from the target Lt. Downing's ship seemed to have received a direct hit, because it seemed as though his ship was completely enveloped by flames from the wings back. Apparently still under control he left the formation diving toward the right. That was the last I saw of the ship and my gunners never reported any chutes leaving the ship.

*John C. Moore Jr.*  
JOHN C. MOORE, JR.,  
Captain, Air Corps,  
O-747861,  
642nd Bomb Sq (L),  
409th Bomb Gp (L),  
"A" Flight Leader.



STATEMENT

On 9 March 1945, I was flying as Engineer-Gunner on Aircraft #43-22365, (A-26), of which 2d Lt John W. Shute, 0822119, was pilot. We went in on the bomb run and encountered heavy anti-aircraft fire. Our aircraft was severely hit in the right engine, but we proceeded on to the bomb run and dropped bombs. The formation made a short right turn; however, we could not make the short right turn due to the condition of the right engine, which by this time was smoking.

The formation continued back to base. We tried to make it back to our lines before bailing out, but we were jumped by three (3) FW 190 enemy fighters. Two of the enemy fighters made passes at our aircraft, after which I saw a large hole in the right wing. The right engine was burning severely. The doors were blown off the right wheel nacelle. Part of the horizontal stabilizer was shot off on the right side. At the time, we were approximately thirty (30) miles south of Coblenz, Germany. Lt Shute gave me instructions to bail out, and he opened the bomb bay doors. As far as I know and saw, Lt Shute did not appear to be wounded. I bailed out as instructed, and as I was spinning down before my chute opened, I saw the aircraft for the last time; it was losing altitude and the right engine was still burning severely. I did not see Lt Shute again. I did not see him bail out.

As I was descending, I tried to look up for any sign of Lt Shute, but the parachute harness was pressing tightly against the sides of my head, and I was unable to observe anything, as I could not turn my head. I tried to spread the harness so I could move my head, but by this time I was descending through the clouds.

*William E. Bode*

William E. Bode, 37603231,  
S/Sgt., 553rd Bomb Squadron (M)

Here's an interesting note in this regard I found this among the records for the unit:

13. When, where, and in what condition did you last see any members not already described above? GUNNER IN PRISONER OF WAR CAMP BAD KLEE

And in a separate account of the same incident:

STATEMENT OF WITNESS

On 9 March 1945, Lt. Shute was flying in the #5 position in my flight, when we were attacked by enemy aircraft. I saw Lt. Shute just after the initial enemy attack. His right engine was on fire and he feathered it immediately. The fire disappeared and the engine quit smoking. The ship was well under control and I had imagined that everything was alright. That was the last I saw of Lt. Shute's aircraft.

*Leonard A. Sentner*

LEONARD A. SENTNER,  
1st Lt., Air Corps.

My uncle was a gunner, but their mission was bombing over Germany:

**A Carrier Brings The Bombs Into Position To Be Loaded Into The Boeing B-17G "Flying Fortress" 'E-Rat-lcator', A Veteran Of 125 Missions. It Presented A New Problem In Loading Due To Its Awkward Size And Its High Sensitivity.**



**England - Lethal Combination At Reducing German Cities Has Been The Lancaster And 12,000 Lb 'Cookie' Or Blast Bomb**

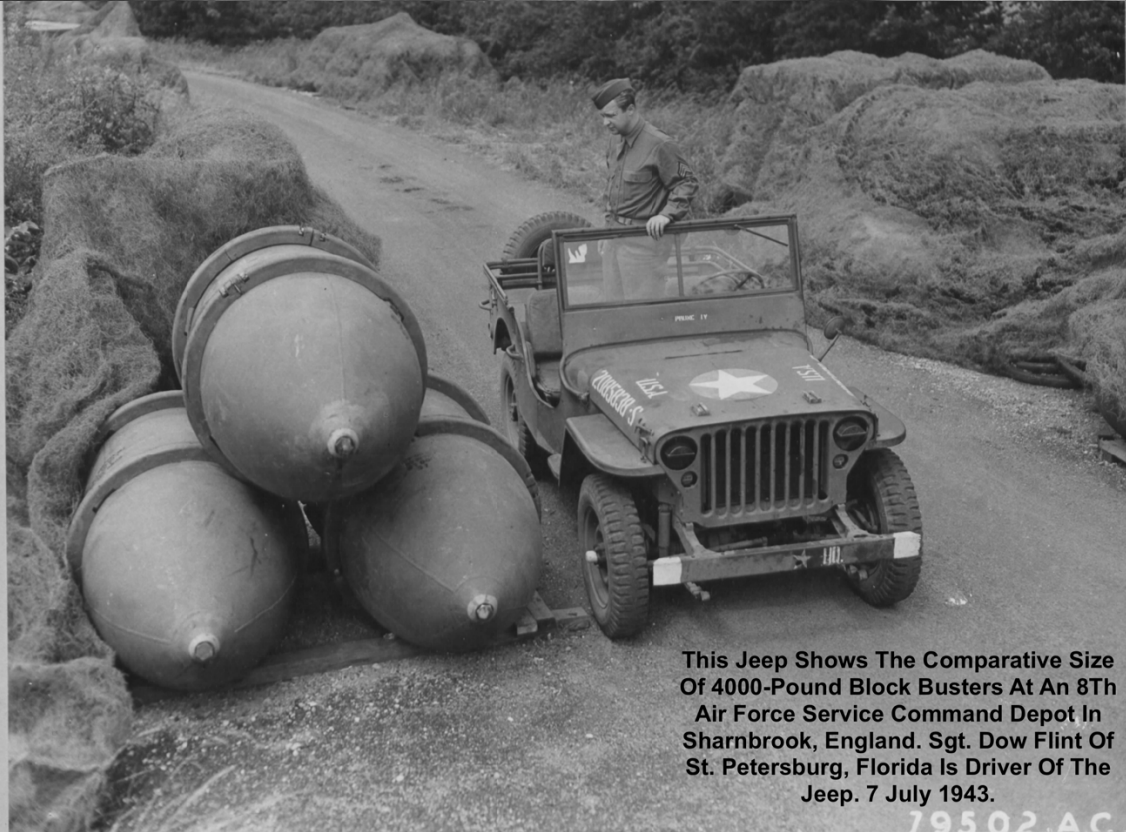


Personnel Of The 388Th Bomb Group  
Prepare Fire Bombs For Use Against The  
Enemy. 15 April 1945, England.



A-61368 A.C.

This Jeep Shows The Comparative Size  
Of 4000-Pound Block Busters At An 8Th  
Air Force Service Command Depot In  
Sharnbrook, England. Sgt. Dow Flint Of  
St. Petersburg, Florida Is Driver Of The  
Jeep. 7 July 1943.



79502 AC

War Theatre #12 (England) BOMBS & SERVICE  
(over)

torical Group, AF, 386th Bomb Group, England.

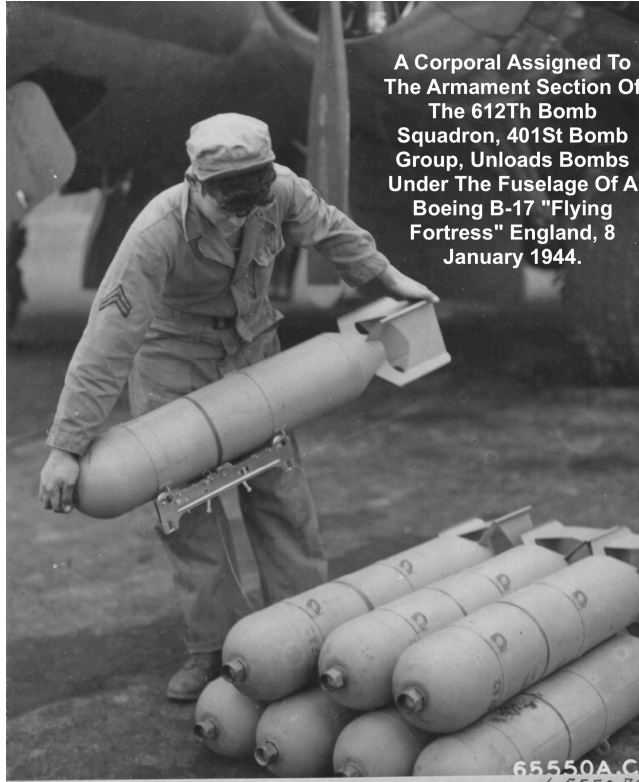


Two Men Inscribe A Note To Hitler On A Bomb Which Was Purchased Through The Sale Of War Bonds. Soon This Bomb And Others Will Be Loaded On The Martin B-26 'Hell'S Angels' (Background) Of The 386Th Bomb Group For Another Devastating Raid On An Enemy Target

70270A.C.

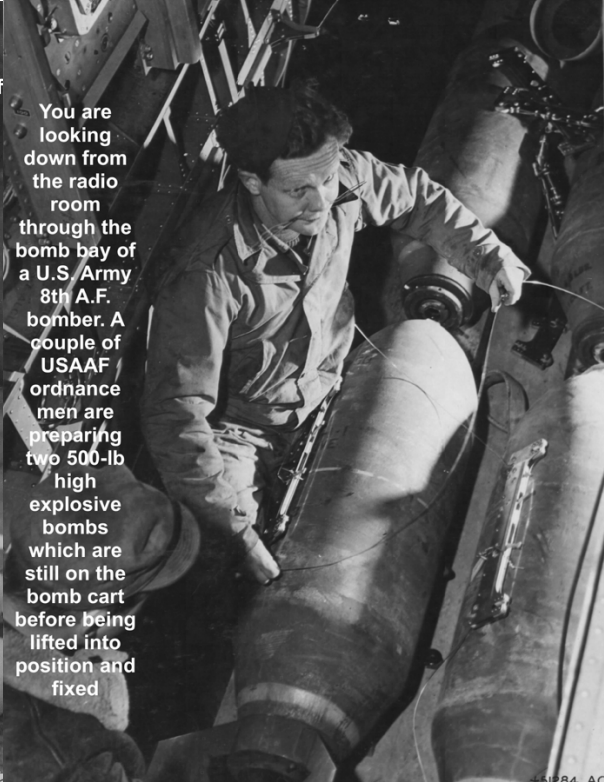
Reserve stores of a large variety of high explosive bombs are stacked up at an operational station in preparation for future missions. Ordnance men are seen swinging a blockbuster into place with aid of crane.





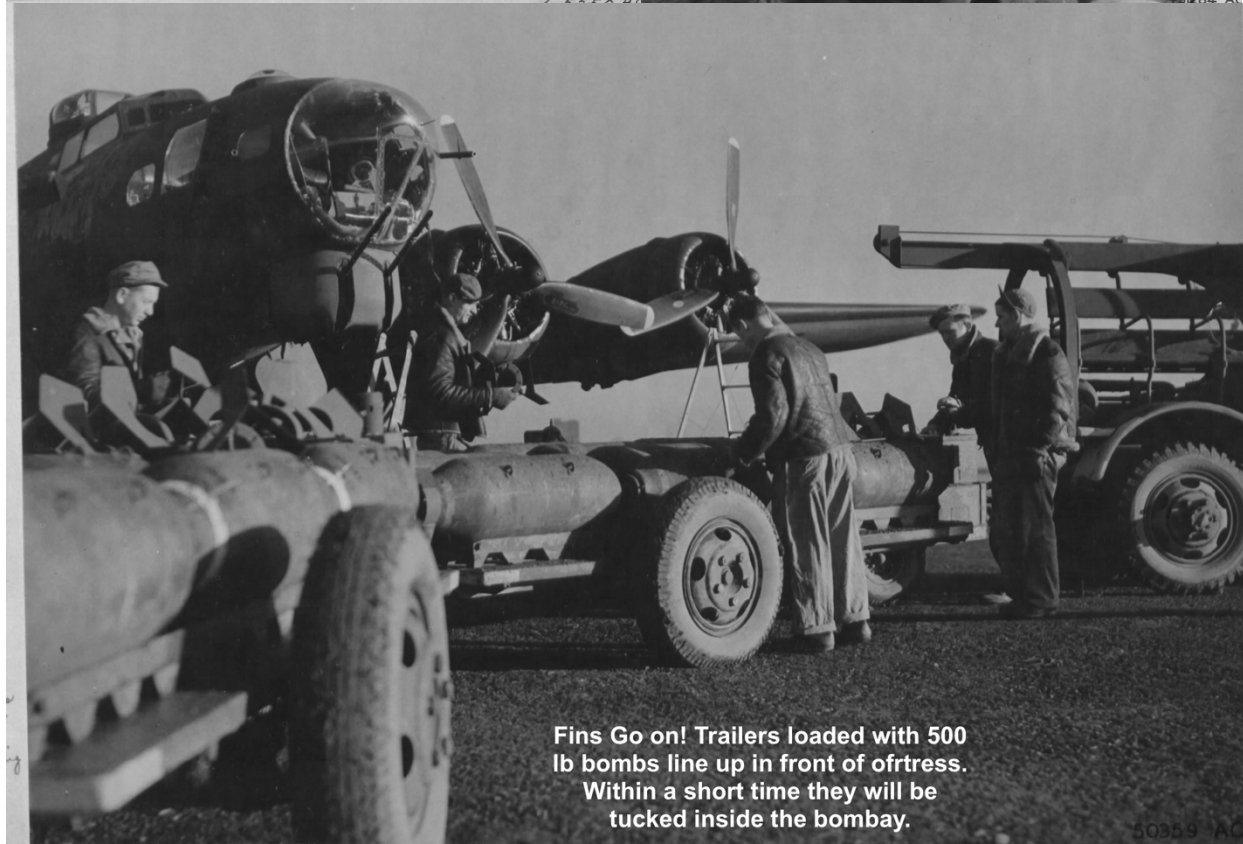
A Corporal Assigned To The Armament Section Of The 612Th Bomb Squadron, 401St Bomb Group, Unloads Bombs Under The Fuselage Of A Boeing B-17 "Flying Fortress" England, 8 January 1944.

65550A.C



You are looking down from the radio room through the bomb bay of a U.S. Army 8th A.F. bomber. A couple of USAAF ordnance men are preparing two 500-lb high explosive bombs which are still on the bomb cart before being lifted into position and fixed

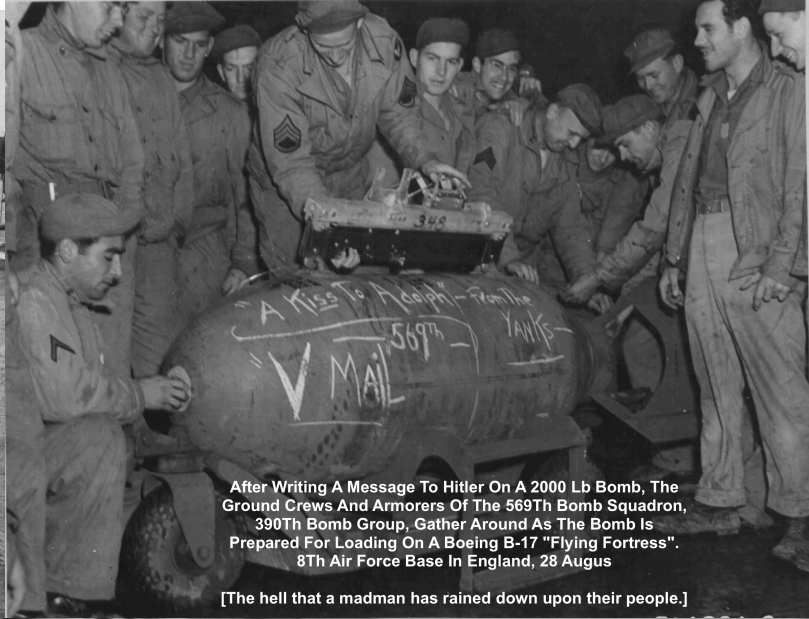
451284 AC



Fins Go on! Trailers loaded with 500 lb bombs line up in front of ofrtress. Within a short time they will be tucked inside the bombay.

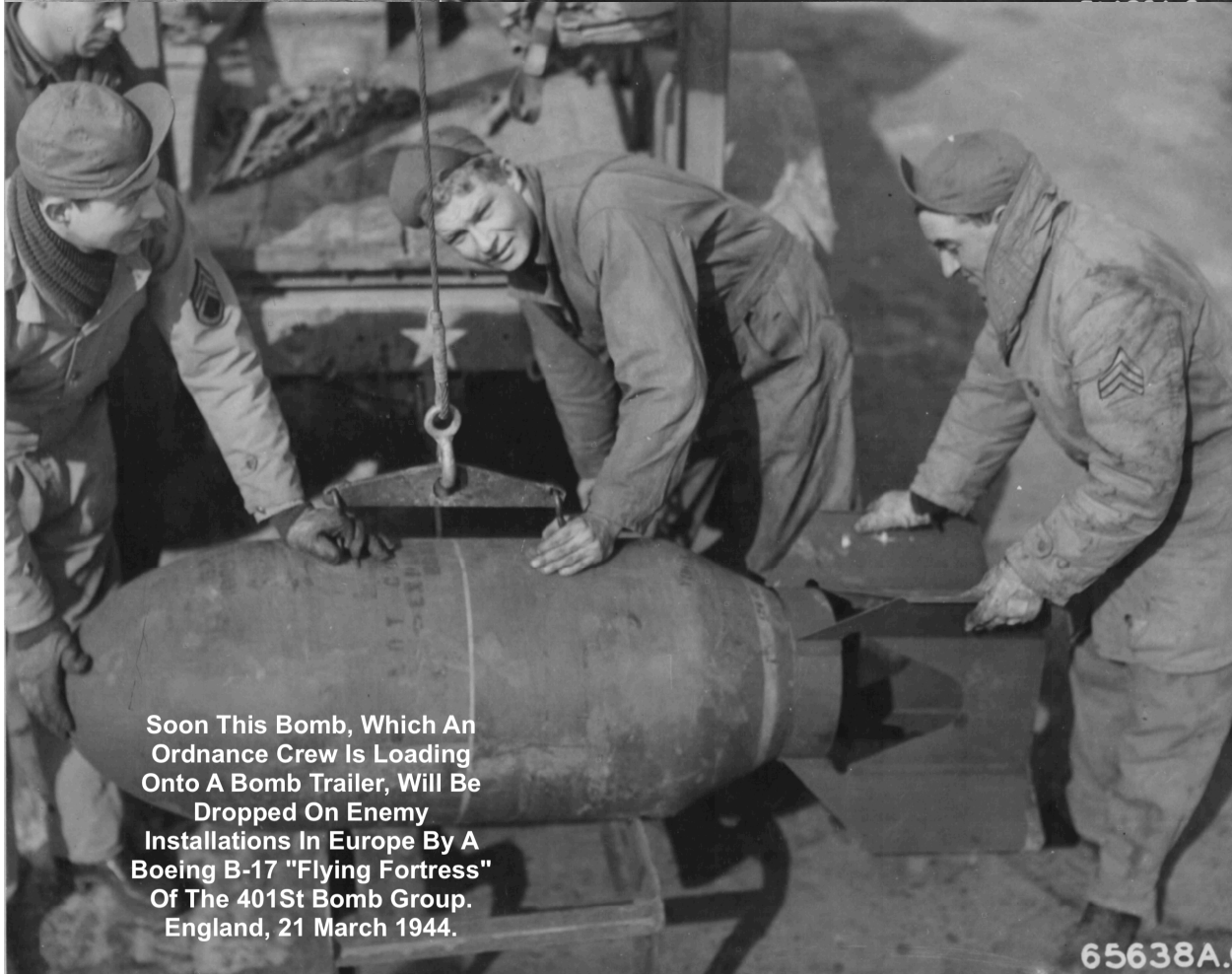
50359 AC

INDEXED



After Writing A Message To Hitler On A 2000 Lb Bomb, The Ground Crews And Armors Of The 569Th Bomb Squadron, 390Th Bomb Group, Gather Around As The Bomb Is Prepared For Loading On A Boeing B-17 "Flying Fortress". 8Th Air Force Base In England, 28 August

[The hell that a madman has rained down upon their people.]



Soon This Bomb, Which An Ordnance Crew Is Loading Onto A Bomb Trailer, Will Be Dropped On Enemy Installations In Europe By A Boeing B-17 "Flying Fortress" Of The 401St Bomb Group. England, 21 March 1944.

65638A.