"Hank" Hettinger Goes to War

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By Loren Hettinger and Robert Hettinger. Based on interviews with Henry R. "Hank" Hettinger, November 2, 2001, and October 30, and December 20, 2005.

Talk about extremes: I mean about going from being a small-town boy in the farming and railroad community of Sterling on the plains of northeastern Colorado to a world traveler – although on "Uncle Sam's" nickel – and all in the matter of months. The declaration of war after Pearl Harbor was bombed on December 7, 1941 changed everything. Before that happened, the farthest I had been from home was to Denver, and that was a big adventure in itself. So, this world-shaking event in Hawaii circled the globe, touched our small corner of the world, and brought me out of my reverie of wondering if I had a career working at Montgomery Wards. I can't remember what catalyst caused me to enlist in the army, but a lot of the young guys in my crowd were heading for the military in a huge up-surge of patriotism.

After the induction physical in Denver, I was first assigned to Shepard Field, Texas for basic training. The unit at this time was composed of a conglomerate of young men from all over the U.S., but contained quite a few boys who likely had never been any place before where knowing right from left was important. This caused us no end of suppressed amusement at first, with a bunch of hick kids running into each other during marching drills. But it also caused a lot of hollering from the drill sergeant and some swearing fallout on everyone. But the drill sergeants had run into this problem before, and their method of engaging different sides of the brain in recruits while they were marching was to have them hold a large rock in their right hand. This caused the recruits to march with heavy, right-foot tromping, and for some reason I thought of cave men. I laugh to this day thinking about it. These poor guys were on permanent KP duty, either in the kitchen or scrubbing out the commodes. Some from the backwaters of the country thought that KP duty in the kitchen was fine though, as they had plenty to eat.

At the end of basic training, the Army Air Force was looking for airplane mechanics, and I thought this sounded like a good deal. I had worked on cars with my older brother some and figured I might know something about turning a wrench. After getting out of mechanics training, I was assigned to the 8th Air Force, and became part of a provisional bomb group, the 801st & 492nd composed of B-24 Liberators. B-24 Liberators had four-engines and were a kind of stubby-looking bomber with twin tail booms, a high wing and had a maximum speed of about 300 mph. They became the workhorses of the European theater.

Training continued at bases in San Diego, Salt Lake City, Alamogordo, and Clovis, New Mexico,

and finally Langley Field in Virginia. I became the Flight Engineer on an eight-member aircrew with three ground-crew members. We were sent to England via Newfoundland, Greenland, and Scotland. Names of the aircrew included Van Zyl (pilot), Clark (co-pilot), Olson (radioman), Qualls (second flight engineer), Zsadanyi (tail gunner), Elkouri (bombardier), Rivkin (navigator), and me, also a flight engineer. The flight engineers had a multitude of jobs, from making sure equipment was functional and if it wasn't to fix it, to keeping track of fuel, making sure bomb bay doors were open for a drop and wheels were locked down on landing, filling in as a gunner as needed, and then to making sure we dropped ordinance and later personnel and supplies at the right time in conjunction with the navigator while flying OSS (Office of Strategic Services) missions.

We were initially assigned to a base in Alconbury, and then Watton, England, and were first sent out on submarine patrols over the Atlantic and then the Bay of Biscay. At the airbase in Alconbury, the runway was a steel mesh, which made for rough landings. The quarters were in Quonset huts that had a stove in the middle, which was placed in a "sand box" for fire safety. The sand, however, became a handy urinal if some of the guys had stayed at the pub too long or they were too lazy to walk out to the commode. This made for an unpleasant ambience when the stove was fired up, and some of us complained that these guys "had to get some couth." We finally sewed one of the sand-urinating night owl's sleeping bag shut, and he had a terrible time trying to figure out how to open it up after coming in from a night "out on the town," but with much muttering and swearing finally ripped it apart. The next morning he was sleeping peacefully in a halo of feathers.

The submarine patrols entailed low-level flights, and if a submarine was detected, torpedoes were dropped in line with the target. Once we were flying very low in choppy seas, we fired on a "fishing boat" that turned out to be used for enemy observations.

We were then assigned to a base in Watton, England where we continued submarine patrols for two to three more months, and we then started doing night flights to drop people, called "Joes," and equipment as part of the OSS and Maquis resistance fighters in France and the underground in other European countries. This was part of the support security called "Operation Carpetbagger"*. The airplane was painted black for these missions, and a 6-foot hole and trap door were put in from which the resistance personnel and equipment were parachuted out. The equipment was varied and included everything from food to gasoline, explosives, machine guns, and ammunition.

In flying 30 completed, and as many as 70 attempted missions (the quota for a tour of duty was 30 missions, but a mission was not counted if for any reason it was not completed), we had numerous "close calls" and went through three or four planes that had to be junked after getting shot full of holes. The following relive some of the events that I remember as if they happened yesterday.

Early in my career as flight engineer, we were short on fuel and landed at an alternative base. I was showing one of the resident ground crews the plane and they were asking about the flare gun that was positioned in the ceiling to fire a flare into the air above the plane. I pulled it out of the holder, and not realizing it had a hair-trigger, sent a round through the windshield of the plane. I never saw people move so fast to get out of a plane, while I stood transfixed with a smoking pistol in my hand. The pilot said it better be fixed before we took off for our base. At first I tried to find a replacement from "parts," but this turned out to be futile, as it would take some time for one to be shipped from another base. Then I saw one of the tin kerosene cans and had the other flight engineer help me to cut the top off. We then put the top over the hole and tied a rope to the handle and secured the other end to a reinforcing post inside the cabin. The co-pilot had to hold onto the rope to make sure it stayed tight, as we flew to our base where there was a replacement windshield from all the junked, shot-up planes.

Early in our submarine patrols, when we were still learning the nuances of flying for long periods over the ocean, we flew into a series of thick clouds. The pilot thought we should have been over land, and asked the navigator where we were. The navigator replied, "I wish I knew!" As flight engineer, I was calculating fuel supply, and how much time we had before running out. I then relayed this information to the pilot. He thought we would likely have to ditch into the ocean, but fortunately we finally reached land, which turned out to be Scotland. We headed southeast, straight for the base, and made a deadhead approach. One engine quit on the approach, and another as we finished taxiing. Likely none of the crew, except the pilot, co-pilot, and me, really knew how close we were to a crash landing. I had been so nervous that when I got out of the plane I felt like kissing the grass, but I instead threw up on it.

As Flight Engineer, I had the opportunity to occasionally serve at different stations of the plane. I had relieved the tail gunner on one mission as we came back from submarine patrol in the Bay of Biscay. All of a sudden I was amazed as a hole appeared in one of the tail fins, and a second later, a JU-88 (twin-engine German fighter) went whizzing by. Other parts of the plane were being hit. I grabbed onto the machine gun and was going to fire at the fighters, but the plane was bucking so wildly, as the pilot took evasive action, that it was all I could do to hang on. There were seven or eight fighters, which came back for another pass, and put some more holes in the plane, shooting the seat out from under the bombardier. The German pilots shot at the wings, which contained the fuel tanks, but by this time in the war, these were self-sealing, and I'm sure this saved our bacon, because there were a lot of holes through the wings. We finally were able to reach cloud cover to shake the fighters. A bullet had sheared a cable to the tail, which made it difficult to keep the plane flying straight. One of the waist gunners and I used empty 50-caliber machine gun links, which held the ammunition, to splice the cable, and this seemed to cure the problem. In all this, none of the crew was injured, and the plane was able to make it back to England, but was junked because of so much damage.

On another flight, a bullet from a fighter entered the fuselage and caught the hydraulic lines and

fluid on fire above the bomb bay doors. We tried to control the flames with a fire extinguisher, but it was roaring like a large Bunsen burner, and flames extended out about 20 feet. The pilot thought we were going to have to ditch. The procedure was to open the bomb bay doors when ditching into the ocean. I helped do this then looked out into an angry sea with waves the size of houses. I knew instinctively that the plane would fly apart in such rough water. The waves were close, about 20 feet below the plane! All of a sudden the fire went out. I didn't know whether it was the wind from the open door or divine intervention. I ran to the cockpit and hollered, "Pull'er up, it's out!" The crew – well, we just looked at each other. Later, I thought that opening the bomb-bay doors had likely squeezed all the remaining hydraulic fluid out through the lines and removed the source of fuel feeding the fire.

We were then assigned to be part of the "Carpetbagger" group that was set-up as part of the OSS. Night flights into Europe to drop resistance personnel and equipment had the advantage of missing most of the fighter patrols, but these flights usually encountered flak from anti-aircraft guns. I found the night missions to be lonely, as I was usually in the top gun turret. The darkness caused me to often be slightly air sick, which didn't bother me so much during the day.

One night early in these missions, as we were returning, the navigator radioed to the pilot and said, "I hate to tell you this, but I believe we're over Paris!" About that time, large searchlights came on to spotlight our plane, and 88mm anti-aircraft guns started shooting flak at us. The pilot said he was taking the plane down on the deck, and he hollered at me to watch for steeples and smoke stacks. In the meantime, 88-shell bursts were exploding all around the plane, and the waist gunners were shooting out as many search lights as they could. Every so often, I would yell, "There's one!" And the plane would bank away in response from the steeple or smokestack. Finally we were out of the area, and made it back to base without any damage.

On our return from one mission, we flew across the coast of France and on toward England, and we had a view of the armada that was assembled for D-Day. It was an awesome site with ships stretched out as far as the eye could see. It gave us hope that this war wouldn't last forever after all.

In dropping people and supplies behind enemy lines, we generally flew at low altitudes to reduce the potential to be detected by anti-aircraft batteries. We dropped the resistance personnel from 2000 feet and supplies from 400 feet. One night we had a woman on board as part of the resistance personnel, and she told me that I would have to push her out when it was time to jump, because she could not do the jump on her own. So I made sure the static line on her parachute was connected, said, "Good luck," and gave her a push, at which she gave a loud, frightened yell and disappeared. Recently, I received a telephone call from a woman in Australia, and she told me that she had looked me up, as she remembered that flight and said that she had survived the jump and the war!

Finally my crew and I reached our quota of 30 completed missions and returned to the States. We flew back from Scotland and Greenland again without mishap and to Atlantic City, and then dispersed. I came back to Sterling on a furlough, and was one of the first from the Army Air Corps to come back from the war. Thus, I was in demand to give talks to various organizations, but really couldn't say very much because the missions were still classified, which disappointed many of the people. So, my talks generally went like this,"I flew in B-24 Liberators over the Atlantic and parts of Europe on missions that are still classified. And yes, it was a miracle we survived, but part of this was due to being innovative and lucky. Because a lot of our comrades in other planes did not make it back!" And then there would be questions like, "So, did you fly into Germany?" My answer would be something like, "Well, I really can't say anything about that!" After this dialogue was repeated a number of times, people finally gave up trying to pry any gory details out of me.

I was reassigned as a training instructor for flight engineers at a base in Boise, Idaho and to retrain for the Pacific Theater. I realized that the new pilots and flight engineers didn't know anything and thought about how we were probably like that when we first went to Europe. Then I was sent to Victorville, California. Leota Broman, whom I had met on a blind date while on leave eventually married, came out on the train for a visit. An order came down that we were confined to the base for a reassignment. I used guy's passes from other units to visit with Leota, and when MPs came to check on us, the fellows in my unit would say, "He was just here . . . you just missed him!" Later when I returned, the MPs said, "Where have you been? We've been looking all over for you!" And I said, "Well, I've been around all the time!"

While at Victorville, I was selected along with a pilot to fly a major to San Francisco to a high-level meeting. The officer told the co-pilot and me that he would return at a certain time, and we better be there because he would not wait. I knew this officer had a tough reputation and meant what he said, so was back at the plane at the designated time. The co-pilot was not however, and we took off without him. I became the co-pilot on the flight back. When the co-pilot finally arrived back at base the next day – after hitching a ride on another flight--the major had him in front of his desk and scathingly read him the riot act. I was glad it wasn't me and was hoping there was no fall-out in my direction.

I continued to serve as an instructor at different bases in Kansas and finally was discharged at the end of the war from Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma. Because "A" bombs were dropped on Japan, which shortened the war, I never served in the Pacific Theater.

I know these experiences happened over 60 years ago now, but they seem closer than that. We were in an adventure all right, but the stakes were high. Maybe that has made the experiences remain so vivid for me. So, many of the crews that would go with us on a mission didn't make it back. Sometimes an adjoining crew would know what happened – if they had parachuted out, or if the plane had gone down in flames and pieces. Sometimes a crew just disappeared, as if they had been plucked out of our midst by a giant hand, never to be heard from again. By the end of

our tour, we were the only intact crew left of those that had started out with us in England. I think about some of these guys occasionally. I know that we were lucky to have Van Zyl as the pilot. Time after time, he was level-headed in emergencies and without his clear thinking in the face of danger and his quick actions – as well as those from the rest of the crew members – we might have had the same fate.

Staff Sergeant Henry "Hank" R. Hettinger received an honorable discharge on September 12, 1945, after serving 3 ?-years, and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal with Three Oak-Leaf Clusters, and the European Theater of Operations Ribbon with three battle stars. (He did not receive a Good Conduct Medal, possibly because he evaded the MPs to meet his wife-to-be. They celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary in November 2005).

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*Parnell, B. 1987. Carpetbaggers: America's Secret War in Europe. Eakin Press. Austin, Texas.