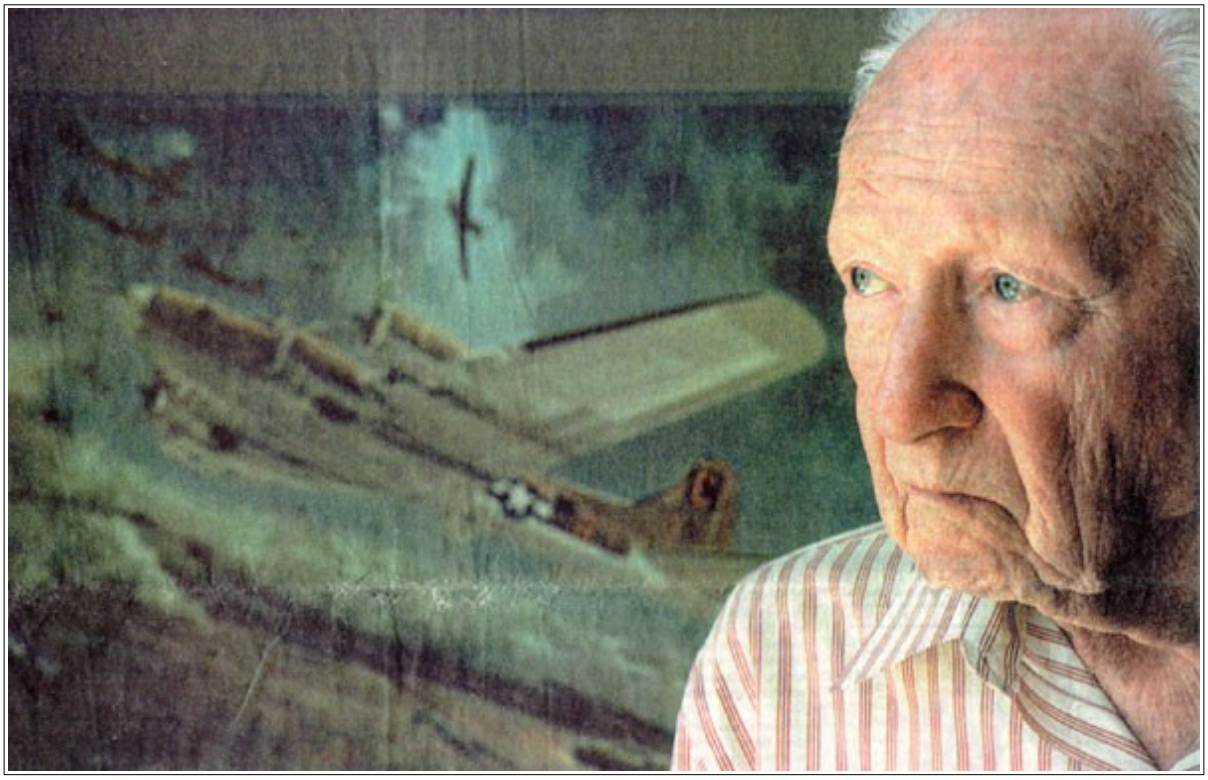
A Matter of Days



Images of B-17 bombers dominate John Comer's room at the Wesleyan Retirement Home in Georgetown. He flew 25 missions during World War II.

By Brad Buchholz
American-Statesman Staff

GEORGETOWN -John Comer's room at the Wesleyan Retirement Home is filled with airplanes - or to be more precise, photos and paintings of United States B-17 bombers. There are no family portraits in plain view, no mementos from a life beyond the limits of World War II. Above his simple bed, a hulking B-17 swoops low over an English wheat field, props buzzing, elegant in its final approach home.

The man who lives in this room is 90 now. His hair is white. He walks with short steps. It's been a long time -- more than 55 years --since he last flew in combat inside a B-17 "Flying Fortress," as an aerial engineer and turret gunner, during World War II. Yet those days are still vivid within him. Is it a thing of triumph, or of sadness, that a human life is defined by a mere 170 days - and 25 bombing missions - over Nazi Germany in 1943?

"I have no idea how we managed to survive," Comer says simply, wistfully, at one point. And in the end, there may be no more succinct way to frame his story.

It was an awful and honorable duty, to do what Comer and his compatriots did in those days. In an age before long-range fighter escorts, the B-17s in the 8th Air Force Unit, flew almost naked into Nazi Germany, in daylight, fending off anti-aircraft fire and German fighter planes. Even when B-17s were lucky enough to have short-range escort upon leaving Ridgewell Airdome in southern

England, German fighters would circle above and wait patiently for the Allied warplanes to run low on fuel before commencing their attack.

The temperature in the old B-17s was 40 degrees below zero, 50 degrees below zero, 60 degrees below zero. The crew faced the danger of frostbite, and fatigue, and blackout from a lack of oxygen. The casualty rate in his unit was so high, says Comer, that only one man in four completed the mandatory tour of 25 bombing missions - and many of those who did survive suffered deep emotional scars.

By a miracle, John Comer made it. And what's more, he wrote about it. His book "Combat Crew," (published by William Morrow in the 1980s) is a first-person, present tense account assembled from a daily journal Comer kept during the war. A young man's fear and adrenaline - and death at 15,000 feet - are everywhere within the pages.

Comer's book recalls what it is to crash land on a crowded runway with no brakes, or pray for your life when the fuel gauge reads empty, or dangle upside down in the open sky while trying to cut loose a live, thousand pound bomb from a bomb-bay rack with a hacksaw. He tells you what it is to watch an airman jump safely from. a crashing bomber - only to have his silk chute snag onto the tail of the plane. Each mission had its own cruel, coincidental twists of fate. A matter as simple as a shifting cloud pattern saved Comer's life, so many times. . . .

And so it is that I visit the Wesleyan Retirement Home to ask an American hero the essential questions - about God, and War, and Fate, and what it is to live for 90 years when it was all but certain you'd never see 1944. But as I sit with John Comer in a sunny, silent recreation room, I can't get past the more immediate sensation. How his eyes are a thin, pale blue - the color of the sky.

First mid-air combat: 1943

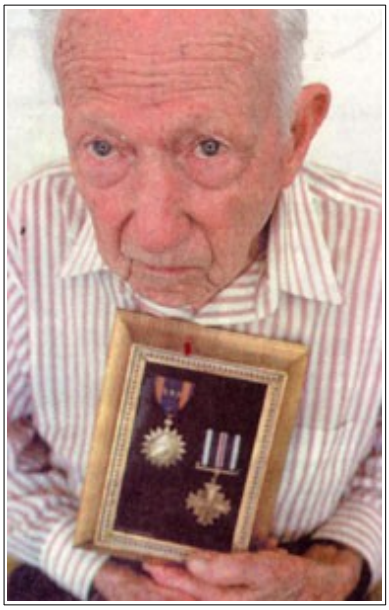
"Copilot to Turret. "

"Go Ahead. "

`Keep your eye on those three fighters three o'clock high - I'll watch high and forward. . ."

Suddenly (copilot Herb) Carqueville screamed over the intercom: `Fighter coming in twelve o'clock level-get him! Get him! Get him!" I was tracking four suspicious fighters at nine o'clock and wheeled around just in time to get my sights on the fighter attacking us. It was headed straight for our nose spitting deadly 20 mm cannon shells and 30 caliber machine gun bullets. I was so fascinated by the sight that I froze! Did not fire a shot!! Neither did the Bombardier nor the Navigator - the only other guns that could bear on a frontal attack! Light flashes from the leading edge of the fighter signaled how many cannon shells were being fired at us. I could hear some projectiles striking the airplane. It was a spectacle that drove deep into my memory. The fighter turned his belly to us and slipped into a beautiful barrel roll under our right wing and dived out of range.

Carqueville was boiling mad! He exploded over the intercom: "What th' hell's the matter with you sunnuvabitches? You're supposed to be gunners! Why didn't you shoot?. . . "



Comer's Distinguished Flying Cross medal, at right, 'doesn't have to do with how many missions you fly,' he says, 'It's about what you do when you're up there.'

He was furious and he should have been, because there was no excuse for failure to fire. I have relived those traumatic moments many times and I can still feel the mesmerizing power that prevented my hand from pressing that firing switch. Why didn't we fire? I will never know for sure. We were seized by the paralysis so typical of what happens to a deer hunter the first time he gets a buck in his gun sights, (or the commandment "Thou shalt not kill.')

Essential questions

Even now, there's a boyish quality to John Comer - particularly when he smiles. There's a formality to his posture: chin straight, arms clasped behind him. He does have a hard time hearing, even with his hearing aids. Sometimes, I have to write out questions on a piece of paper. Other times, the airman's 55-year-old son, Austin writer Jim Comer, intervenes and shouts them straight into his father's hearing aid.

Ninety years, I'm thinking. It's only normal, at that age, to have hearing troubles in conversation. But I don't even consider that the explosion of turret guns or the roar of bomber engines may have damaged his hearing long ago, when he was still a young man.

Comer was only 32, married, living in Corpus Christi and selling machine tools, when he enlisted in 1942. Most of his companions on the B-17 crew - all of whom had volunteered for air combat - were even younger. "We were a group of very

ordinary men," he says. His voice is warm, avuncular. "But in combat, we became extraordinary. If we hadn't, there was no way we were going to survive.

"Had we known what (that) combat was really like, none of us would have volunteered. And by the time we knew, it was too late."

I hold back from asking Comer about the time his crew jettisoned their guns and ammunition and parachute gear into the North Sea in a desperate attempt to lighten the plane and stretch their last drops of fuel. I resist the urge to ask about the time he saved the lives of three men who'd blacked out, due to lack of oxygen, in the middle of an aerial battle. I don't ask about the two raids on the German ballbearings plants to Schweinfurt, when a combined 122 American B-17s were shot out of the sky. I knew the stories; they were all in the book.

Instead, I asked how a veteran comes to terms with the great paradox of his war experience. In combat, in the air, in the span of 170 days, Comer forged the deepest friendships of his life. In the air, in combat, in the span of 170 days, he witnessed the greatest horrors of his life.

Comer tries his best to answer, then looks away. I'm ashamed for pushing the question. It's too much to ask of the man, now. Some things, it seems here, are better left in the past.

Waiting for the call, 1943

For the first month at Ridgewell (Airdome) the mental strain of not knowing what to expect with the dawn of each new day was severe. No amount of training, and especially the kind we had, could prepare one to step from a sheltered civilian life to the chance he would face death, or an injury even worse, in the next twenty hours. All of a sudden my priorities had undergone a traumatic shift. The small anxieties I used to worry about seemed so trivial. Did I once worry abort making my sales quota? Or about paying the monthly bills? How absurd! It all boiled down to revising my mental priorities to accept a new way of looking at things - a new mental attitude that would have been alien and totally unacceptable six months ago. . . .

After making my decision, I began consciously to try to drive out contrary thinking. "Why worry about tomorrow? There is no tomorrow - there is only today. . . . When life is threatened each hour becomes more irreplaceable. Today you are alive and well, so be grateful. For all you know this may be your last day! Don't ruin it by morbid foreboding' of burning airplanes and horrifying plunges out of the sky. To hell with tomorrow!

A son and a friend

John Comer's best friend during the war - his best friend in life, period - was a college-age Mississippian named James (Jim) Counce. When the two men met in training school in 1943, they hit it off so well that they "bribed" an Air Force clerk to ensure that they would fly together in European bombing raids. Both men were engineers. Comer handled the top turret guns, Counce manned the waist guns.

Together, the two flew in B-17s - planes with names such as Nip N' Tuck, Tinker Toy, Hellcat -- raining bombs on Nazi strongholds in Stuttgart and Schweinfurt, Bremen and Hamburg, Brussels and Paris. During "down" time, the two men engaged in friendly discussions about the odds of their survival. In "Combat Crew," Comer wrote that one group of airmen believed one's odds of survival decreased with each successful mission - reasoning a man could survive only a finite number of raids. Comer and Counce believed that one's odds of survival stayed the same - or maybe even improved, because of a crew's gained wisdom - with each mission.

On Dec. 20,1943 - during a bombing raid over Bremen, Germany - Counce and two other airmen collapsed in .the back of the plane when their portable oxygen tanks began to freeze at 80 degrees below zero. While the co-pilot manned the turret guns in an air battle, Comer stumbled to the back of the plane and revived the men, one by one. Two, including Counce, had been deprived of oxygen for more than five minutes. "Their faces," recalls Comer, pointing to a jet black picture frame, "were as dark as that wood."

Counce suffered a severe case of frostbite during the mission and had to miss four subsequent raids - flights no. 22, 23, 24, and 25 for John Comer. When Counce returned to duty - Jan. 11,1944 - he was shot down and killed over Germany on his very first flight. So, too, was Comer's friend George Balmore, a radio operator on his old crew. Comer had said goodbye to both men on the runway that morning, as each boarded separate planes. He then left Ridgewell Airdome for good, his 25-mission tour of duty complete. Comer didn't hear the news of their deaths until days later.

Comer in Italy, 1944. He had already survived innumerable brushes with death.

"I'm sure that my father would tell you that the relationships he forgsd during the war wore the most meaningful of his life," says Jim Comer. "I was, in fact, named for my father's two closest friends - Jim Counce and George Balmore. My full name is James Balmore Comer."

Prayer, 1943

BAM!!

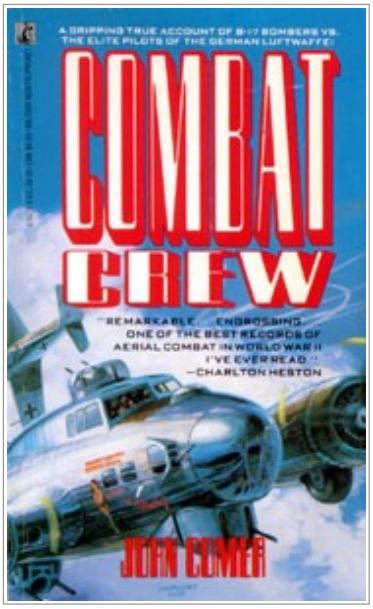
The ship rocked and I saw a nearby burst of orange flame followed by boiling, black smoke. I had been told that the crew would not hear the (anti-aircraft) shells burst. Well, I heard that one. . . .

One battery of guns below began to move in closer and closer. They seemed to choose us as their special target and were firing five 88mm shells at a time. As. the bursts crept ever closer I could feel the hair on my head trying to push up against my helmet. All the German gunners needed to do was make one final correction, and they would have had us bracketed dead center.

"Radio to Copilot-can't we take some evasive action?"

"Hell no! We're on the bomb run."

I prayed a little, but who knows whether it helped me or not. At the time, a man with a religious background felt that it could help, and in that sense perhaps it was useful. Later, when I looked back on such moments more rationally, I wondered why I believed that through the mysterious phenomena we call prayer the Supreme Being could be induced to alter the Laws of the Universe - His Own Laws - just for me. Was I some special favorite? Was anyone praying for the protection of the innocent people who lived and worked too close to where our exploding bombs were landing? How strange and paradoxical for men to pray selfishly for their own lives, while doing everything in their power to kill other men, who in turn perhaps were praying to the same God.



Cover art from just one of the many printings of John's Combat Crew.

Faith

Though he was free to retire from active combat, Comer volunteered to fly again during World War II - participating in 50 B-17 bombing missions with the 15th Air Force over Italy in 1944 and 1945. But the tide of the war had turned by then, and the Allies had at last developed and deployed long-range fighter escorts. The element of danger was cut dramatically.

After the war, Comer lived a quiet life in the United States. He worked as a sales manager for Sherwin-Williams paints and eventually settled in Dallas in 1962. The man who handled turret guns so gallantly would never allow a gun to be kept in his house.

When Jim Comer reached draft age during the Vietnam years, the father respected his son's philosophical stand against the war in Southeast Asia. As a teacher, Jim Comer was exempt from the draft. The man named for two dead airmen did not serve.

How is it that a man's entire life is defined by a mere 170 days? As brilliant spring sunlight streams through the broad window in his room, John Comer takes a moment to show me his Distinguished Flying Cross. It hangs in his room, alongside the pictures and the paintings of the B-17 bombers. "This medal doesn't have to do with how many missions you fly," he says quietly. "It's about what you do when you're up there."

On a piece of paper, I scratch out one last question - about what sustained him during the experience. Was it hope? Was it faith? "Religion had something to do with it," he says. "But we all felt like we were battling against the worst anti-Christ in the world, Adolf Hitler. We all felt we had an obligation to protect our families, to protect our country, and help destroy this man. And we did."

Some men paid a higher price in that cause than others. I wonder if it's something John Comer still ponders at night, when he glances at his paintings of the B-17s before he cuts out the light.

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