

Ridgewell 1945

Ridgewell, England, 1945, by Richard A. Bettencourt

It all began in 1943. My father and mother were Tony and Anna. I have two sisters, Loraine and Anna. I was raised in Ignacio, which is now South Novato, about 20 miles north of San Francisco. I lived by highway 101, across from Hamilton field. I saw the first airplanes land there and as a youngster I would walk to the airfield and spend time around the planes, watching the mechanics and sitting in the cockpits. This started my desire to fly. When the war began and I was getting near being drafted, I heard about the cadet program. I went to Hamilton Field, took all the tests and was accepted into the cadets. On Friday the 13th of August, 1943 I was on a train that 3 days later arrived at Sheppard field, Wichita Falls, Texas. I survived all the training and in September of 1944 I was made a Navigator and a Flight Officer and assigned to a B-17 crew. The crew did some further training at Dyersberg, Tenn. And on January 31st, 1945 we were on a liner destined for England. On February 12th we arrived at Ridgewell, the home of the 381st Bomb Group. We were assigned to the 532nd Bomb Squadron and a ship named "Old Irongut" was assigned to us. The crew consisted of Pilot Wesley E. Huff, Copilot Jack Youk, Jr., Navigator Richard A. Bettencourt, myself, Bombardier Joseph A. Manfredi, Engineer J. Austin Hebert, Radio Operator William E. Geist, Ball Turret Gunner Richard Zoph, Tail Gunner Thomas Vandeventer, and Waist Gunner Donald O. Whiteker. After the war sometime he changed his name to Kuehn.

We were immediately given some practice formation flying and on March 1st we flew our first mission. The group, consisting of three, 12 ship squadrons. We flew to Neckarsulm in southwest Germany, just north of Stuttgart. There we dropped our bombs through clouds using radar. The mission lasted 8 hours and 45 minutes. Most of our planes received some light damage from flack. The bursts were all around us. We were told not to worry about the flack you see. It is the one you do not see that can hurt or kill you. One plane had one of its engines catch on fire and the engineer bailed out. The fire then went out and the plane was able to return to the base.

The next day we bombed Chemnitz. Again we dropped our bombs through cloud cover. This time we spent 9 hours in the air. There was very little flack. We were all low on gas. Two ships had to stop for gas. One landed in Belgium and the other landed near the English coast and got some gas and then came home. All crews returned. We heard that another group had been attacked by German fighters, but we saw none of the fighters.

On March 4th we bombed a place called Ulm. There was no flack. It was mighty cold at 38 degrees below zero. The mission was uneventful.

On the March 5th mission to Plauen things got a little hairy. On our return we received flack near Brux. One piece came through the vertical stabilizer and on into the fuselage. One piece broke the side window near my navigator's desk. I figured it was about a foot from my head. One piece came through the cowling of engine number two and another went into engine number 3's oil cooler, but the engines kept running. Two other ships landed in Brussels with mechanical problems but no casualties.

Missions were uneventful for awhile.

Then on March 9th our crew received its first 48 hours pass. Most of us decided to go into London. After arriving in London we went and got something to eat. Joe the bombardier had made reservations for us at the Jules Club. We went there, rested, washed up and then went out and walked around Piccadilly Circus for awhile. The next day we arranged for a 2-hour tour of London in a cab. We saw Buckingham Palace, #10 Downing Street, and the Tower of London, St. Paul's Cathedral, Westminster Abbey, Parliament and the bridges across the Thames River. We also saw a lot of the ruined parts of London.

That evening we went to Grosvenor House for dinner and then to the Overseas Club to listen to music and dance. Got to bed about 3:00 AM. The next morning we got up and headed back to our base.

Then on March 15th we went on mission #7 to Oranienburg. We took a lot of flack over the target. There were a couple of hits in our plane's horizontal stabilizer. One bombardier got wounded in our 3 ship element. The lead ship got badly hit and a gunner was killed. A big hole appeared in the waist. The hole was big enough to push a piano through. They had to crash land on a field in England near the English Channel. Upon landing the landing gear collapsed and the ship was so badly damaged it was written off.

On March 18th we went on our first mission to Berlin. There was a lot of flack over the target, but none near our ship. A couple of ships did get hit pretty badly but they were able to return to base. As we were getting ready to leave the ship our engineer asked our waist gunner if he would remove the barrels from the twin 50's in his top turret as he had another job he had to do. As the waist gunner reached up to raise himself into the turret, he somehow hit the trigger on the twin 50 caliber guns and several rounds went across the fields. Somehow no plane or personnel were hit. No sooner had the noise stopped when the Commanding Officer pulled up in his jeep to find out what happened.

On March 22nd we flew our 11th mission. We bombed military barracks near a town NNE of Essen. The lead ship was hit by flack about 30 seconds after bombs were dropped. He was flying directly in front and slightly above our ship. They got hit between the co-pilot and the #3 engine. The #3 engine is the engine immediately to the right of the co-pilot. There was a burst of flames and debris and the ship started down. We saw three chutes appear, but only two opened. The flack was very accurate. We received several holes in both wings and in the horizontal stabilizers. The holes did not affect our return to base. That evening a V-1 buzz bomb went by over our base. We heard the noise, and were glad to hear it continue on its way. We never did hear where it came down. It was weird laying there and listening to the pop pop pop of the engine and hoping the noise would continue.

On March 24th there were two missions, we went on the second to Ensade. On the first mission one ship was hit over the target and blew up. It went down without any chutes appearing. Our mission was done with no casualties.

On March 30th we went to Bremen and bombed submarine pens. The only flack we encountered was over the target and it was pretty accurate. A piece of flack came in the waist part of the plane, hit some armor plate and went out again. We got several holes in the horizontal and vertical stabilizers. There was an awful wind of 300 miles per hour over the target. It lowered to 95 MPH on the way home as we went to lower altitudes.

On April 10th we flew our 18th mission. It was to Oranienburg about 20 miles north of Berlin. There was no flack over the target. We had no bombardier and I was the toggler. A few minutes after we came off target I saw some flashes across the nose. I realized it was tracer bullets and someone was firing. I rushed for the nose turret and started to turn the guns. A German fighter, an ME-262 jet fighter, had come up from below us on the right and was leaving going up and away to the left. We had never seen anything move so fast. Some ships got in some shots but it appeared that no one hit him. It was the first and last time that I saw an enemy fighter near our formation. On the way home we saw flack over Wittenburg and went around it. Another group was not so fortunate. They lost a ship. It went down in two pieces.

On April 11th we went to Friedham to bomb some underground oil supply tanks. We assembled over France and on the way to the target we saw the Eiffel Tower. There was a little flack over the target. Only one ship got hit. It was hit in the tail and the tail gunner got wounded. The excitement happened on the way back. Two ships holding tight formation collided. One ship came up and its wing caught the other ship's horizontal stabilizer and knocked the entire right tail assembly off at the fuselage. He was able to keep the ship under control. When he got back to base they suggested that they bail out. He told them he could land it. He had practiced landing procedures on the way home. He said that he had to keep the landing speed up otherwise the tail would drop. They told him to wait until all the other ships had landed then he would come in. He brought

the ship in using every bit of the runway. He also burned out the brakes. But he got it on the ground with no one injured. He received a special medal for this feat. This pilot presently lives in Tiburon, California, about 10 miles from my present home. His name is Turner Brashear.

On April 21st on our 25th mission we went to bomb a German airfield near Munich. The target was covered with clouds so we went to a secondary target. Some marshalling yards. We had to bomb using radar. Everything went wrong with our ship as we came off the target. The VHF radio would not work. The gee box, a method of navigation invented by the English, went out. We could follow the lead ship back. Suddenly there was a short in the chin turret and boy did it smoke. But it stopped and cleared up. The formation was letting down all this time through the clouds and just as I saw the French coast appear below us and I knew we were over the English Channel, we suddenly were in clouds. So we dived to the left to get away from the other planes. We kept going down in the clouds. We could just see past our wing tip. We continued to let down slowly. We finally came out of the clouds and the altimeter said we were 200 feet below sea level. We were actually about 200 feet above the water. The barometer pressure had changed during the 8 and ½ hours since we left our base. There were 3 bombs in our bomb bay. For some reason they hung up, so we salvoed them in the channel. We decided that if we flew to the west that we would eventually get to England. We did not know what part of England we would hit. We were concerned of the anti-aircraft guns set up to protect the coast. As we neared the coast we did a 360 degree turn. The buzz bombs that came over England could not turn. We did not want to appear as a buzz bomb. We had no radio to contact those controlling the guns. The anti-aircraft guns on the coast of England were manned by women. They would fire on almost anything that got within range. We found ourselves approaching the coast south of London. We went around London and finally reached our base and landed.

On April 23rd I flew as a navigator for a special mission to a base near Liverpool to get liquor for the Officers club. When we got there we decided to go to town to get something to eat while the Major went to get the liquor. The pilot, co-pilot and I, along with the colonel's dog, a collie, that flew with us, caught a street car that ran along the base. They would not let the dog on the streetcar so he had to run along side. The streetcar slowed down several times so the dog could keep up. We ate and then made the return trip to our home base with a load of liquor.

Our crew got together that afternoon and were playing a softball game against another crew, when suddenly someone came and told us that our Radio operator had been killed along with 30 other men. We could not believe it. His name was drawn for a 48 hours pass to Belfast, Ireland. The plane had crashed into a mountain on the Isle of Man, situated between England and Ireland. The mountain is about the same height as Mt. Tamalpais, approximately 2,400 feet high. Mt. Tamalpais sits about 10 miles from my home. It hit the mountain about 200 feet from the top. All 31 were killed. Our whole crew was upset with the news. It hit us very hard. We were all very close. All the bodies were flown back to our base before being taken to the American Military Cemetery at Cambridge, where the entire crew along with a large attendance from the base took part in the service.

On April 25th we flew our 26th and last mission. This mission was to Pilsen in Czechoslovakia. We were to bomb an airfield just outside of town. We were to bomb only if we could see the target visually. We came down to 14,000 feet. Ordinarily we were about 25,000 feet. We went over the target. It was covered with clouds, so the group went around again. It was still covered, so we went around again. This was the third time over the target and it was still covered. We did not have enough gas to stay any longer, so we headed for home. While we did not lose any of our ships we saw several from other groups go down. On the first time over the target we got hit by some flack and 2 cables were cut in the waist of the ship. We still had control. We did not know at the time there would be a problem. As we made our last pass and came off the target the ship started to climb. The pilot went to change the setting of the elevator trim tabs. The wheel that controlled them was free. It was then we found out what the cables were for. The plane kept climbing. The pilot and co-pilot had the controls pushed all the way forward. They even had their knees on the controls trying to keep the plane down. Someone suggested pulling on the

cables. One of the waist gunners grabbed and pulled on the cables and immediately we went into a dive. After some adjusting the ship was under control. And we got back in the formation. There was some indication from the lead ship that we were going to Munich and drop our bombs there. It was decided that the group did not have enough fuel to make the side trip. So we brought the bombs back and landed.

On May 5th the pilot, co-pilot, the engineer and I went up in a ship to put some time on a new engine. We took off and headed north to get away from the other 5 bases that were within 15 miles of our base. The clouds were at about 1500 feet so we decided to get above them. We went up to 12,000 feet and because we had no oxygen masks could go no higher. We were in the clouds all the time flying on instruments. The pilot said we should go down and get under the clouds. He turned over the controls to the co-pilot and sat back. We started down. I was standing behind them with an elbow on the back of each of their seats. The pilot got out a cigarette and started to light it. We could barely see our wing tips and suddenly there right before us was this big tail of a B-24 bomber. It was traveling from our right to our left. I do not think we missed them by more than 20 feet. The co-pilot looked back at me and asked did you see that and I said yes. The pilot said what did you see. When we told him, he said lets get under this fast and head for base. He called the base and they told us to return and land. The co-pilot said my face was white and I told him his was white also.

On May 7th came the official announcement of the surrender of Germany. At 8:00 AM there was a celebration in front of the control tower led by Col. Hall our commander. He stated that 165 ships had been lost and about 1290 personnel. The group had accounted for 223 enemy aircraft destroyed, 40 probables and 187 damaged. Some 28 enemy aircraft knocked down over Osschersleben on the mission of January 1944, and the 381st lost 11 ships over Schwienfurt on the 17th of August 1943. Over 22,000 tons of bombs were dropped during 9,035 sorties. Following this the base was thrown open for further celebration, the bars did a great trade with 100 lbs (\$405.00 in U.S. currency) worth of beer being provided. The celebration continued all over the base. Some of the fellows went out to the planes and brought back the flare guns. They started firing them in the air. Some fell back near some fellows and they had to run. Then they started firing towards some of the fellows. The flares came slow enough so you could duck. One shot missed and went through a window of a barracks, rolled across someone's bed and into a bag at the foot of his bed. It left a burn mark across his bed and on his bag. I think about 80% were drunk. There were a lot of headaches the next day.

On May 13th they woke us up at 3:15 AM. 10 ships from each of the 4 squadrons were sent to Barth, up near the North Sea in Germany, where Stalag 1 was located to return POW's to a base near Leon, France. After we arrived at Barth we formed up in a single line on the taxiway. The two right engines were throttled back, the waist door opened at 30 recently freed prisoners were ushered in and away we went.

We were on the ground less than fifteen minutes. They sure were happy to be leaving. Some came up in the nose where I was to see what was new in the way of navigation equipment. A couple of them started to tell me stories. When the German guards left, a decision was made to stay where they were until the Americans came for them. The regular Russians arrived and asked them what they needed. They said they needed food. So the Russians went out and gathered every cow, goat, pig and sheep they could find and drive them into the camp. Then the regular Russians left and behind them came irregulars.

Some of the fellows said they walked into town to see what was going on. On one end of the main street was a cannon. It was pointed down the street. One of the Russians asked them if they would like to see it fired. There were people walking all over the street. They said no and the Russian did not fire the cannon. Another said he was trying to talk with one of the Russians. A German walked by wearing a nice pair of leather boots. The Russian asked him if he liked that kind of boots. Without thinking he said yes. The Russian pulled out his pistol and shot the German, took off the boots and gave them to him. After that he was very careful about what he said. One of the POW's gave me a piece of cloth 6 ½ by 11 inches. It had an eagle flying over a swastika. He said the Germans sewed them on the tee shirts.

After we arrive at Leon and POWs had gotten off. We went to take off and found that we had sheared the tail wheel pin. This keeps the wheel in line for takeoffs. Without this a cross wind will push the tail to one side and you can not line up with the runway. There was a cross wind and only one runway at this base. We went back to the beginning of the runway and tied up the tail wheel with some wire. We started down the runway and the wire broke. Our engineer went looking and came back with a bolt. Again we started down the runway and the bolt broke. We came back and parked the plane off the runway. Our engineer got someone from the base and a jeep and they went into town. They found a hardware store where they found a larger bolt. We moved the ship out on the runway and inserted the bolt. We started down the runway and this time the bolt held and we took off. We finally arrived back at our base at 5:30 PM. This was some 8 hours and 40 minutes after we had left our base.

On May 24th we were assigned a ship that we were to use to go home to the USA. It was called "Weber's Wagon". We were to prepare it for the trip home.

On May 29th we packed our bags and took them to the plane. The officers were allowed 85 lbs., and the enlisted men 55 lbs.

It wasn't until June 7th that we reported for a briefing for the trip home. We took off at 11:30 AM and flew to Valley, Wales. We spent the night there and took off at 5:20 am for Meeks field in Iceland. We were there only 5 hours for refueling and took off at 10:25 PM for Goose bay, Labrador. We were so far north that it never got dark that night. We passed over the south end of Greenland. We stayed at Goose bay about 5 hours and took off for Bradley Field, Conn. There we turned in all our equipment and I prepared to travel to Camp Beale in Marysville, California and home.

This concludes my experiences that lasted 4 months and 10 days.

Written June 2001 Edited August 2004.

Submitted by Richard Bettencourt, October 2, 2005