

Poland Crew

How a B-24 Crew Landed With the 381st

By William B. Poland, Jr.

I volunteered for the Air Corps but I failed my physical because I was underweight. I weighed 125 1/2 pounds and the minimum was 127 pounds for my height. The sergeant told me to go out and eat a couple pounds of bananas or drink a quart of milk and come back and try again. The closest thing was a small eatery so I ordered a quart of milk (the man thought I was crazy). Anyway I got most of that down, went back and I had added only a pound but he gave me the other 8 ounces. When I got off the scales made a beeline to the restroom and came out weighing 125 1\5 pounds! I mention this because when I reported for my B-24 transition and saw that big bird I wondered what the hell was I doing here. That big old bird and me had a rough time for a while but I finally got so I could handle it.

After flight training I was sent to Davis-Monthan Field at Tucson, AZ, and picked up my crew there, and did our training there. (the crew wasn't too thrilled with my size either and some wives worried even more) anyway I got so I enjoyed flying the B-24 and could handle it very well. My crew and I were shipped overseas consisting of 10 members [along with other B-24 crews]. Four of these B-24 crews were assigned to the 381st on 22 December 1944. Two of these were assigned to the 532nd squadron and two to the 534th squadron.

My crew consisted of the following men:

2nd Lt William B. Poland, Jr. Pilot

2nd Lt Otes Bennett, Jr. Copilot

2nd Lt Donald A. Sockrider Navigator

2nd Lt Charles H. Beene Bombardier

Cpl William J. Powers Eng/Top Turret

Cpl Francis M. Burgess Ball Turret

Cpl Frederick S. Schnitman Radio Operator

Cpl Thomas M. Kowalcky Waist gunner

Cpl Jack N. Hext Tail Gunner

Cpl Jay C. Galvin Nose turret

Of course the nose gunner was surplus as far as B-17s were concerned so he was removed from the crew [group records show he became an Electronic Counter Measures operator with the 535th Squadron].

Kowalsky was also removed and trained as a radar operator with the 532nd.

It took them a while to decide what to do with us, so we did much of nothing until the 1st of February 1945, when we flew our first mission. I flew my first ten missions as copilot using a couple of spare pilots. Bennett [regular copilot] flew the missions with other crews. On all of these missions, the waist gunner was not a regular member of my regular crew.

My transition into the B-17 definitely was not formal. While flying as copilot the first 10 missions I learned the location of the switches and other controls, became familiar with the instrument panel etc. But I didn't have much if any "hands on" experience. After those missions, Capt. MacNeill took me up for "check" ride. I shot about 6 touch and go landings and my MOS was changed to B-17 pilot. Basically they said, you're a 4-engine pilot, deal with it. I was very fortunate, THE MAN upstairs was with us. As far as the 24 versus the 17, I was glad to make the transition, not because I didn't enjoy flying the 24



but the 17's reputation was more impressive and was a tougher plane. I think it was also a little easier to fly. I'm proud to have been able to fly both.

Submitted by William B. Poland, Jr.