

Robert L. Withers, Captain USAAF

By Warren B. Carah

“Don’t blame us for what you see here. Not all Texas is like this. God has not found this place yet.”¹ Thus was the description of Pyote Army Air Field in Ward County, Texas, where the military career of newly commissioned 2nd Lt. Robert L. Withers began. Lt. Withers, or “L. Robert,” as he was called by his close friends, had just graduated from an Army Air Forces advanced flying school in January, 1943. He was the first B-17 pilot assigned to the 533rd Bomb Squadron of the 381st Bomb Group, then being assembled at the newly created air base. Pyote, arguably the most inhospitable Army Air Field then known to exist, suited the young Lieutenant just fine. After all, he was used to bugs, snakes, and miles of sage and sand that surrounded his home town of Fort Davis, Texas at the gateway to the Big Bend country.

From the first day at the humble base at Pyote, 24 year old Robert L. Withers stood out as a mature and capable leader. He was soon tapped for challenging assignments in his bomber group through their training days in the states to their missions flown from England to axis targets in Europe later in 1943. Flying bombers in Europe in 1943 was a very dangerous profession and it ultimately killed, maimed or imprisoned thousands of young airmen before adequate measures could be taken against the formidable German defense. Until more protection could be provided, the pilots and their crews faced very uneven odds in surviving the war. Most airmen had little more than their courage, character and faith to help them and their crewmates survive the aerial ordeal. Robert Withers applied every skill he knew to insure his fellow airmen would survive the war, even if he would not. Here is his story:

Robert L. Withers was born on 13 December 1919, at Weatherford, Texas, to Robert Casey Withers and Mattie Lee Justice. Robert came later in his parents’ life and he was an only child. His father was a school administrator and teacher and the family moved several times in Robert’s youth. L. Robert’s mother was an accomplished artist, poet and teacher. Together, the two parents exerted a strong influence on L. Robert to excel in all manner of endeavors and to take many leadership roles in his youth.

In 1925, Robert and Mattie Withers moved to Fort Davis, Texas, when the younger Robert was six years of age. Robert Sr. was a co-principal of the Fort Davis schools for one year and then he started an insurance company. L. Robert’s mother continued to teach and write poetry. Their combined influence on the character of L. Robert was profound. As he matured he had an intense intellectual curiosity and natural leadership abilities which were evident even as a teenager.

During his high school days, L. Robert participated in scouting and was an excellent athlete. He was a tennis champion, but participated in all the sports his small school offered. He also had a strong affinity for nature and the Big Bend country that surrounded his home. He frequently took younger children on outings to climb the hills outside of town. They would often sit on the rocks and watch the sun set over the arid, pristine country. It is his strong sense of responsibility for others that would determine his role in the upcoming war against the axis powers.



L. Robert was very talented academically and was the valedictorian of his small Fort Davis High School class of 1937. There was no question that he would be going to college and his first choice was Baylor University in Waco. The Withers family was active in the Baptist Church and Baylor suited L. Robert's spiritual and intellectual needs well.

He graduated in August, 1941 with bachelor's degree in history and a minor in English. There is no question that he was headed for a teaching career, and he likely would have been successful at the college level. However the war intervened and he felt the need to answer the call and serve his country. His father was a veteran of WW-I and L. Robert wanted to serve his country as well. On 8 January 1942, Robert L. Withers enlisted in the United States Army at Dallas, Texas and was selected to be an Aviation Cadet.

Aviation training in the early stages of the war was a year long affair that began with an assignment to a huge pre-flight reception center where the cadets were classified as pilots, navigators or bombardiers. The regimen at the reception center usually consisted of hours of physical training, intense academic instruction in math and the sciences, basic classroom instruction in military life, and lots of parade ground drills. Housing was typically in huge tent cities with no running water or other modern facilities. After six weeks, if they survived the selection process, the cadets were sent to the appropriate schools for their aviation specialties.



For pilots, this training included primary, basic and advanced flying schools. After basic flying training, pilots were then divided into single engine and multi-engine groups for further training in an advanced flying school. Robert was assigned to bombers which fit his character. The Army Air Forces wanted bomber aircraft commanders who would assume responsibility for their crews to insure their safety, and Cadet Withers fit the bill. Aviation Cadet Robert L. Withers graduated in Class 43A and was commissioned a 2nd Lt. in the U.S. Army Air Forces on 4 January 1943.

After graduating from advanced flying school, pilots were assigned to operational training groups for transition instruction in the aircraft they would fly in combat. Lt. Withers was introduced to the Boeing B-17 and soon mastered the aircraft. Withers was then assigned as the first pilot to the 533rd Bomb Squadron of the 381st Bomb Group, then forming at Pyote

Field, Texas.

At Pyote, the 381st Bomb Group members mastered basic formation flying skills and the crews learned to work with one another. As a lead pilot, Withers was often called upon to show the newer pilots how things were supposed to be done. In recognition of his leadership, Robert was promoted to 1st Lieutenant on 10 March 1943.

To the relief of most, the 381st Bomb Group moved from Pyote to Pueblo Army Air Base, Colorado, in April, 1943, and made preparations for final training before deploying to Europe. On 20 May 1943, the group started flying their B-17F aircraft to their new home in England: Ridgewell Station, Essex, near Cambridge.

After a month of getting used to the difficult British weather and flying conditions, the Group was assigned its first bombing mission of the war with a raid on the General Motors plant in Antwerp, Belgium. Lt. Withers of the 533rd Bomb Squadron was selected to lead the raid on 22 June 1943. Withers' aircraft carried both the commander of the 381st Bomb Group, Col. Joseph Nazzaro, and Brig. General Frank Hunter, commanding officer of the 8th Fighter Command, who were along to observe the group's maiden mission. The raid was a success, but not without its



sorrows as the group lost two bombers and the lives of some 20 colleagues. By war's end, the 381st Bomb Group would lose some 131 aircraft taking most of the 1,300 crew members to their deaths or captivity.

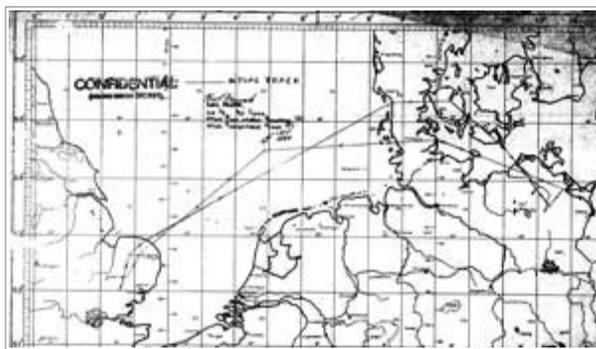
On the following day, while Lt. Withers aircraft was being loaded with bombs, there was a terrific explosion that shook the base at Ridgewell. Evidently one or more of the bombs accidentally detonated destroying several aircraft and killing many, including most of Lt. Withers' gunners. The loss of most of his tight knit crew preyed heavily on the young man. And while he continued to fly with a new crew, L. Robert could never forget the young men he had led for months since the early days at Pyote.

The numbing losses mounted up and soon veteran pilots were in very short supply. Withers was continually asked to assume the leadership position in the formations and he did his job well. He frequently flew the group or squadron commanding officer in his aircraft and safely returned these senior officers from missions over Germany, the Netherlands or France throughout the summer and fall of 1943.

On 17 September 1943, Robert Withers was promoted to Captain and assumed deputy squadron commander duties. This did not relieve him of any flying time and he had the added burden of being responsible for a number of other crews besides his own. Despite the appalling losses and grueling schedules, Lt. Withers always was able to maintain his perspective and his faith, and to focus on his mission.

His roommate and best friend in those years, 1st Lt. Inman G. Jobe, recalled the many hours the two spent discussing the most effective strategies to survive the war and how to best protect their aircraft and squadron mates. Jobe noted that Withers was always thinking of the group's interest before his own in these discussions.

On 9 October 1943, the 381st Bomb Group was participating in its 37th mission of the war. Captain Withers had flown fourteen missions prior to that, the last being a raid on Emden, Germany on October 2. The mission on October 9, was a very long, maximum effort on an aircraft works at Anklam, Germany, just 30 miles north of Berlin. The flight course was over the North Sea to Denmark before turning south towards Germany. The return flight would be a reverse of the original course. The North Sea route was thought to afford some protection against enemy aircraft attacks. This was due to the rather short range of the German fighters and their need to stay close to land bases to refuel and rearm.



A large stream of allied aircraft from many bomb groups flew to the target at the relatively low altitude of 13,000 feet and they were over Anklam by noon to drop their bombs. The flight inbound was marked by heavy flak, but light enemy fighter activity. However, on the return leg back north over Denmark and then west over the North Sea, enemy fighter strength was exceptional and the attacks on the allied bombers frequent and determined. The fighting was so fierce that many bombers simply ran out of ammunition for their guns and were unable to resist the continuous fighter attacks.

A relatively new enemy tactic was experienced on this raid and it soon proved to be effective against the 381st Bomb Group. Due to the heavy defensive fire that is put up by the B-17 formations, enemy fighters had to be very careful about coming too close. This is why most fighter tactics included daring head-on attacks to break up the formations and allow individual bombers to be picked off by the waiting enemy squadrons. On the occasion of the Anklam raid, German Me-210, and Me-110 aircraft were employed to launch rocket bombs into the bomber formations from stand-off positions in the hopes of breaking up the tight defensive groups.

Based on reports from other aircraft, one of these rockets hit Captain Withers' aircraft, disabling his number three engine. A B-17 bomber can fly well on only three engines, but the speed is typically reduced. Since Withers was flying the lead aircraft, his disabled plane was slowing down the entire group. After reaching a point on the return course over the North Sea where enemy fighter aircraft were not expected, Withers signaled the deputy group leader that he was to assume command of the formation. With that, Withers dropped out of the formation and fell behind the group as it traveled on towards England.

What happened next is not entirely clear from the military reports, but it appears that Withers' disabled plane was attacked while it was well out over the North Sea by several Fw-190 enemy fighters. In the official report of incident, called a Missing Air Crew Report (MACR-887), nearby allied aircraft reported that Withers' bomber was seen to be out of control and plunging



towards the sea below. Six parachutes were seen near the stricken bomber, but there was no way to ascertain who was able to bail out of the aircraft. Nor was there a way to rescue the crew, even if they did escape the spinning bomber and parachute into the sea.

Sadly, the bomber formation had no choice but to continue on with their journey home. The crash site was miles off the Danish and Dutch coasts and no air-sea rescue unit was available to search for survivors. It was assumed that B-17F No. 42-30012, with a crew of ten, was gone with the loss of all hands.

Captain Withers' selfless act to pull out of the formation in order not to slow it down and expose it to danger was a fundamental act

of bravery. This act of courage reflected the values with which he grew up and which guided his life during his short, but remarkable 24 years on this earth. Captain Withers was awarded the Air Medal with two Oak Leaf Clusters and the Purple Heart for his efforts to insure freedom for all Americans and our allies during World War-II. But the true measure of the man is in the legacy he still projects to those who knew him as an outstanding intellect, an able leader, and dedicated warrior in the defense of democracy.

¹Canteen girl, Pyote Army Air Field, 1 Jan 1943 as remarked to 1st Lt. James Good Brown, Chaplain, 381st Bomb Group in Brown, page 1.

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About the Writer:

Warren Carah is a native of California. He moved to the Midwest in 1975 to pursue a marketing and engineering career in the automotive industry, and later in the nuclear power generation field. He edited his father's memoirs of WW-II and published them in November, 2006. In addition to his interest in WW-II, Mr. Carah has also written histories of his California Gold Rush era forebears and their native land of Cornwall, England. He is currently the principal in an engineering consulting firm and makes his home with his wife Maggie in Brighton, Michigan.