A DAY IN THE LIFE…

War is not a part-time proposition. It is waged 24/7, 365, relentlessly. Necessarily, this puts tremendous strain and pressure on combatants, particularly if they were aircrews of The Mighty Eighth Air Force.

This is an attempt to describe a day in the life of these heroes, *our* heroes, these men of *The Greatest Generation.*

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Quote: "Consider yourself dead. Some of you won't come back from this. Some of you will, but you will be the lucky ones."

(Actual statement from the briefing officer, 97th Bomb Group, to B-17 Navigator Lt. Mike Scorcio before a mission to Germany.)

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There is no real "starting time" for the Mighty 8th each day, but this will describe the sequence of events that resulted, after being repeated again and again, with the defeat of The Third Reich. The times shown might vary from day-to-day, and season-to-season, but this should give us an idea of how things unfolded. And a mission itself, from takeoff to return landing, might last as long as ten hours.

1700 - Bomber Command in High Wycomb, 40 miles outside London, issues a command decision as to the target areas and objectives for the next day. These might be deep inside Germany, and often included multiple areas and many specific targets, particularly during 1944 and 1945. In many cases all three Air Divisions were engaged, typically being assigned different target areas. These orders are transmitted to the Air Divisions (1st, 2nd and 3rd) as appropriate.

Consideration was given to and direction taken from Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) requirements and operations. E.g., during the D-Day invasion, 8th Air Force heavy bombers flew tactical missions in support of the landings. (On D-Day, the 385th BG flew *three* missions /82 sorties, extraordinary for a heavy bomber group.)

Also taken into consideration are the current and recent missions performed, results achieved, opposition encountered and, importantly, losses incurred. This would enable Bomber Command to determine the scope of the coming operations based upon anticipated resources – bombers, escort fighters and aircrews – that would be available. Also, beginning in 1944, coordination with Royal Air Force overnight targeting was performed.

2000 – The Air Division command determines the resources necessary to achieve the stated objectives. An Action Plan is developed which further refines the assignment of resources – which Combat Air Wings – and determines the logistics for insertion into the bomber "stream" for the coming attacks. This is where the Order of Battle is determined and results in a Combat Order.

2300 – A Combat Order is received by the affected Combat Air Wings for the coming mission. At Wing Command, once again, resources are determined - which bomber groups will be assigned – and the Order of Battle is defined for each participating bomber group. Communication signals and codes are provided and the Mission Alert is sent.

0130 - As the Mission Alert is received by the affected groups, each Headquarters Staff then determines which bomber squadron(s) will be engaged, and assigns takeoff positions, departure, formation and rendezvous times and navigation coordinates. This is the Mission Plan which will be detailed at the Briefing of each assigned group. These communications were usually received by the group via teletype, and the Mission Alert becomes a yard-long message.

While this is taking place, orders are given to ground crews to appropriately provision the aircraft involved. This is not only fueling and arming, but also selecting and loading the appropriate ordinance. Several types of bombs were used, most commonly the "GP" (General Purpose) bomb. This bomb was a compromise between blast damage, penetration, and fragmentation in explosive effect. They were designed to be effective against enemy troops, vehicles, and buildings. Alternatively, "HE" (High Explosive) bombs, particularly effective against troop formations, or Fragmentation bombs which were used against hardened targets

such as submarine pens and Incendiary bombs, which were designed to cause fires, could be loaded.

0245 – Squadron air crews are awakened by Group Headquarters staff and begin preparing for the arduous day ahead. After dressing they head to the Mess Hall for breakfast.

0315 – Breakfast. Crews often knew that a particularly difficult or lengthy mission was in store by what they were served. Steak and eggs was a dead giveaway of bad news at the coming Briefing.

0350 – At the Briefing, aircrews learned of the mission. Contrary to what we may have seen on a Saturday late-night TV war movie, the briefing did *not* have the wise-cracking, bubble-gum chewing tail-gunner with his baseball cap cocked sideways in the audience. Only officers – pilots, co-pilots, navigators, bombardiers – were present at the briefing. The Mission Plan was described in detail, and an effort was made to apprise the crews of anticipated enemy opposition.

Maps were provided the aircrews of known flak concentrations in German-occupied areas. While the routes chosen might help avoid flak concentrations, this did *not* mean there would not be opposition elsewhere. Where there *wasn't* flak, the Luftwaffe was the peril. And the Luftwaffe, as our veterans well know, was formidable until the very end. In April 1945, the last full month of the war, the 385th BG lost *five* aircraft, and 28 brave souls were killed in action. This included one loss (the Burich aircraft) on 7 April when the B-17 was deliberately rammed by a BF-109 during the infamous one-day Sonderkommando Elbe ("Special Command Elbe") "Kamikaze" operation by the Luftwaffe.

0450 – Aircrews begin to make their way to their aircraft. Most rode in trucks or jeeps, some chose to walk if their aircraft was nearby. Once aboard, the men begin to check, and recheck, their equipment: machine guns, radios, intercoms. The pilot and co-pilot might still be outside, having last-minute conversations with the ground crew, as they complete their pre-flight walk-around.

0530 – A two-pronged red flare is fired and arches over the center of the field adjacent to the runways. Engine start-up. Occasionally an engine would fail to start, and that aircraft would have to abort the mission.

0545 – Taxi into position for takeoff. The bombers would taxi from their dispersal areas onto taxiways, into a line in their takeoff order. This was not a quick process, as several squadrons, ideally three, would be involved, so there would be several dozen aircraft involved.

0610 – Final engine run up by each aircraft to ensure engines are properly operating at high throttle settings prior to the takeoff run. Again, occasionally an anomaly would here be detected by a flight crew, resulting in an abort by that aircraft.

0620 – Headquarters staff receives the final "go" authorization, and a green flare is fired from the control tower, indicating takeoffs were to commence. The bombers would begin their takeoff rolls usually at thirty-second intervals.

Takeoffs sometimes would actually occur before dawn, during a period known as Nautical Dawn Twilight, which can begin as much as an hour or more before sunrise, depending upon the time of the year. This is the pre-dawn period when the sun has reached a position twelve degrees below the horizon, and begins to illuminate the dark sky, enabling aircraft aloft to maintain visual contact with each other. Sometimes that visual contact would be difficult until clearing the cloud cover, or fog, presenting significant collision hazards even well after dawn. More than *one-fourth* of the 385th BG aircraft lost were lost to *non*-combat events, most typically to air-to-air collisions.

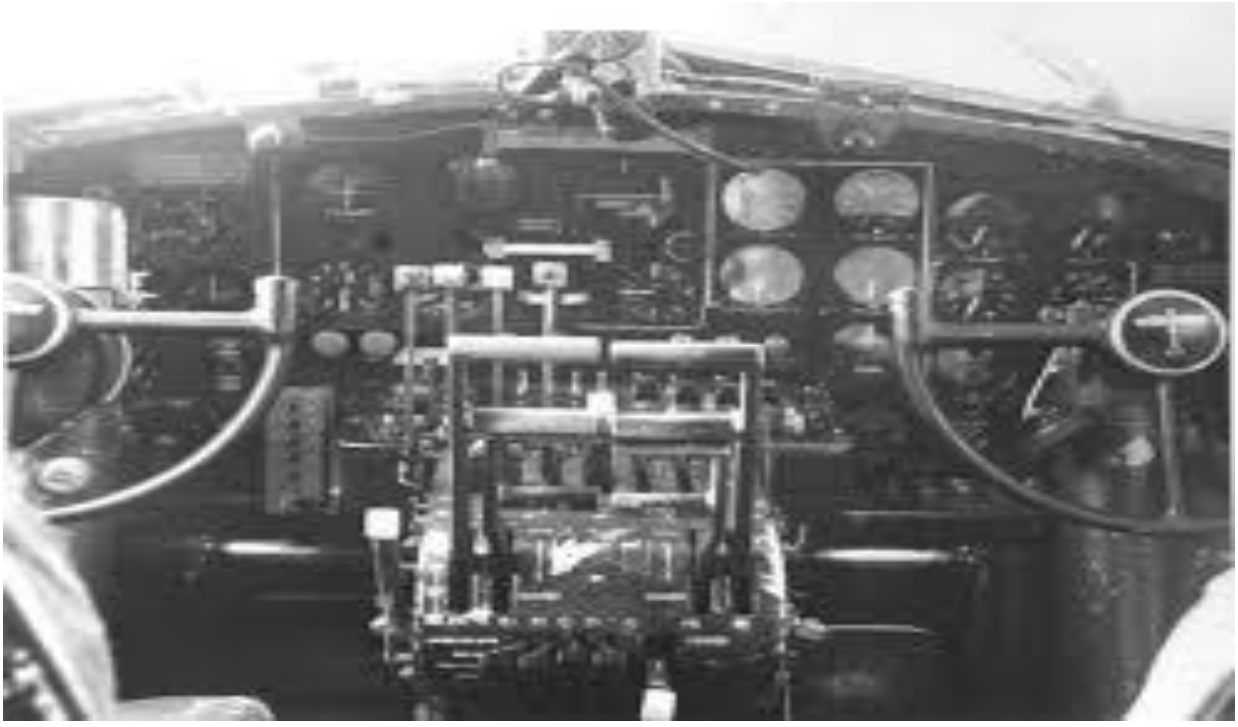
As a pilot I can tell you that taking off in an aircraft is *always* one of the most dangerous parts of a flight, and *the most* dangerous part absent a combat environment. This is when the aircraft is heaviest – maximum fuel and payload – and, upon becoming airborne is flying slowly. Any mechanical mishap on the takeoff roll can be catastrophic and even shortly after takeoff when still at low speed and low altitude, particularly if you are a fully-laden bomber with tons of high explosives..

0638 – The final mission bomber is aloft (assuming three full squadrons, thirty-six aircraft), with thirty seconds separation at takeoff.

The aircraft begin to assemble and proceed to a "racetrack" staging area off the southwest coast of England (for the 385th BG). From there, they would proceed (at a designated time) to an Assembly Point where they would insert themselves into the bomber stream of all the mission groups. This whole process – from takeoff to getting into the bomber stream – could take as long as several hours.

Long before the aircrew encounters the enemy, they must deal with three dangers, any one of which can be a killer: the weather, the bitter cold and oxygen starvation.

Whenever I fly someplace today, as I board the airliner I always look into the cockpit. (The FAA permits cockpit doors to be left open while boarding is occurring.) And what I see amazes me, again as a pilot: full-color 3-D maps showing not only geography but weather, digital instrumentation, GPS, fly-by wire, inter-galactic displays. I refer to modern cockpits as "Tokyo by night." (You'll understand if you've ever been to Tokyo.)



Well, let me tell you, that was not what the "office" of our aircrews in a B-17 saw. It was 2-D, black and white, hydraulic and mechanical, muscle and sweat. Those of you who have been to England know that an overcast sky is pretty common, and our boys were taking off into that overcast day after day. When that pilot forwarded the throttles to full-military power for takeoff, then at around 800 or 900 feet, eased back to 85% power at a 7 ½ degree climb rate,

he had to hope – no pray – that the 85% and 7 ½ degrees on those imperfect indicators on the bomber 30 seconds in front of him, and 30 seconds behind, was identical. Otherwise, it was entirely possible a collision would occur. And they did. Regularly.

While they are climbing, the temperature is dropping. Many of us recall last year, in February, the record cold reported in the Mid-West. Chicago was reporting 15 degrees below zero, *actual temperature*! Minneapolis was 20 below! And Duluth, Minn., was showing *50 degrees below zero* wind chill! Who could survive such cold? The news programs were all advising everyone to stay indoors, and bundle up. To survive.

Let me tell you about cold. While these bomber are climbing to their combat altitude, of up to 31,000 feet, the outside temperature is dropping with the gain in altitude, and it now might be forty below zero and going down. The windshield and Plexiglas nose are getting frosted over, so cockpit windows are opened to equalize the temperatures, because these planes were not pressurized. *Nor were they heated.* Oh, and by the way, the 3 ½' x 4' windows on the sides of the bomber, for the waist guns, were always open. At 40 below. And sometimes 50 or even 60 below. Ever wonder what the wind chill factor might be at 50 below and 170 mph?

The third danger, oxygen starvation, is something that is tragic for me to read about in mission reports, and I have seen this again and again. The men, due to the extreme altitudes, were breathing oxygen from metal bottles thru rubber tubes. Sometimes those bottles would malfunction. Sometimes that rubber tube would get severed by flak or other enemy action, or even one of the plethora of hard, sharp surfaces inside the aircraft. Lack of oxygen resulted in rapid unconsciousness, and death in a matter of minutes.

These dangers were inherent long before they saw the enemy, and while they were engaged. And these men, of *The Greatest Generation*, did this every day. For years. Would you? Would I?

0905 – The formation approaches the European coastline. Prior to the D-Day landings, numerous Luftwaffe airfields were scattered throughout France and other occupied countries. This enabled early interception of bomber formations, and frequently the intercepting German fighters could attack the incoming bombers, refuel, and attack again as the bombers were returning. And prior to December 1943, when the first long-range P-51s began to arrive, full-mission fighter support was a rarity. So the bombers were on their own for a significant portion of the mission. By now the formation is in a defensive formation, the "combat box," which could mass defensive fire at intercepting fighters.

Whether or not there was fighter escort, the Luftwaffe always made its presence felt. Whenever the bomber formation was over enemy territory the appearance of Messerschmitt Bf-109 or Focke-Wulf FW-190 opposition was expected, and might be nearly continuous during 1943. Fighter activity would generally be absent where there were flak concentrations, for obvious reasons.

When the 8th began making attacks early in the war, losses from the Luftwaffe were often unsustainable. The 8th had a factor of 5% as being a sustainable loss rate. Some missions suffered as much as a 40% loss rate, including aircraft that were shot down or damaged beyond repair, and this put great pressure on the 8th to continue offensive operations.

Losses from the Luftwaffe were much greater than from flak early on, but as the war progressed and the Allies gained air supremacy, losses from flak overtook those from the Luftwaffe. There were four reasons for this: (1), Allied fighters could engage the Luftwaffe and

restrict their access to the bomber formations; (2) dwindling numbers of available Luftwaffe fighters due to attrition and fuel shortages; (3) significant improvements in the flak batteries themselves, as they migrated from optical and acoustic sensing to radar for targeting, as well as larger caliber canons, from 88mm to 105mm to 128mm; and (4) massively increased production of these weapons as a more cost-efficient defense for German targets than the more complex production of aircraft.

Late in the war the appearance of advanced jet (and rocket!) aircraft came as a rude shock to our boys. Heavily armed with multiple 30-mm canons, they could inflict devastation on a bomber formation, and did. Difficult to stop when approaching a formation, our fighter sweeps sought them out on the ground and during takeoff or landing. Fortunately, fuel shortages, and our fighter pilots, prevented these potential game-changers for doing just that.

0915 – Any Allied fighter support (pre-1944) is peeling away, and the bombers are now truly on their own. The next 3 ½ hours will be pure hell.

1050 – The Initial Point ("IP") is reached where the bombardier and Norden bombsight effectively take over control of the aircraft. The IP was usually selected by the weatherman, based upon predicted winds. (The Norden was more accurate flying into or with the wind than dropping into a crosswind.) The run from the IP to the aiming point, or main point of impact, is hazardous as the formation is now flying in a predictable fashion, straight and level. It did not take long for the Wehrmacht to pick up on this, and it greatly facilitated their defensive fire with their flak batteries, as the speed, altitude and direction of the bombers was now known.

A couple of common misconceptions should be cleared up here: (1) the flak batteries did not "aim" at the formations themselves. Rather, they used *predictive* fire, that is, firing their weapons where the formation *will be* in a certain period of time, rather than where they were now. This is because, when fired, the 20-lb shell from an 88 flak gun would take from 12-25 seconds to get to the appropriate altitude for detonation. (Heavy bomber formations might be anywhere from 22,000 to 31,000 feet up.) So the batteries would aim at an imaginary patch of sky where the flak explosions would coincide with the arrival of the formation.

And an 88 shell need not hit an aircraft. A detonation within 100-200 feet of the bomber could inflict significant harm, severing control connections, hydraulic or fuel lines, damaging or disabling engines, and piecing the thin metal skin of the bomber and wounding or killing aircrews. If a shell *did* strike an aircraft, it was invariably catastrophic, nearly always resulting in the loss of the entire crew.

Another misconception is that the Germans used proximity fuses with their shells. These were only used by the Americans, in the Pacific, and late in the war. The fuses on the flak

gun shells were either timers or barometric. And they were quite effective at detonating at the appropriate time and altitude.

1105 – The aiming point is reached and the bombs are released. Photographers in lead and trailing aircraft of each formation take photographs of the target area for evaluation upon return. Each aircraft, relieved of its load of bombs, surges upward. Now the pilot and navigator turn to head for the Rendezvous Point (or "Rally Point"), where the remaining bombers will reform into defensive formations for the dangerous trip home.

During the next 90 minutes, damaged aircraft or stragglers would often be "cherry picked" by marauding Luftwaffe fighters. The arrival of full-mission fighter support in 1944 greatly increased those crews chances of making it back.

1240 – Allied "Little Friends" begin to appear as contrails above and in front of the returning bomber formations. Luftwaffe opposition begins to fall away.

1300 – Over the English Channel, homing in on Great Ashfield, the home field for the 385th BG. Aircraft that have wounded aboard begin to move into the lead to land first.

1325 – At Great Ashfield, ground crews anxiously scan the skies for their returning squadrons. As the first B-17s are spotted, the counting begins, as the ground crews are hoping as many aircraft return as departed. Too frequently, this was not the case.

1330 – The first aircraft is on final approach, and a red flare is fired from the waist gunner position. As it arcs in the air, an ambulance begins to roll, racing after the landing B-17, as there are now known to be wounded aboard. As the bomber slows and turns off the runway and onto the grassy turf, the ambulance is now next to the bomber, and as it stops the ambulance is beside its door.

1350 – The last of the returning aircraft is on the ground, some still taxiing to their dispersal areas. Crews are beginning to wearily climb out and are met by waiting trucks and jeeps. Ground crews are already surrounding the parked planes and determining what miracles they will need to perform.

1420 – In the Briefing Room, crews are being interrogated about the success, or failure, of the mission. At the same time, the photographers aboard the aircraft are hurriedly taking their precious films to their darkrooms for development and analysis.

As this is happening, sandwiches and mugs of coffee are brought in for the crews. Some intelligence information, such as convoys sighted or plane crashes is called “Hot News, and is immediately phoned in to Air Division for action.

1530 – The Base Commander has completed a tactical report, and it, along with the photographs of the strike, are delivered by parachute to Wing 45 minutes later.

1645 – Reports of the mission are received by Bomber Command. Depending upon when they are actually received, they may influence targeting for the following day. Losses incurred *always* influence the coming mission assignments.

The men have started filtering into the Mess Hall for dinner, and then back to their quarters to collapse into their bunks.

Because tomorrow they have to go out and do it all over again.

WRAP

Did any of this really make a difference? After all, there are some historians who find it fashionable to say that the Russians, the Soviets, *they* won the war. They suffered the greatest number of casualties, both military and civilian. They got the greatest commitment of troops from the Germans, and the Germans suffered most of their casualties there.

To this assertion I have one word: BLATHERPOOP!

One reason the Germans committed so many troops to their Eastern front was because that front was as much as two thousand miles long. On D-Day, the front was, at most, a few dozen miles, and the Western front never remotely approached the size of the Eastern.

Another big reason was because the Germans and Russians were fighting each other almost in a WWI type of fight. It was purely tactical. It was a meat-grinder. Neither the Germans nor the Russians had any strategic bombing capability, so neither had the ability to marginalize their enemy's ability to keep on fighting in the first place.

But – aha! – The Russians DID have a strategic component. It was called the 8th Air Force, and it was pounding, every day, Germany's ability to produce the weaponry and resources necessary to continue to fight with any hope of success. Tank and aircraft production, communications, fuel refining and delivery – all were being marginalized.

If you doubt this, consider this: by late 1943, 40% of the German economy was dedicated to stopping the bombing. *They* were getting the message.

In case you missed it; that was **40%**.

Not of the war effort, but 40% of the ECONOMY. (The war effort was a sub-set of the economy.)

What was left – the other 60% - went to:

The "economy stuff" – food production, transportation, medical care, power generation, communications, infrastructure, repair & rebuilding.

And then there was still the *other* "war stuff" - tanks, guns, U-boat & armaments production, naval operations, Secret Weapons, training recruits, the "Atlantic Wall" (the largest building project in history, from Scandinavia to Spain), the Western front, the Italian front…

And, oh yeah, then there were those pesky Russians.

Blatherpoop.

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But it came at a price.

To put it into perspective…

8th AF had 350,000 soldiers, or which 200,000 were aircrews

Casualties during WW2, by branch:

Army (taken as a whole)	2.08%
Marines	2.94%
Navy (taken as a whole)	0.88%
Navy submarines	13.6% (we lost 52 subs, or 18% of our subs)

Army Air Force (as a whole)	7.42%	
Army Air Force aircrews (worldwide)	27.0% (!)	But what about in Europe?

During World War II, ***one in three airmen*** **survived the air battle over Europe**. The losses were extraordinary. The casualties suffered by the 8th Air Force were about HALF of ALL the Army Air Force casualties around the world. And remember, there were SIXTEEN numbered Army Air Forces!

Throughout those liberated countries of Europe there are memorials, honored and tended graveyards, even museums, that bear homage to what our boys did. They have not forgotten the sacrifices of *The Greatest Generation*.

Have we?