

FLYING FIRST CLASS

by Bob Pocklington

Posted July 21, 2009

Back in 2002 the Confederate Air Force flew a B-17 to Suffolk Airport and three of us were invited to take a ride: Myles Standish, Curtiss Milteer, and me. It was nostalgic for me because back in 1944 we could jeep to any nearby airport in Southeast England on a weekend and fly as often as we could convince a pilot to take us up. Most said, "Sure." They flew the bombers routinely just to get the take off and landing practice and make sure it would stay up...most planes had flown many missions and looked like it. No need for the gunners to go so we were often allowed to occupy the waist gunner's position but, "Keep your damn hands off the machine guns." There were hundreds of parked B-17s and young mechanics and pilots were constantly fussing with engines, etc. The view from five thousand feet was as thrilling as takeoffs and landings.

A few months later we invaded France and the B-17s we saw then were overhead at 25,000 feet in groups of a hundred or more as they headed deep into Germany. We knew there were nine or ten "boys" in each of them and that one out of four of those huge bombers would be shot out of the sky. If the crew escaped the plane over Germany they would be taken prisoner or killed on the ground. And we had taken only a small portion of France so being found and rescued was more than a long shot.

On their way back from raids we saw them again, planes missing from formations, scattered groups, much lower as they passed over French territory we had made safer. Some were so low we could see the guys in the cockpit, not waving, fighting to keep control of a bird full of holes, chunks of wing or tail missing, fuel leaking from destroyed engines. We figured there were still ten kids in there, fingers crossed, kissing a rabbit's foot or doing whatever else they hoped would bring them luck when they sure as hell needed it. Some had been wounded by whatever put those holes in the plane. Often one would crash, roaring in with wheels up in a field, others in the trees.

When we could hear a crash we knew we were close and rushed with our equipment to help if we could. If there was no fire or clouds of smoke we had a chance to rescue those who survived, and retrieve those who did not. The first time we made it to a downed plane we learned how tough those planes are. It had hit so hard all escape doors were twisted and trees nearly covered what was left of the fuselage. No sounds came from within but a look through the waist gun ports indicated bodies were there. Our axes and saws would not cut into the plane fast enough so we used a bulldozer and tried to rip it open it with the blade. We merely moved the plane but could not open it. You could see bullet holes in several places so if they could go through so could we. With the corner of the steel dozer blade the plane opened like a tin can. All the gunners were huddled on the floor protecting each other; all were injured, some badly. Trees had killed the pilots and there was still danger of fire...gasoline was everywhere. We did what we could after radioing medics who arrived in minutes; they had heard the crash but could not locate it.

Who had convinced those "kids" that what they did at 25,000 feet and 40 degrees below zero could be fun? Or was it their motive to save democracy for the generations to come? Not for a moment did any of them or us have such lofty thoughts; we were all caught up in the excitement and danger of war and thrilled to be part of it. Scared, you bet, a good part of the time. When chunks of metal come flying your way you know you can die, none of that stuff about believing it can't happen to you, only the other guy. When you've seen the results of steel versus flesh often

enough you know that even a hole in the ground filled with icy water is a nice place to be. In the sky a one eighth inch aluminum skin is no foxhole. These kids were either heroes or fools.