

# Twelve O'Clock High: My Flight in a B-17 Flying Fortress

by

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Images by Ken and Lisa Philippart

My bucket list recently got shorter after I had the opportunity to fly in a B-17 Flying Fortress. Like many of my generation, I grew up watching World War II movies. Since I loved the sky, I gravitated towards flying films like *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*, *Tora Tora Tora*, and *Flying Leathernecks*. One of my all-time favorites was *Twelve O'Clock High*, the Oscar-winning story of Eighth Air Force B-17 crews flying strategic bombing missions over Germany. Gregory Peck starred but the B-17 was a worthy co-star, elegant but deadly, graceful yet tough. "Fly in a B-17" got added to my list of "Things to Do Some Day" pretty early in my life. My subsequent career in the Air Force, including studying the leadership lessons in *Twelve O'Clock High* during professional military education courses, kept a B-17 flight on my To Do List for many years.

Fast forward four decades. While poking around the Experimental Aircraft Association's website one Sunday afternoon, I noticed that the EAA's B-17G *Aluminum Overcast* would be at Lunken Airport (LUK) in Cincinnati giving rides over the Labor Day weekend. I also realized that my wife, Lisa, and I would be in Dayton, Ohio that weekend for our granddaughter's first birthday. Dayton is less than an hour north of Cincinnati. I mentioned this to Lisa and also *casually* (yeah right!) mentioned I had always wanted to fly in a B-17. Lisa didn't react but apparently took the not-so-subtle hint since on my birthday a few weeks later, I opened my card and found a reservation receipt for a ride on *Aluminum Overcast*. Best wife and best birthday ever!

We arrived at LUK early, the day before Labor Day. We weren't sure where to go until we spotted *Aluminum Overcast* gleaming on the ramp in the early morning sun. The annual Lunken Airport Days were just starting and there were other warbirds on the ramp. But *Aluminum Overcast* was the star and it seemed like a beam of light was shining straight down on the B-17. I felt like a kid on Christmas morning.



It was early so the crowds hadn't arrived yet. A few ground crew were milling about. One pointed me to the EAA trailer for checking in. I walked over and dutifully handed over my flight reservation. Without looking at it, the volunteer smiled and said, "I've got

you on the list Ken.” I was taken aback that he knew my name until I remembered I was wearing my Air Force A2 leather jacket for the occasion and he had just read my nametag. I was handed a waiver to sign. I noted the standard language about the inherent risks of flying but saw nothing about Luftwaffe fighters or AAA (antiaircraft artillery) so I signed.

My group was to be the first flight of the day. Ten of us were ushered to the aircraft and allowed to take pictures as the ground crew readied *Aluminum Overcast* for flight. We were given a brief history of the Boeing B-17, including its design, advanced-for-the-day wing truss construction and operational history. We learned that *Aluminum Overcast* was a B-17G-VE model, one of 2,250 produced. The aircraft was delivered to the Army Air Forces in May, 1945, too late to see combat. We learned her post-war history, how she came to the EAA and how she got her name. There was probably a lot more information that I was too excited to remember.



A preflight of the aircraft and safety briefing followed. Our pilot noted that *Aluminum Overcast*, like many warbirds, holds an Experimental air worthiness certificate. He explained what that meant to assure the more nervous in our group. He also relayed he had 16,000 hours of pilot in command time, including several hundred in the B-17. He pointed out the aircraft exits, including the lower nose hatch, aka the *Twelve*

*O’Clock High* hatch, where the young and limber would swing themselves up into the aircraft. He reminded everyone that the aircraft was designed as a machine of war, not for comfort, and to beware of sharp edges that could cut you and equipment that could smash your shins or bump your head. That much hasn’t changed in military aircraft even today. He warned us not to grab the exposed control cables overhead as we moved about the aircraft since, if we did, we’d be in effect flying the aircraft and probably cut our hands in the process. And he explained operation of the military-style seatbelts that often baffle the uninitiated. Then we posed for the obligatory group picture by the aircraft nose.

Thoroughly briefed, it was time to board the aircraft. Lisa wished me a pleasant flight and walked away to take pictures. We used the aft door. Entering via the nose hatch wasn’t an option but most of us weren’t young or nimble enough to want to try it anyway. I’d been secretly advised by one of the ground crew to board early and grab one of the primo seats, the radio operator’s or navigator’s stations. But I was too busy snapping pictures and forgot the advice. I boarded late and got a seat by the waist guns. I settled

into familiar, canvas military seating and buckled up. I'd expected the aircraft to be hot. Military aircraft always seem to be hot. But it was a cool morning and tolerable.

The smells brought back a flood of memories from my Air Force days. Military aircraft have a unique smell, a combination of fuel, ozone, canvas, sweat, and unidentifiable scents emanating from big iron that has baked on hot ramps for years. *Aluminum Overcast* still smelled like a bird of prey.

After everyone was seated, the pilots coaxed the engines to life. Clouds of blue smoke billowed by the waist gun windows as the four 1,200-horsepower Wright R-1820-97 engines coughed to life. Radial engines are notorious for smoking upon initial startup. Lisa told me later she saw so much smoke she thought an engine might have been on fire. But that's normal.

The noise was not as bad as I expected. Besides being hot, military aircraft are often very noisy. I declined the offer of earplugs and didn't regret it. It was loud but quieter than modern turboprops. Conversation was possible without screaming.

Overhead, I noted the flight control cables, as warned about, and could see them moving as the pilots waggled the control surfaces.

Looking forward, I was surprised I could see the flight deck from where I was seated. The aircraft did not seem as long inside as expected. The top turret gun installation had been removed to allow easier movement within the aircraft; I imagine if it had been installed, the flight deck would not have been visible from aft.



The pilots taxied to the run up area and brought the Wright Cyclones up to power. It was loud but not intolerable. The aircraft shook and strained at the brakes as if yearning to take flight, but no more than other piston engine aircraft.

Run up complete, the brakes were released and the aircraft lumbered onto the runway centerline. A brief pause, throttles firewalled and the old warhorse ambled down the runway. Acceleration was better than expected and pushed me backward. Of course, we were sans the 6,000 lb. typical bomb load and were flying light. The tail came up only slightly and we lifted off from almost a 3-point attitude.

We departed the traffic pattern and when we reached 2,500 feet, we were allowed to move about the aircraft. The air was smooth. The Flying Fortress lived up to the name and felt rock-steady. Several of us took the opportunity to pose for pictures holding the .50 cal. waist guns, imagining what it must have been like to see attacking Luftwaffe

fighters in-bound. A light rap on the fuselage skin revealed how little metal stood between the crew and 20mm shells. The sober look on our faces revealed we were beginning to better understand the threats the crews faced on missions.

The B-17 is unpressurized, a fact confirmed by the numerous drafts throughout the aircraft. It was a pleasant summer day and we were at low altitude so were quite comfortable. But it was not hard to imagine how cold and uncomfortable the crews would have been flying 8 hour missions at 25,000 feet where the outside air temperatures were 35 degrees below zero, exposed skin stuck to cold metal and blood quickly froze. Cold, fatigue, fear and the strain of combat would have made for very different experiences.



Heading forward, I tried the radio operator and navigator seats, checking out the equipment and the views outside. Easily passing through where the top turret would have been, I shimmied along the catwalk above the bomb bay towards the flight deck. The catwalk was narrow, not as long as I had envisioned, and while it would have been easier to traverse when I was 20, I navigated across

without incident, noting the dummy bombs below as I passed over.

Reaching the flight deck, the first thing I noted was the view. The aft crew stations were not claustrophobic by any means but the view was much better up front. The next things I noticed were the modernized flight and navigation instruments. The flat screens and GPS detracted from historical accuracy but were wise concessions to safety since *Aluminum Overcast* routinely travels cross-country. Federal aviation regulations do not allow passengers to operate the controls but it was easy to picture oneself behind the yokes with a fistful of throttles piloting the big bird.

A tap on my shoulder interrupted my reveries. It was my turn to slide down to the bombardier's position. I crawled on my hands and knees with as much grace as I could muster, again realizing that would have been an easier task 30 years ago. Entering the aircraft's nose, my first impression was, "Wow!" Sprawled below were farmland, woods and the Ohio River, with nothing but a Plexiglass® nose in front of me. No doubt this



was the best seat in the house. I snapped many pictures then took the bombardier's seat, peering into the Norden bombsight and imagining I was the lead ship on a bombing run. The spectacular view came at the price of being completely exposed. I can only imagine how it must have felt to be perched up front as Messerschmitts and Focke Wulfs swarmed or flak burst all around. Brave men indeed!

Reluctantly relinquishing the bombardier's seat to the next in line, I slowly headed aft, soaking in the sights, sounds and smells once again, trying to engrave the experience into my memory.

All too soon, we were signaled to strap in so I settled onto a seat slightly forward of my takeoff position. After a rather airliner-like approach and a slight flare, the mains chirped on the runway quickly followed by the tail wheel settling to earth.

As we taxied to the ramp, I noticed a crowd had gathered. As *Aluminum Overcast* squeaked to a stop and we tumbled out, applause erupted, a greeting that World War II Airmen would have richly deserved but never received upon completing their missions. Huge smiles adorned the disembarking passengers' faces and before we scattered, we snapped more pictures and chatted about the flight. Only then



did I learn that the young man who had been sitting next to me had recently graduated from Air Force Undergraduate Pilot Training and received his wings. His father had purchased the flight for him as a gift.

As the next group of passengers filed past for their flight, we discovered that the elderly gentleman in the new group was a former B-17 pilot who had not flown since the war. He nodded to me and the newly-minted Air Force pilot as he passed, a symbolic passing of the torch across three generations of Airmen, bound together by a 70 year old flying legacy of his war and his generation.

For the next hour, Lisa and I wandered the open house exhibits, my feet on the tarmac but my heart still in the air. We came upon a booth where an elderly gentleman dressed in US Army Air Forces khakis was signing books. We paused to investigate when a very pleasant woman noticed my Iraq/Afghanistan Veteran ball cap, motioned and said, “Come over and meet Herb.” She was Herb’s wife and Herb was WWII B-17 pilot Lt. Herb Heilbrun, Herb was 96 but his handshake was firm and his eyes steely. I thanked him for his service and he thanked me for mine. Unspoken understanding flowed between two old warriors. There is a shared experience among those who have seen the ugliness of war even across generations, separated by decades and very different wars. My eyes welled up and Herb’s did too. Neither needed to say more. I purchased the featured book, *Black and White Airmen: Their True Story* by John Fleischman, the story of Herb and his friend John Leahr of the Tuskegee Airmen. Herb inscribed the book for me, a treasured keepsake of the day.

The day started as a simple desire to fulfill a childhood dream of flying in a B-17. But it ended as much more: the opportunity to better understand what the Greatest Generation—our parents, grandparents and now, great-grandparents—did when they were young and saved the world. Their experiences and their sacrifices became that much more real from touching their warplanes, standing their battle stations, and hearing their stories. They have earned our respect and our admiration. As engineers, we love the technology and wonder of our flying machines. Let us not forget to also love, honor and remember those who’ve taken them into harm’s way.

I started this article by saying I could finally scratch “Fly in a B-17” off of my bucket list. But I now realize that was premature. I don’t want to cross it off my list. I want to do it again.