

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, August 27, 2007

Flying in a B-24, World War II: This past weekend a B-24 and a B-25, both restored bombers from World War II, were at New Castle Airport for inspection and rides for the general public. Reading of this in Saturday's Wilmington paper revived my memory of the seven months in 1945 when I flew in B-24s. I'll try to supplement, rather than repeat, some of what I related in the Weekly News of August 6, 2007.

Having settled in as a weather forecaster at Roswell Army Air Field in New Mexico, I was discontent and applied for overseas duty early in 1945. Major Miller, head of the weather station there, asked me why I would want to do something like that, was I not happy with the comfortable situation (and second in command under him) at Roswell? A few weeks went by, and nothing happened; I thought he had not put in my request for transfer. Later I learned that regulations required him to do so, even against his wishes. In late February, orders came through, transferring me to a Weather Reconnaissance unit at Will Rogers Field, Oklahoma City, with 10 days' delay en route. I reported for my new assignment about March 10. The B-24 crew I joined had trained together at Mountain Home, Idaho, and arrived at Will Rogers about the same time I did; all had had flying experience except me. Dalton F. Newton, age 28 of Lakeland, Florida, was our captain, and he was a good one, several years older than most of us. We were to have some classroom training and a lot of flying experience in our B-24 weather plane for the next 10 weeks.

Carrying a crew of five officers and five enlisted men, we flew about 12 missions from Will Rogers in April and May, almost entirely south and east from our base. Our four gunners, plus myself as a nose gunner, got practice burning up ammunition over Lake Pontchartrain outside New Orleans. Once we calibrated the air speed meter on the plane by flying very low over a level field with check points about 5 miles apart. We flew at 10 M.P.H. intervals between 140 and 200 M.P.H., the latter as fast as a B-24 would go. Another time we put on oxygen masks and tested the maximum height this airplane could achieve; it was just over 20,000 feet. There was not enough power and lift to take us any higher.

The most memorable flight was in mid-May, when our typical flight plan called for us to fly south to Corpus Christi, across the Gulf to New Orleans, north to Jackson, Tennessee, and then west back to Oklahoma City. It was a hot spring day when we took off in early afternoon, but I noticed on the weather map that temperatures in Nebraska, about 500 miles to the north, were in the 40s. A strong cold front was obviously between us. Since we were to fly in the other direction, little notice was given to this phenomenon. Despite the heat, it was a routine flight for three legs of our four-leg flight plan, and then we turned west from Jackson. It was getting dark, but we could see heavy cumulonimbus cloud build-ups with flashes of lightning over the Ozarks directly ahead of us. The cold front observed earlier in the day to the north and west had moved rapidly, and it was a severe one. Flying at our normal height of 8,000 feet, we hit the rough air, and the plane started to bounce. I braced myself in the tunnel between the main fuselage and the nose, but the gunners behind me were not that lucky, and boxes and other stowed material flew at them from all angles. We were expecting the worst at any minute—that we might lose an engine, a wing, or something like that. The vertical currents in the storm were in complete charge, but Lt. Newton kept his cool, and the airplane kept flying. When the worst was over, we looked out the side and saw the trees. We were at about 2,800 feet elevation, the height of the Ozarks in that region. We had dropped from 8,000 feet in a few minutes. The plane was slightly damaged, but it kept flying. Most of the air fields in Oklahoma were closed, but we were directed to Ardmore near the Red River, 100 plus miles south of Will Rogers, where we landed in heavy rain. Two or three of our crew were taken to the base hospital, but it was only for cuts and bruises. We were “weathered in” at Ardmore for one full day and two nights, and our plane was inspected for safety. The second morning, we flew back to Oklahoma City. The experience taught us two things: the B-24 was a wonderful airplane, and we would not again intentionally fly directly into a storm of this intensity.