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### Scrapbook Commentary Part I: Training

p. I was a freshman age 17 at Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA when Japanese forces bombed Pearl Harbor, Hawaii in 1941. The armed forces of the United States were not prepared for that attack. Certainly we who were young college students were not prepared either, but we quickly recognized that male students in particular would have to leave college and become a part of America's Armed Forces.

First we had to register for a nation-wide draft in early 1942. College students could register out-of-state for transfer to their home state draft board. I did so in nearby Harrisburg, PA with a request for service with the U.S. Army Air Corps - with hopes of becoming a pilot. I heard that I must weigh at least 130 pounds to become a pilot and so I drank a quart of milk about one hour before weigh-in, as I was a borderline 130.

I was being introduced to bureaucracy! I registered. I weighed enough. My registration was to be referred to my home state of Delaware and while a student in Carlisle, PA I would have a local card as well. Dickinson College went to a year round curriculum -- no summer holiday -- so that students could maximize their studies before being drafted. That allowed me to finish both my freshman and sophomore studies in January 1943.

The Western Union telegram on p. 1 of my scrapbook had already informed me that I could enter the United States Aviation Cadet Corps but no specific time has been given for moving ahead.

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The time has come for action at last. The Aviation Cadet Examining Board in Harrisburg, PA sent SPECIAL ORDERS from Headquarters, Third Service Command, Baltimore, MD. Dated February 15th, 1943. "To Aviation Cadets, Enlisted and Reservists, called to active duty in the grade of Private, Air Corps, Unassigned." You are now qualified for Aviation Cadet Assignment and are ordered to Miami Basic Training Center, #9, Miami FL effective February 25, 1943.

At this point fifty-five years later I will refer you to a scrapbook that I put together in 1946 as illustrative of my young career services until a retirement dated November 20th, 1945. You will notice that the front cover of the scrapbook has a picture of a German Shepherd dog. That is in memory of Ginger, my dog while I was in high school, while I went away to college and then to the Army Air Corps. You can imagine how wonderful it was for us both after I returned from that war.

I was both eager and nervous as I started to get ready. At age 19 I felt that a giant doorway was being opened for me then. If only I had enough substance and character to follow through! I took an early morning Baltimore and Ohio railroad train from my hometown Wilmington Delaware to Washington, D.C. There I changed to a sharp, streamlined train called the Silver Meteor for a 10:30 arrival in Miami. Pages two through five in my wartime scrapbook will begin to give you a feel for my getting started.

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Page two shows my personal half of my 1943 railroad ticket for entering the Army Air Corps. And there is a front half of the names of young men like myself who received the same type orders that I did. You will note that I have checked off the names of young men I was close to down there. Including fellow students from Dickinson College.

Page 3 begins with my personal identify [sic] card and a note from the Wilmington Delaware Evening Journal to say that I had arrived. We Air Corps recruits had to wear a dog tag for self-identification during the war but somehow mine had fallen out of today's scrapbook.

Page 4 photos [show] me three times and it pictures two local hotels. The Army Air Corps was authorized to take over acres and acres of land and buildings in the U.S. on which to establish airfields, training centers and hospitals. Because it was wartime the long miles of beachfront property in the Miami Area during the war were not privately profitable and so a mutually healthy partnership in the use of space and housing for military needs was very sensible.

First I was housed in the Hotel Good, so crowded that in my bedroom only four out of eight recruits could have floor space at one time for dressing or undressing and only the first four arrivals had bureau space, the rest of us had to make do with duffel bags. I was glad that after the first week we were moved to the Hotel Coral Reef where there was a normal bedroom occupancy for three

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weeks and then to a large Hotel Atlantis fronting directly on the Atlantic Ocean. Our daily schedule was not at all crowded. We were measured and outfitted in army clothing. We were fed in a cafeteria format and took turns in cafeteria serving and clean up. Of course we were given personal and health check-ups

but in the last week I woke up one morning with a fever and reddish bothches which mandated two nights in a hospital.

On return to my hotel I found out that I was marked "stand-by" which meant I would not be shipped to a next post of duty with my hotel buddies because of my hospital visit. That was standard precautionary policy in all the armed fores. Now that I was released from the hospital I would be moved out as part of a back-up number of three dozen recruits--a dozen who had hospital alarms and a coupld of dozen whose duty had been to serve as health call standbys if they were needed.

Page 6 of the scrapbook leads off with a featured picture and bio of General Henry Arnold. He graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in 1907. He completed flying instruction in 1911. And he became the Commanding General of the American Air Force in March, 1943 just as I was in Miami Beach and focused on becoming one of this pilots.

At the bottom of p. 6 is a postcard, which shows a red birch college building at Morningside College, Sioux City, Iowa. Why? Because I had been joined with other Miami stand-byes [sic] to move to that college campus in order to start a six-month or more Air Corps College Training Detachment. The facts were that there were too many college recruits passing through basic training in

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in the face of shortage in pilot training airfileds. We got to Sioux City by way of slow, low priority trains: New Orleans, then Chicago and then Sioux City A bit bedraggled we were told that our arrival was a mistake. They opened a condemned gymnasium and brought in folding cots for overnight sleep. The next morning were told that we were supposed to be in Lincoln, Nebraska!

pp. 7, 8,9,10

The next four pages are full of joy! In part because I am back in a collegiate setting of goals and vision. I lead off with the great joy of all on page 7: pictures of me in my first thrusts into piloting. A careful, thoughtful instructor as part of the Air Corps College Training Detachment, opening the way. The pictures pick up a threefold theme of campus, city and of new friends in fellowship. One threat! A brand new building-- the Love Memorial Library -- given over then to Army Air Corps for wartime training. Bookshelves were postponed in favor of lower and upper bulks for young soldiers. In that climate I earned two one-month advances toward getting onto future flying.

pp 11,12,13 Page 11 represents a criticl decision point. A "to be or not to be" assessment with experts in daylight combat flying as to my future in the Army Air Corps. And with a great smile on my face now as well as back then I submit

a letter sent to my father from the Commandant and Base Commander of the Santa Ana, CA Army air Base -- to say that I was approved to enter a three stage training period to earn a pair of silver wings for combat in World War Two. I qualified in part because my daylight eyesight was rated great and daylight

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bombing gave an advantage to Americans in comparison to the accent on night bombing by the German pilots. There are some photos of myself in my brand new aviation cadet uniform. We who won out were invited to a graduation dinner dance. And I collected some actor/actress autographs at the Hollywood Stage Door Canteen. On p. 14 there is a copy of all three verse of the Army Air Corps Song.

pp. 15, 16,17, 18

Primary Pilot Flight Training at Thunderbird Field # 1 outside of Phoenix, Arizona. I started by learning to fly a two wing Boeing P.T. 17 Kaydet that came from a Stearman co. assembly line. My instructor was O.P. Canant, an ace pilot who had flown with General Chenault and his Flying Tigers in China until he was badly wounded. He was a fanatic about precision in flying. PRACTIC PRECISION! He kept his students focused on basic details all through training. Then for each of us in person he gave us amazing acrobatics which after PRACTICE PRECISION.

p. 19 and 20

Basic Pilot Flight Training. An Air Corps Field outside of Pecos, Texas. Here I learned to fly a heavier metal and singlewinged BT-13 Vultee Vibrator with a more powerful engine. My instructor as 2nd Lt. Frank Nolan whose older brother was already in the 8th Air Force in England. And here at Pecos I was introduced to a Links Trainer. An electric powered, one seat, closed top machine in which trainees could practice precision control to strengthen their advancing skills in the air.

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We celebrated Christmas at Pecos, I have included a Cadet Mess Christmas Dinner Menu together with the names of all the Air Corps Cadets in Class 44-C. (My apology that in pasting the menu in my scrapbook I covered up the entire cadet names that came after Ray L. Moore.)

Advanced Pilot Flight Training was an extension of Basic. Almost overnight Army Air Corps Command converted our Airfield outside of Pecos into a field

for "two engine" flight training. Now we would be taught to fly a Cessna manufactured Bobcat-- an emphasis on more feisty.

There is a picture of the two engine Cessna on p. 21 in the scrapbook and one also of my bright new instructor, 1st lieutenant William Conner. Also a certificate for my passing an Instrument Flight Test -- how to use the instruments of the pilot's dash board without delay or mistakes.

Pages 22,23, and 24 have to do with my formal graduation from the first stage of Air Corps flight training. A three step process which ends with a ceremonial presentation of a pair of pilot's silver wings and the rank of a 2nd lieutenant in the United States Army Air Corps.

Pages 22 and 23 present a collage of Air Base, Air Corps and Air Forces public relations hype. There is an Air Base graduation announcement, graduation programs and graduation dance invitation. There is an Air Base public relations piece about a record breaking pilot training schedule. And there is a Personnel Order from Headquarters Army Air Forces Western Flying

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Training Command, Santa Ana, California which certified our flight class promotion to the rank of second lieutenant in the United States Army Air Corps, 12 March 1944. A year and fifteen days after my personal reporting for Aviation Cadet Training at Miami Beach, Florida. Oh Yes! P.R. sent two separate announcements back home to Wilmington, Delaware. In the celebratory moment in the spotlight, I left for a holiday leave -- time back home!

A fellow graduate with me (about three years older) was a graduate of West Point, already an army officer and so privileged to have a private car on base. He was going to drive back home to his home in Washington, D.C. before picking up on the next stage of our Army flight training and he offered me a ride east-sharing in the driving and skipping the expense of motels. We got started at six p.m. (after graduation) driving north toward Arkansas, crossing the state eastward in the dark and crossing the Mississippi at Memphis, Tennessee at sunrise. Halfway across Tennessee we had to stop for a blown out tire in a town where we had to spend two hours to get a permit for a then tightly rationed tire. We drove up the mountains from Chattanooga as night came on and entered the Blue Ridge Valley of Virginia at sunrise. I caught an early train from Washington to my hometown in Wilmington, Delaware for a two-week holiday. [Note: The correspondence clearly documents that the holiday in Wilmington was one week.]

There is a photo in the scrapbook with Grandmother Jones getting an open window look ad Dad and Mother standing close-sided there with me.

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I must say that I knew that I was no face-to-face with the most awesome challenge of my life as I stood at the threshold of my 20th birthday, June 16, 1944. I was both proud and thrilled that I had earned a chance to fly a Boeing B-17 Flying fortress -- a four engine heavy bomber with a crew of ten. Was I really ripe enough to perform up to standard? I honestly didn't know, but I decided to push ahead. I did not hesitate.

See pages 25 and 26 plus my most real and personal affirmation: a United States Army Air Corps certificate to certify officially my personal potential for Specialized Four Engine Pilot Training. On the reverse side there is a picture of a pilot's control panel of 54 vital gauges to monitor and respond to in both the going out on a mission and coming back. Mission accomplished! One reminder, that no person can do all that is needed alone. We need to build teamwork: one for all and all for one!

The song "June is Busting Out All Over" was very appropriate to my feelings in moving on from the strongly affirmative training at the Roswell, New Mexico, Army Air Base.

I was given a two weeks home vacation to nourish family roots, affirming our five lives together. (see note) My next orders were to pick-up a nine-member air crew for doing combat in the European Theatre of World War Two. That was taken care of simply at Personnel Headquarters in St. Petersburg, Florida, followed quickly by an Atlantic Coastal Train taking our full ten member - just getting started crew - due west to Gulfport, MS.

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We were told that we would be pushed and polished at the Gulfport Army Airfield. That our instructors would be already tested in combat exposure in both England and the Far East and that they would not tolerate any short falls in our responsiveness. We did get a two-day break to visit New Orleans half way through the training course.

Then in the last ten days for our polished readiness my co-pilot Arthur Rohl became seriously ill. Nobody could predict a quick, let alone a war-ready recovery. There was a pilot who had a strong record flying a B-25 two engine bomber but who had been thrust into a co-pilot category as punishment for getting caught while flying underneath a tall bridge over the Mississippi River. TWICE! I was given a chance to wait at least another month for weaving another co-pilot in sync with our fresh and ready bomber crew, but I was given a chance if I wanted to interview this 2nd Lt. Gordon Dodge, to check him out first and that's what

I did. He obviously had guts. He had worked three years for the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) in Minnesota and was six foot, 170 pounds (obviously strong and tough). I was told that he might be too self-centered independent and therefore disruptive. But my father had been Superintendent of the Ferris School for delinquent boys in the state of Delaware for nine years. My home was on campus there. I played baseball and went swimming with boys my age and one of them had been in my class at high school. In short, Wes Dodge seemed to be to have strong flying potential. In short, our crew plus Dodge met each other, flew together and compared notes for five days and then agreed to fly into combat together as part of the U.S. 8th Air Force in England.

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## **11**

This page is a repeat of information on p. xx.

## **12**

This page is a repeat of information from earlier pages.

## **13**

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## **14**

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Scrapbook Commentary Part II: Into Combat

September-October, 1944

We were prompt and ready on September 23rd, 1944 to sit in wooden wicker seats on a Louisville and Nashville Railroad train -- three hours late -- as part of twenty-one air crews being transferred to Hunter AirField, adjacent to Savannah, Georgia for processing to fly ourselves to England.

This base specialized in preparing Army Air Corps aircrews and airplanes for flying themselves to England. We were given maps and guidelines. Our duffel bags were checked out for content. Our fleece lined battle jackets would come in handy. And our navigator, Wes Pitts was briefed in consummate detail.

We could call long distance when we arrived to alert our families but not to share either take-off time or route of travel. Back in Gulfport I had heard of these travel routes already, had estimated a broad breadth of time of day to be flying over my parents office space outside of Wilmington, Delaware and then let them know that I might fly over (weather permitting) for a B-17 buzzing farewell. I was able to do just that and staff nearby at DuPont Airport enjoyed the fun. (See list referring to the family's letters for reactions to this event.) [Letters dated October xx 1944]

The route we flew to England went up the East Coast to Grenier Air Force Base outside of Manchester, New Hampshire. As we prepared for landing I handed the steering wheel over to Wes Dodge [may have mistaken the name for Wes Pitts] as partnership in flying, this time for a landing. He badly misjudged his angle of approach and I had to quickly take over and start a new round. But I turn the steering wheel back to Wes for landing. In short, I affirmed my personal confidence in Wes. And to the whole crew for togetherness sake. [see note]

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The next day our flight route to England took us farther north to the flat land and barren coast of Goose Bay, Labrador, with a brisk, chilly temperature. Our next day's stop was Greenland, centuries ago a Viking outpost and now for us an unusual landing strip thirty some miles up a coastal fjord. The strict rule was planes go out in the morning, planes go in that afternoon. A one-way passage with some narrow places and twists to watch out for. Then at a white marked milestone there was a semi-sharpt turn and throttle-back signal as you would be facing and landing on a 25-degree upward slanted glacier. Of course an opposite positioning, heading downward in getting started weaving a way out to the ocean the next day. [see note]

Our fourth stop and last stop in flying to England was outside the outskirts of Reykevick, the Capitol City of the island called Iceland. Again flat and barren from what we saw around the airfield. In going to our overnight hostel we could see attractive midde-class housing but that night was and still is the coldest night of my life. The hostel was build low but ample for military crowds but our crew had to sleep in our clothes with only one rough blanket and scattered electric floor heaters that were of little help to our crew. I must say though, that the northern lights in the sky outside were magnificent to watch.

The next morning we roused ourselves early, shook off the cold while eating breakfast with two cups of real warm coffee at a canteen in the corner and got started on the final lap of our flight over the Atlantic ocean. Our landing place was just outside a town called Valley, Wales. We had supper, a good night's sleep and after breakfast the next day travel by train to Lond and

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transferred to another train that took us to a very spread out Army Air Base outside of a small town called Rattlesden, Suffolk County, East Anglia, in England. We loaded our belongings in the back of an army truck, squeezed for room for we young soldiers, and were driven to our latest Air Base/home on the road. This one where bombing and killing will be our number one agenda at least for 35 required bombing runs over Fortress Europe.

The Crew of the Blue Hen Chick

At this point let me introduce the members of the Blue Hen Chick: really as we came together the members of our jointly owned bomber. Copilot Gordon Dodge sturdy from CCC employment before the war, from Minnesota. My navigator, lanky Wesley Pitts, age 22 out of Clemson College in South Carolina. Our bombardier, John Rosiala, a suave 24 out of western Pennsylvania. Then John Shannon, Brooklyn, New York all over, who was our plane engineer, who manned our top turret gun and who stood right behind the pilot-copilot combo in the start-up of our engines for double-checking. Our radio man was Olaf Larsen a Phi Beta Kappa from Pittsburgh University, age 27, a native of New York City. The only married man on our crew and father of one daughter. Howard McKay, 19 strong and tall from Georgia was our whole time waist gunner. Max Shepherd, a bright 18 year old from Mesa, Arizona was our ball turret gunner. And Joe Trambley (sleepy Joe) age 21 from close to the Mexican border in New Mexico was tail gunner all the way in the back of the plane. Ralph Minker, the pilot from Wilmington, Delaware only 20 years old until after the war ended in Europe and June 16, 1945 came round.

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Now is the time to open our wartime scrapbook to page 31 for a mission morning, photo of the crew of the Blue Hen Chick. A bit fuzzy! And five different angled pictures of the Blue Hen Chick at rest on what is called a hardstand. A resting place to support both its own weight and for take off but all so the bundled-up weight of a nine man crew equipped for battle. Don't stop with that one page when you can also turn to pages 32,33,34 and 35 which catch the grace and strength of a flying B-17 in formation gathering. Then the exact moment of "bombs away" while threatened with the danger of flak. "Plane down!" But also the awesome beauty of the way home! The relief at last when the wheels touch the earth at the base.

But please do not stop with pictures only! If you turn back to page 28 you will see a three page essay entitled "Into the Air Against Germany" which I wrote

about a year after I had come back from the war and to studies at Dickinson College and I did not want to forget what I had been involved in during the war. Pages 29 and 30 in the scrapbook are a part of a life long rage against Adolph Hitler.

pp. 36-37. In the pages the crew members are dressed as rather low class Europeans. These false photos are to be carried with us on each and every mission over Europe so that if our bomber is shot down and we can manage to parachute safely we might be able to change clothers--smudging up our flight clothes, or with the help from locals who hate Adolph Hitler, to change clothes and be able to authenticate ourselves as natives. Either way with an identity card to authenticate our falsely developed identity cards.

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**20**

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**21**

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**22**

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**23**

Repeat of the bottom of p. 18.

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Combat Missions

I shake my head in amazement at age 74 at some of the audacity I had as a freshman in college to decide to volunteer to become a sky pilot in the Army Air Corps. My father used to say that I caught that vision from Charles Lindbergh when I was just five years old and we were living in Concord, New Hampshire.

[see note] Lindbergh took time out in his early career to visit both towns and cities to help promote aviation as the wave of the future and dad and mother took me with them to welcome him and listen to him speak. When told about that event in 1942 I thought I could remember somehow a lot of dust and cheering but I thought that I had made up my own mind about the Army Air Corps. And my own mind has become extra important in the final choice of crew for combat. To make sure that each crew member had a positive attitude-- a cooperative attitude-- as well as technical skill. As it worked out at Gulfport, Mississippi, I had to replace a co-pilot because of a bad health problem and both a tail gunner and a waist gunner for obvious dragging of feet.

My feeling of personal confidence as well as confidence in each member of my crew for high sky combat with the 447th Bomb Group of the Third Division of the 8th Army Air Force can be felt and picture in the following examples.

A laugh to start off with! The official history of the 447th Bomb Group gives me and my crew a pictured nod of welcome on page 226 for our first mission as a crew all together after a couple of prep missions called break-ins when we split up to fly with each other, already tested crews. On page 226 [of the 447th BG history] is a picture with the word "Ralph Minker's Crew (Youngest First Pilot)". The big glitch is that noen of that crew in the picture were a part of our flight crew.

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What it takes to maintain a single B-17

Thirteen 8th Army Air Force personnel were need to provide essential ground support to keep each B-17 combat crew flying.

1 Crew maintenance chief, 1 air compression technician, 1 armament specialist,

3 as a bomb supply team, 1 dispatcher, 1 electrician, 1 gas truck supply,

1 hydraulic specialist, 1 instrument specialist,

1 plane mechanic for the plane as a whole plus 8 engine mechanics (two for each engine).

1 oil truck supply, 1 parachute rigger and 1 specialist,

1 radio maintenance technician, 1 radio testing technician, 1 tug driver (used for towing a plane) 1 weather forecaster and 1 observer.

That's not all by a long shot! There must be stand-by relief and management coordination at all times. Food providers and helpers. Medical care and helpers. Fire fighters both for the airplane and extensive base facilities. Base chaplains. Base security forces. And base entertainment and recreation.

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### Mission Notes

Christmas Eve Morning, 1944

A warm-up of over 2,000 heavy bombers! Fifty bomb groups of the 8th Air Force in England spaced fifteen minutes apart as they flew to assigned targets in and around Belgium. Time in flight: 7 hours, 15 minutes.

In the history of the 447th Bomb Group to which I was attached "This was the mission to end all mission." Our four squadrons were ordered "to put up everything that would fly." This was the first clear flying day since the beginning of the Battle of the Bulge on December 16th.

Here is a comment from our troops on the ground that had been badly hurt by both the harsh weather and a German counteroffensive. "We got up on the 24th of December and saw there wasn't a cloud in the sky and soon we could hear and see the formations of American bombers going over and you wouldn't believe anything could make a bunch of guys so happy as that sight did." [History 447th Bomb Group by Doyle Shields, 1996. p 243.]

It wasn't easy but in less than four months [error - less than four years] World War Two in Europe was out and over.

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## 27

In the fall of 1944 the most awesome of priority targets was Merseberg, Germany and our crew flew all together in the second and third attacks. The history of the 447th puts it this way for November 25th.

"Fear came over all of us as the cover on the mission map was removed. It was Merseburg again." Specifically the synthetic oil plant again. Fiercely defended by the Luftwaffe because armies need gas and oil if they are to be effective and we were start to cut their accustomed supplies.

These two missions were November 25th and December 6th, 1944. And now we had established our primary use of Kirkland A-Able - #719 which I had painted on the left front side of the Blue Hen Chick. This plane was to carry us to safety and effectiveness for 25 bombing missions. [They flew other missions in different planes to complete the tour of 35.]

Most Challenging Mission

When asked what single mission I could rank as most challenging, I would have to choose Friday, February 16th, when I was flying as Deputy Squadron Leader and had to take over as Squadron Leader. We were on target to bomb a major bridge crossing the Rhine River at Wesel so as to close an escape route for German soldiers pulling back toward Berlin.

Just as we were positioning ourselves for releasing our bombs German flak guns from 20,000 feet below interrupted the bomb drop for our squadron leader [Capt. R.P. Gormly leading the high group], and forced him and his crew to leave formation. That meant that I and my crew had to take over that now leaderless position but our whole squadron was in such disarray that I had to lead them in a large circle off to the right to allow the next following squadron to come

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straight through for its bombs away and to give our Squadron time enough to reorder its position for coming back for a second run of bombing.

As I was sending the news of this strategy to the other planes in the squadron I was told by my navigator that my bombardier up front in the nose of our B-17 had been wounded in the flak blast that had forced our squadron leader out of formation. The bombardier was ready to try for a fresh bombing run while the navigator was working on a tourniquet for his wounded arm and the two of them hold together as we finally circled to come back for accurate bombing. Flak holes and bad weather back at home base in England forced us into an overnight stay in France near Criel and it appears that what happened did not get recorded in our home base records. [The 447th Bomb Group history does record that Minker flew this mission, but no notation of his report.]

There was a major confusion developing after the 6th of December which was partly hidden and therefore all the more confusing. Adolf Hitler was ready to start a strong counter attack under cover of wintry weather in the Ardennes Forest in Belgium. At the same time Americans led by General George Patton and Englishmen led by Field Marshall Montgomery were arguing about contrasting strategies for capturing Berlin. A deadlock! And then icy snow and freezing winds began to stagnate maneuvers of all kinds in what was called a German Bulge against the allied forces. The tension was growing. There was a one-day opening. On Sunday, Christmas Eve, December 24, both the English and American air forces were able to fly - including the Blue Hen Chick - for nine straight hours. Our most difficult mission. A major shove to ending that war in April 1945.

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Closing Comment

One good day is never enough to win a major war! And so far as we approach another century on planet earth there is no settled way to agree to peace rather than one upmanship. The challenge for solutions will soon pass to the year 2000 and beyond.

I will comment on two final themes. (1) A description of the single most difficult bombing mission of my air force enlistment. (2) A description of that part of my scarpbook which opens up both alternatives and consequences.

My deep appreciation for the Delaware State Museum [Delaware Historical Society] for its staff, its officers and all of its constituents.

My deep appreciate also for my father and mother. Ralph L. Minker and Ruth Edna Jones Minker, Delawareans also, and guides and teachers for human life. Helping, learning and sharing!