Veteran returns to air in bomber

By Jenny Kobiela-Mondor jennyk@kpcnews.net
Friday, 25 September 2009 01:00

AUBURN — Steve DeWald of Fort Wayne flew 30 missions in a B-17 Flying Fortress bomber in 1944. On Thursday, he got to fly one more.

But this time, instead of a 10-hour flight dropping bombs over military targets in Germany, DeWald took a calm, 20-minute ride over DeKalb County.

DeWald had the opportunity to fly in the B-17 Flying Fortress Aluminum Overcast, which is visiting the DeKalb County Airport this weekend as part of the Experimental Aircraft Association's Salute to Veterans tour.

"I enjoyed it," DeWald said. "It always brings back memories."

DeWald was a lead B-17 pilot in the 457th Bomb Group out of Glatton, England, near Peterborough. Normally, B-17 crews had to fly 35 missions, but as lead pilot, DeWald was only required to fly 30.

DeWald was a student at Butler University on Dec. 7, 1941, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. He didn't immediately enlist in the Army, but after his fraternity brothers began getting drafted and enlisting, DeWald decided to join up.

"It seemed to be the proper thing to do, considering what had been happening in that area in the last 10 or 15 years," he said.

He chose the U.S. Army Air Forces because "I thought flying was more glamorous than being in a submarine or something," DeWald said.

DeWald began training in 1943, when he was 21 years old, and earned his wings in March 1944. DeWald was the oldest in his crew — most men were 17 or 18 year old "kids," he said.

Images

Veteran Steve DeWald enjoys his flight on the B-17 Aluminum Overcast Thursday afternoon. DeWald flew 30 missions as a B-17 pilot during World War II.

Rural DeKalb County and propellers are seen from the nose of Aluminum Overcast, a B-17 Flying Fortress.

KPC YELLOW PAGES
twitter
KPC PHOTO CONTEST

Auburn, IN
52 °F
Clear
at 12:49 PM
Advisory!
Click for Forecast
LISTEN IN!

Calendar

"I say kids, but that made men out of them," he added.

He flew his 30 missions near the end of the war — in fact, his final mission was the last one out of the base at Glatton — and targeted cities such as Dresden and Regensburg. DeWald said he recalls that his sixth mission was over Meersburg. Out of 36 planes in his bomb group, only six came back, and the B-17 he was flying had lost engine and was torn up with surface holes. However, no one in his crew was hurt in the 30 missions he flew.

On mission days, the crew would wake up at about 4 a.m. and stop at the chapel on the base together on their way to separate briefings.

"We developed a spirit of camaraderie and closeness," he said of his crew.

After receiving briefings on their assignment, the crew would take off in the dark and circle until a group came together. The group then would fly and meet up with other groups at one-minute intervals to form a wing, then fall into line on the way to their target. Fighters would meet the bombers during the mission.

"They had a big highway up there," he said.

The crews would fly out and back during a mission, sometimes deep into enemy territory. Flying Fortresses could hold up to 4,800 pounds of bombs.

"It was one of the most dependable we had in the air corps at the time," DeWald said of the B-17. "We just felt it was the best plane in the world."

After the missions, the crew would land at the base, which was relatively safe. They had a bed and food and didn't see the faces of their enemies.

"It was sort of a non-combat existence," he said.

DeWald said it often didn't feel as though they were fighting a war — it felt like a competition.

Still, DeWald admits that each mission was a scary experience.

"Anybody who said they weren't afraid was crazy. I remember my knees knocking," he said.

DeWald and his crew, and most B-17 crews, concentrated on what they had to do. DeWald said that, in a way, having a single purpose in life was a good thing.

"We only had one thing to do. We did that the best we could, because that was going to get us back home," he said. "At that time, I felt more comfortable and closer to God than I ever have."

B-17 Flights, Tours

When: Friday, Saturday and Sunday

Where: DeKalb County Airport, 2710 C.R. 60, Auburn

Flights: $385 for EAA members, $425 for non-EAA members

Ground tours: $5 for adults, free for WWII veterans and children under 8. $15 per family (adults and children under 18). Tours begin after flights are done for the day.

More information: 437-7702 or 800-359-6217

Comments Add New Search

Write comment

Name: 103302

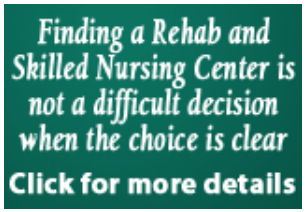
Email: automatic do not notify

Website:

Title:

Send

Powered by JoomlaComment 3.26



Email Webmaster | Copyright 2009 KPC Media Group