

Memories

By Lloyd W. Prang

It's 6:30 in the evening. The B-24 "All American" has been gone for ten hours but the memory of its visit will linger for a long, long time.

I guess it's safe to say that most of us who flew in these machines didn't give much thought to our final mission. For some it was a combat mission; for others, like myself, it was a mission to carry a bunch of guys back home. When we left the aircraft at an airbase in the United States – not too much thought was given to our parting. We had had enough of cold Nissen Huts, 3 a.m. awakenings, 5 a.m. briefings which showed long lines on the map going to places like Hamburg, Berlin or Magdeburg; enough of fighters and flak, and enough of seeing planes explode or fall slowly out of the sky, and enough of counting the chutes of those who were able to get out. But after a time lapse of 44 years, the memory of all this is altered. All the uneasiness that combat brought to some – the terror that it brought others – all this begins to fade and all that remains is the fond memory of being about 20 years old and flying a big airplane like the B-24. You can tell people how it was – also they are able to see a B-24 in a museum – but it's like looking at a dead animal that has been stuffed.

On Wednesday morning it was no longer just a memory. There it was, far away in a hazy sky, little more than a big speck – but it was our B-24, the one we left behind 44 years ago. It was coming back to us. It was like watching a mission return. It wasn't important that it was only one plane, this plane was bringing our youth back to us, and we were 20 years old again. It leveled off at about 50 feet over the runway and made a low level pass before making its turn to the downwind leg, then, mixture full rich, props-high rpm, gear down, turn to base leg, flaps at about 30 degrees – turn to final approach, full flaps, flare out, touchdown, chop your throttles, wheel all the way back into your gut – nose wheel down – and landing complete.

There were only a few people in attendance at 9:15 on this Wednesday morning so it was no problem for another pilot and me to take our old positions in the cockpit and talk about times gone by. In the ensuing four days, thousands of people came to view the "All American." I talked with many ex-crewmen, and if you closed your eyes to the gray hair and other signs of age, and just listened to the excitement and enthusiasm in their voices, you knew that they, like the beautiful B-24 on the ramp, had also been restored to their original youthful condition.

Sunday morning came as scheduled, much too soon, and it was time to say farewell. Once again I managed to spend a few moments in the cockpit – then it was time to start the engines. They were reluctant to awake from their four day sleep, but after a little coaxing, one by one, they belched a cloud of smoke and settled down to an even rumble. The top hatch opened, the flight engineer appeared, and the brakes began to squeal as she taxied to the runway.

While there were only a handful of people present when the aircraft arrived – on this Sunday morning there were more than two hundred. Many of them rushed all the way out to the runway, and had to be persuaded to return to the taxi strip. This beautiful B-24 then proceeded to take off. It made a turn to the right, then slowly turned left for a pass over the runway. Upon completion it turned and made another low level pass in farewell.

Yes, 44 years ago we left her at an eastern airbase. She was old and war-weary. Later, she was flown to a big field out west – to be dismantled and destroyed. We went forward, full of youthful vigor, ready to conquer the world – and found that the best we could accomplish was to earn our daily bread and lead a decent life. Looking back I guess that wasn't too far off our original target – still, it does seem that we could have made a somewhat larger hole in the target!

Now on this Sunday morning, our B-24 has left us, her mighty engines roaring in youthful exuberance – going out to conquer her world, leaving us with unforgettable memories of how it was so long ago.