

## Accounts of Local Airmen and the Flying Fortress

by Jay M. Jones

*Seventy Five Years ago marked the concluding events of World War II. This is the fourth in a series of articles highlighting some of the contributions of people from Iron County to the successful termination of the war.*

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*The B-17 Flying Fortress lived up to its name. Photo from [www.boeing.com](http://www.boeing.com).*

The B-17 Flying Fortress was a bomber built by Boeing that played a critical role in World War II. It was a workhorse that delivered massive numbers of bombs that destroyed Hitler's ability to dominate Europe. General Carl Spaatz, the American air commander in Europe, said, "Without the B-17 we may have lost the war."

With crews of ten or more men, each fortress was heavily armed with 9 machine guns. Over 12,700 B-17s were built, many for Allies, and peak American B-17 inventory was 4,574 in August 1944. Late in the war, bomber production priorities shifted to the B-29.

One of the early B-17 pilots from Iron County was Frank Hunter of Cedar City, who became a Flying Fortress pilot in October 1942. He flew combat missions in North Africa, Sicily and Italy.

Hunter received national media attention when he guided his severely damaged B-17 to home base at Bizerte, Tunisia at the conclusion of a successful mission over Messina, Sicily on June 25, 1943. Despite serious injuries to several of his crew and less serious injuries to himself, with two engines totally out, wings damaged, instruments out, flaps and wheels unusable, he made a successful belly landing without causing further injury to the crew.

Following the event, Alta Hunter, Frank's mother, sent him a letter which was shared with his friends, who then posted it on the bulletin board. Colonel Fay R. Upthegrove saw the letter and was prompted to reply, writing in part:

*"Dear Mrs. Hunter:*

*"We have never met, but I feel like I know you, after reading your letter to your son Frank. It is one of the best letters from a mother to a son that I ever had the pleasure of reading. . . . The thing I like most about Frank is his honesty and modesty, and boys don't acquire those traits without love and guidance at home. He did a miraculous job in getting himself and crew safely home after the odds were so heavy against him. Moral courage, the will to keep trying and skill plus a wonderful plane tell this story of his and many other crews. . . ."*

Less than a month after the heroic landing, Frank Hunter and his plane did not return from a mission over Foggia, Italy on July 22, 1943. Initially reported as Missing in Action, it was later confirmed that he was killed in action.

Captain Vernon Cooley from Cedar City, serving as a chaplain in Italy, wrote a letter to Mrs. Hunter a year later, indicating that he had found and dedicated the grave of Lieutenant Hunter "resting in a very beautiful spot with his brothers-in-arms."

Another tragedy struck a Cedar City family on February 12, 1944 when Lieutenant Robert N. Bulloch was killed when two B-17 bombers collided on a training mission near Ardmore, Oklahoma.

Only one man survived from the plane on which Lt. Bulloch was co-pilot. Corporal Joseph William McClanahan, the tail gunner, recalled in 2007 that thirteen B-17s in close formation were returning to base after a mission to Matagorda Bay near Corpus Christi, Texas.

McClanahan relates: "As we neared home, we began to descend and turn at the same time. This is a difficult

maneuver for a large plane to accomplish, especially if in close formation under turbulent air conditions.

“Being the tail gunner, I had a clear view of all the planes behind us. The aircraft on our upper left slid into us. The two right engines cut our plane into two pieces just behind the radio room.”

McClanahan was able to exit and parachute to safety. None of the rest of the crew was able to do so. The other plane, without the two right engines, was able to regain control and land safely.

A stunning fact is that nearly 15,000 Americans lost their lives in training flights of the many types of aircraft used during World War II.

Death was not the only hazard for those that survived training and went on to the war zone.

Second Lieutenant Francis W. Betensen of Cedar City, co-pilot of the B-17 Flying Fortress “Breaks of the Game”, went missing over Germany during a raid on Berlin on March 6, 1944 in which 16 American planes were lost. It was later reported that Lt. Betensen was a prisoner of war.

After the war in Europe ended, Lt. Betensen was freed. it was reported that he had been held prisoner at Stalag Luft I near the city of Barth in northern Germany. This camp is the setting for the 2017 film “Instrument of War,” which tells the story of Clair Cline, a U. S. bomber pilot imprisoned at the camp who built a violin which influenced the fate of the nearly 9,000 POWs in the camp.

Several other pilots and crew members of B-17s hailed from Cedar City. Captain Richard Leigh completed 35 missions over enemy territory as pilot of a Flying Fortress. He was then promoted to Major and assigned as Controller at Headquarters. His awards include the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Bronze Star, the Air Medal with 4 Oak Leaf Clusters, and a presidential unit citation.

Lieutenant Daniel Leigh was a B-17 pilot receiving several awards for “meritorious achievement” on more than 25 combat missions over Europe.

On July 25, 1944 Richard C. Lunt was reported Missing in Action over Germany. A pilot of a B-17, he sustained a leg injury that was treated in Germany while he was a prisoner of war. He was released after the end of the war in Europe.

Muran Limb was a tail gunner in the 463rd Bombardment Group that flew on a raid on the Daimler-Benz tank works in Berlin on March 24, 1945. The mission was the longest (1,800 miles round trip) heavy bombardment operation flown in Europe.

Another B-17 tail gunner was Rulon Paramore. He flew many combat missions over Germany, including shuttle missions from England over Germany to Russia, then Russia over Germany to Italy, and then Italy over Germany back to the base in England.

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