Hoffman, B-17 pilot, flew 26 combat missions

Captain Ralph Hoffman, Sept. 26, 1942 to Jan. 20, 1946, 92nd BG, 326th BS at Podington, England, flew 26 combat missions. Awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal with four Oak Leaf Clusters.

By RALPH HOFFMAN

One of the roughest missions I flew was right after the Battle of the Bulge and I was pilot of the lead plane (led 36 planes in formation) as we flew low around 15, 000 feet trying to help the front line. Captain Robert Bennett, Jr. of Maryville, TN, was reaching over me to wipe the windshield with a cloth for me to be able to see because it was fogging up so badly. During this time, our plane was taking ground to air fire and flack, Bennett was hit in the knee and ankle. He was bleeding badly. The bombardier also suffered superficial facial wounds. Other crew members on board administered first aid to them and placed Bennett in a heated sleeping bag. The temperature in the plane dropped drastically and we were about three hours from base. I asked Bennett if he wanted me to land in France for him to get immediate medical attention and he declined, saying he would rather make it back to base where he was known. As we approached base to land, the wheels wouldn't release. We frantically tried changing fuses. Didn't work. I made up my mind that with wounded on board and a crew to protect that all I could do was land, sliding the plane sideways into the grassy area of the air field and hope for the best. As one more try, I told the co-pilot to lay the screw driver across the fuse contacts while I pulled switches to release the wheels. Thankfully, I began to hear the humming sound of the wheels as they were lowered. About this time, we came in sight of the runway and it was iced over from a snow that had fallen during the night. Lucky for us, as I approached touchdown, I saw that the airport crew had the foresight to de-ice that part of the runway and when the wheels of the plane touched down we had immediate traction and a smooth landing after all.

Figure 1 Ralph Hoffman (standing, second from left) and his B-17 crew who survived 26 combat missions over Europe during World War II

Another memorable mission of mine was being a pilot of a formation of 12 planes flying to Barth, Germany, up near the Baltic Sea. We made up a total of 286 other planes that flew over 10,000 British and American prisoners of war to an airfield west of Paris, France in one day.

On one of the last missions, we flew the entire 8th Air Force over the City of London to show the British what an armada of over 3,000 fighters and bombers looked like.

Figure 2 Ralph Hoffman (right) and two of his former B-17 crew pose with a museum plaque of their World War II bomber

Ralph Hoffman went into business with his brother in Maryland until he was recalled for Korean duty. After his release he owned a Western Auto Store franchise in Oneida and was partner in two Ben Franklin stores. He is a member of the Oneida Kiwanis Club, County Solid Waste Board, and Scott County Chamber of Commerce.