

# FROM CO-PILOT TO TAIL GUNNER

AN EXCERPT FROM THE NEW BOOK DAMN LUCKY GIVES A GRAPHIC LOOK AT WHAT LIFE WAS LIKE IN THE 100th BOMB GROUP DURING SOME OF THE DARKEST DAYS OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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Technical Sergeant Donald O. Ellis and Second Lieutenant John "Lucky" Luckadoo climbed into the cramped tail gun position of the Boeing B-17F Flying Fortress and went over the basics.

"This is how you aim," Ellis said, showing Lucky a small circular bull's eye gunsight between the twin Browning M2 .50-caliber machine guns. Staff Sergeant Leroy Baker (waist gunner on Lucky's Crew 25) pointed to the tail gun's butterfly triggers, "This is how you fire."

Lucky nodded and then took a quick survey of the cramped tail compartment before he crawled out with a pit in his stomach. Ellis stayed behind and finished mounting and loading the pair of weapons that he'd just cleaned

because Lucky wasn't trained to do either.

*What the hell am I doing?* Lucky thought.

The 100th Bombardment Group (Heavy) was on its tenth mission and already lost 60 airmen. Lucky's Crew 25 had flown half of the 100th's missions and he was just getting the handle on being the co-pilot when ordered to man the tail guns after Crew 25 was designated a lead crew.

Lead crews were usually the most experienced airmen in the organization. The lead of the group was rotated among the 100th's four squadrons (418th, 349th, 350th, 351st Bomb Squadrons). There were several lead crews selected in each squadron and the operation's officer designated who

flew which mission.

The morning of 26 July 1943, Lucky learned his crew was going to lead the mission to bomb Hanover's rubber works and rail yards. Major Ollie Turner, the 351st Bomb Squadron commander, would be the command pilot moving Lucky into the tail gun as the fire control officer. The revelation surprised the hell out of Lucky when he'd been told this fact after the briefing.

Ride in the back! What the hell for?

Lucky was barely comfortable in the cockpit. He'd never even fired the .50-caliber guns and the tail gunner was one of the most important defensive positions within the B-17F. The remote position protected the rear of the aircraft. *Luftwaffe* pilots gained a healthy respect for the tail guns, which



Insignia of the 100th Bomb Group.

Magnificent view of 100th Bomb Group airpower at its best as the Forts get into tight formation on their way to a target.