

## War Era Story Project 2012

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Current home town: Dayton  
Age: Not given



### **WWII Experiences of Neil Oatney (1924-2008)**

**Staff Sergeant  
8th Air Force,  
446th Bomb Group  
March 1943 - September 1945**

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Neil Edward Oatney was born on December 8, 1924 on a farm in Lancaster Ohio. His parents were John and Elva Neff Oatney and he had four brothers and one sister. His father was a "farmer for a farmer", working for a large farm owner in Fairfield County. On the day Neil was born (his mother told him) it had been snowing for 2 days and the snow had just slightly melted, and then froze again. People were outside walking on it, for she said it was 20 inches deep and packed down hard.



F. Ilene & Neil Oatney - Jan 1944

Neil attended St. Mary's Catholic school through elementary and continued on to Lancaster High School. He dropped out a year before graduating to get a job, and began working at Lancaster Glass. Soon after, he was to marry Frances Ilene Reed on February 26, 1943.

## Greetings from Uncle Sam

In March of 1943, he “received his greetings from Uncle Sam,” or was drafted into World War II at eighteen years of age. Right before he left, he received his last pay check from Lancaster Glass where he earned \$16.00 a week. He gave eight to his wife and kept eight for himself and boarded the train, “that was all we had in the world, that eight dollars each.”

In March of 1943, he left from the Lancaster Railroad Station for basic training in Miami, Florida. Soldiers did not have to pay to ride trains during this time, whether it was to training or home, it did not matter. The trip took longer than a usual train ride. This one lasted four days because every time the soldier train went through a big town it would pull over onto a separate side track and allow the freight trains to pass. While stopped at these stations, Neil said that many of the townspeople were at the station giving the soldiers on the train cakes, sandwiches, and coke “in a bottle.” “I thought it (Miami, Florida) was 20,000 miles away, 'cause I had never been out of Lancaster in my life, except for twice to go to Columbus.”

Upon arriving in Miami, Florida he was taken to a hotel where he said, “ they were taking the civilian guests out at the same time they were putting us in our rooms.” He stayed in various hotels along the beach and did all of his training on the beach. There were so many men being brought to basic training that there was a shortage of uniforms. He received his shirt and shoes, but no pants to complete the uniform. It took an entire month to be fully dressed in “government” clothing.

To complete basic training the men went through two sieges of eight to ten weeks each, but for some unknown reason the men in Neil's group went through this twice, spending sixteen to twenty weeks in Miami, Florida. He recalled doing calisthenics with jellyfish.

## After Basic Training

On completion of basic training, he moved on to gunnery school. Stationed in Colorado, he spent three months learning how to repair, clean and assemble guns and bombs. Next he had a delay in route, so he was able to go home for ten days to visit his wife and family. After these days, he went on to Armament School at Lowery Field, Denver, Colorado. This is where he learned his position in the B24 bomber plane.

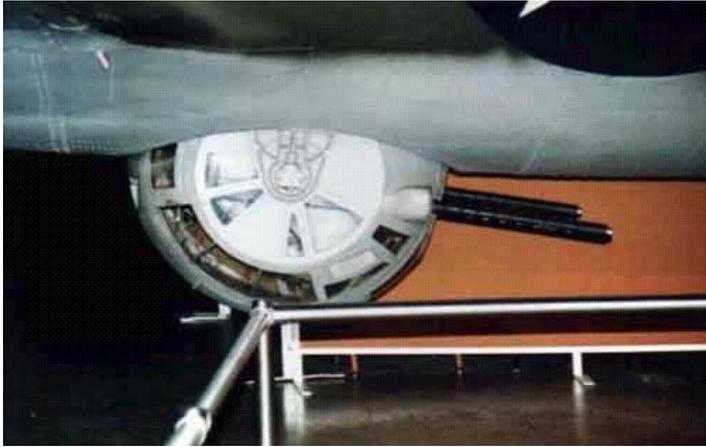
He was to be the Armament Gunner, which meant that he took care of the guns and bombs while in the air. If a bomb would be frozen or stuck, he would have to put his hands out the hole near it and repair it for use. As if this isn't tricky enough, at altitudes of 30,000 feet the temperature is forty below zero, so this is not an ideal job. Also in Armament School, he learned about his other position as a tail gunner. Most crewmembers had two jobs, for example, as the radio



Tail Gun of a B-24

operator was also a gunner.

After completion of Armament School, he moved on to Westover Field, Massachusetts where they formed the men into a crew. Then the crew would fly for three to four months, training together before being sent to war. A few days after Neil came to Westover Field, his crew was to fly a night flight over New York for a navigational practice. That same day, Ilene had come to town, so he told his commander



Ball Gun of a B-24

that he was sick and could not make the flight. The commander, knowing that Neil's wife was in town, allowed him to miss the flight, since it was not a practice for the gunners. Later that evening the entire crew was killed when they crashed into the side of Mt. Holyoke, except for Neil who was with his wife.

After this incident, Neil was placed in another crew - not as a tail gunner but as a ball gunner. A ball gunner is a gunner that is lowered into the bottom of the bomber and sits in a glass ball. Well, he was not

about to be in that position, so he went to see the Chaplain to try to get himself back into his trained position as a tail gunner. He was successful, but this also meant another new crew. His third crew assignment, commanded by Lt. Alter, trained together for three months.

### **Off to Europe**

The crew was privileged with taking the first radar-equipped B24 bomber to England. This crew was picked because the pilot, Lt. Alter, had been a commercial pilot before the war and had training on flying with radar. The first stop before England was Bangor, Maine, where they refueled.

While their plane was on the ground it was a rule that two men had to stand guard. While these men were guarding the plane, the rest of the crew was playing touch football on the air strip. Neil sprained his ankle and was put into the hospital. The doctor there told him he would have to stay a couple of days. The problem was, his crew was to leave the next morning. Neil told a crewmate of his to get his bags and put them on the plane and in the night to come get him and put him on the plane. His friend aided his "escape", and he left with his crew in the morning. He said the whole reason he did not stay in the hospital was because he did not want assigned to another crew.

On their way to England, they made two more brief stops. The first stop was in Greenland, where they were each issued a knife that strapped around the ankle, a forty-five (gun), and binoculars. That evening, the crew had all thrown their personal belongings in a hut and headed to the mess hall for dinner, when over the public announcement system came the message that "everyone in Lt. Alter's crew must report directly back to your hut because it is on fire." All the men ran back from the mess hall to the hut to retrieve their personals. The men were able to save their items, but the hut was completely

destroyed. It seems that there was a leak in the fuel oil stove that had gone unnoticed. They were assigned to a different hut for the night.

Next, Neil's crew flew to Iceland, where they refueled and were on their way the next morning. Finally, they were off toward England to engage in World War II. They landed in Flixton, Bungay, England, six miles from the 446<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group. As soon as they arrived, the brand new B24 bomber was taken from them and replaced with an older aircraft. The B24 bomber with radar was made the head plane for the entire Eighth Air Force.



8th Air Force Emblem

### Movie in the Air

The crew spent three weeks adjusting to the environment. Neil said, "If you stood on the middle runway, you could see hundreds of planes flying over to all different landing areas, it didn't seem possible that I'd be doing that in a few days. It looked more like a movie in the air, only in real life. It was completely, unreal." After the three weeks were over, they were ready to begin their first mission.

The first three missions went smoothly, with no major problems. The fourth mission gave the crew a bit of thrill. The crew's mission was to bomb rail yards in Osnabruck when the number-two engine was knocked out by flak one minute before "bombs away." The plane held formation and was able to drop their bomb load. But the plane could not keep up with the group. The crew was able to fly the plane out of Germany accompanied by P51 fighter plane tucked off the right wing.



In addition, the plane flown on the 4<sup>th</sup> mission had a blown tire. The pilot told the crew that immediately when the plane landed, everyone should jump to the tail of the plane until it stopped. Well, this was great except that Neil was in the tail of the plane so, when they all jumped, they all landed on Neil. When the plane finally slowed to a stop, Neil said that the entire crew flew up and hit the ceiling of the plane. The fourth mission was finally over. Now they must report to the Intelligence office.

Every time a crew landed, they were given their canteen cup, their personals (wallets), and Neil would put back all the money pouches he had drawn out before the flight. The money pouches contained money for Germany, France, and England, so if they were shot down they could possibly buy their way back to a U.S. base. At the Intelligence office, there were two elderly English women who would give each man one or two cheese sandwiches and a double shot of whisky. Then, you were sent in to tell about your mission. The whisky helped you to speak quite freely. On the way out, each man was given a fifth of whisky to relax and forget the day.

## The Shortened Mission

Neil's missions were "relatively routine" for a good while. Not until the twentieth mission, on December 19, 1944 when they were on a mission to Kyllberg, Germany, did the mission become "non-routine." The plane was hit over the target by anti-aircraft flak. Two engines were out on one side. The crew kept asking the crewmember, Bill Lester, to be sure that they were not over water as the plane zigzagged down to 5,000 feet from the target into Belgium. With one engine on fire, the pilot, Lt. George Alter, told the crew they had thirty seconds to get out of the plane while they were over land.

Even though none of the crew had been trained in using a parachute or how to jump, they quickly figured it out. Neil was the first man to jump. The entire crew got out safely before the plane, lovingly known as "What's Cookin Doc," crashed to the ground near Waeregam, Belgium, about 20 miles from Brussels.

Looking back, the crew felt they were lucky to get out since the right wing broke off as it was going down. The crew stopped to see the downed plane resting at the doorsteps of the church in the town where they bailed out. According to a local resident, the plane had demolished the second story of an apartment that was the home of a very old lady. She had not left her room for a number of days, but that day, she had left for some unexplained reason. If she had stayed she would have been killed! No one in the town was hurt despite the 50 caliber bullets going off in all directions. According to the people the crew met around the downed plan, the wing that broke off was found about a mile away from the plane wreckage.

When Neil was in the air parachuting down, he observed, "there was a silence I have never known... you could hear dogs barking on the ground, but you could not see them because the fog was so dense, I could hardly see my own hand in front of my face. I never knew I was going to hit the ground until I hit it. It's probably a good thing, or I would have tensed up and most likely broken a bone."

Neil landed safely on the ground, not knowing where any of the other men were. He sat in a field "that had been fall plowed but not disked, and had frozen and thawed so it was like a mud, which made for a soft landing." He sat along a stone wall and smoked his pack-and-a-half of Camel cigarettes, trying to figure out what to do next. "You don't know what to do.... you're completely lost." He heard some voices coming up the road on the other side of the wall, so he peeked over to see if he could make a judgment of them. They all passed, and shortly afterward an old man, about seventy, walked by. Neil said, "the man was old, smaller than me, and I knew that I had a gun and a knife so if I had to kill him I could." Neil then jumped the man and pulled him to the ground.

The old man said "German?," Neil said, "No." The old man said, "American?," Neil said, "Yes." The old man was obviously relieved, and Neil was surprised to find a willing hand to help. This old man was a member of the French Underground, and also the grounds keeper of a graveyard, which was on the other side of the stone wall Neil landed against. The old man took him in, fed him, and said that a young girl would come for him in the morning that could help him find his crew. Neil had no choice but to trust him.

The next morning, a young girl about thirteen came to get Neil. She asked, "what did you do with your parachute?" Neil said, "I buried it." The girl had a sister who was planning to marry, and she wanted his parachute to make a wedding dress. Parachutes were made of silk at that time so, before moving on, Neil and the young girl went back and dug up his parachute for the girl's sister. She then took him to meet two boys who had a bicycle for him to ride, then to several stops at other houses, and finally on the fourth day he met up with another crewmember.

As the days passed, more crewmembers were located, until finally the entire crew was back together again. They were sent to Brussels, Belgium where the crew searched out the Red Cross for help, but only got coffee and donuts. Next they went to the Salvation Army for help and received clothes, food, haircuts, and a little money to help them get back to base. They finally were able to return to base with no more problems.

Whenever a crew was shot down, if they were able to return, they got two weeks of rest and relaxation. When the crew returned, they were sent to a castle called "Henly on the Thames," where they were served anything they wanted. Neil recalls being able to "sleep whenever, eat whenever and do whatever." All the cigarettes, liquor or beer you wanted, anything. But the welcome back at base after their two wonderful weeks wasn't so great. Because of the lack of supplies, when a crew didn't come back from a mission other soldiers would steal any extra uniform parts, blankets from your bed, pillows, and even your mattress. However, they never would take the men's personals, such as letters, photos, or other items.

### **Bangin' Lulu**

They were given another plane to continue the fight, this one named "Bangin' Lulu." This plane depicted a half-naked lady carrying massive guns painted on the side of the plane. The crew flew another series of safe missions until their 23<sup>rd</sup> mission. Neil was flying as tail gunner at 30,000 feet while wearing his oxygen mask. A piece of flak from shells exploding around him came through the glass beside him and cut the oxygen line.

Neil thought there was a gas leak in the back of the plane, so he was hitting the intercom button. When he tried to talk there was no sound, so the other crew members knew something was wrong. At this altitude in a non-pressurized cabin a person can only live a few minutes without oxygen, so Neil was in big trouble. His crewmate saw the problem right away and knocked Neil down, put a secondary oxygen mask on him and explained what had happened to him.



**Crew of B24 Bomber "Bangin' Lulu" – 1945**

**Back: James Bayus, Robert Brady, Neil Oatney, James Ingersoll, James Cummings, Joe Bombara  
Front: Bill Lester, Warren Stickle, George Alter (Pilot), William LeGrow**

On Neil's 35<sup>th</sup> mission, he was assigned to a different crew. This crew had only flown four missions together in the war so, as far as Neil was concerned, they were just starting out. They went out and were hit over the target. With one engine shot out and alone, because the other planes in the group of twenty had gone ahead, they had to decide what to do quickly. The plane was over water at the time and the navigator was trying to persuade the pilot to head towards the neutral territory of Switzerland. The pilot felt that the plane could make it across the English Channel to an emergency landing strip, even though the plane was rapidly losing altitude.

As the plane came closer and closer to the landing strip, the pilot told the crew to get into a "ditching" position. The plane just made it onto the landing strip, but Neil recalls, "If my hand would have been outside the plane I could have touched the water." After landing, Neil was told that the pilot got completely chewed out by the navigator for not taking his coordinates for Switzerland. Neil said that if they had landed in Switzerland, they would not have been allowed to fly in the war anymore, because after you land in a neutral country you are not allowed to fly over it again, as a rule.

That was Neil's last mission with the Eighth Air Force. The last crew he served with was all killed four days later, when another plane cut their plane in half. Neil was one of a very few at this point in the war to have completed all 35 missions. He, with the rest of Lt. Alter's crew, was asked to take an old B24 bomber on a Bonds Tour around the U. S. for one year. The crew talked about it and decided against it. They all boarded the "Queen Lizzy," as they fondly called the Queen Elizabeth, and sailed back to the States.

### **The Trip Home**

Neil was given the opportunity to fly back to the States instead, but even though he could have been home much sooner, he didn't want to get in another plane unless he had to. Everyone else on the ship were amputees or mental patients from the war. At meal times, the crew helped the others to eat and do other things. They docked in New Jersey and were to go to Camp Kilmer, but the truck the crew was on stopped at a red light and the entire crew jumped off at a bar. A couple of hours later, the driver came back around and picked the men up and proceeded on to Camp Kilmer. At Kilmer, there was a crowd of people and a huge celebration underway, with food, music, and festivities for all the returning men.

A few months later, Neil was sent back to Miami Beach, Florida for one month of rest and relaxation, just like during the war - only this time his wife was allowed to be with him. During this month he earned his GED, (high school diploma). They stayed in nice hotels and were taken around for free by buses. Later, Neil transferred to Texas where he became an instructor for fighter pilots.

On September 28, 1945, Neil was discharged from Ellington Field, Texas. Soon after discharge, Neil met a man from Michigan and hitched a ride back to Lancaster, Ohio where his family was waiting for him. Neil and Ilene raised two sons and a daughter. Neil passed away on March 9, 2008.