

War Era Story Project 2012

Submitted by: Eugene V. Yarger
Current home town: Bellville, Ohio
Age: Not given

Military Memories for 27 May 1996

Eugene Yarger's 29-year military career started with enlistment in the U.S. Army Air Corps in September, 1942. Most of his training was in Texas, California and New Mexico. The early 25-mile training hikes always seemed to have the pace set by guys at least 6'8". He had a very strong desire to be a pilot and worked hard to make it happen.

While he was training in Canyon, Texas, Gloria came down to join him. They were married in May, 1943. She followed him throughout his training until he was sent overseas. Gloria busied herself teaching Bible School, babysitting and waitressing. They made many lasting friendships through the hardships of the training and frequent moving.

Soon Gene was classified for flight training to graduate next year. He especially remembers an auxiliary field (actually a bumpy hay field) near the primary flight school field where his instructor told him to land. The instructor got out and told him to take the plane up, circle, and land by himself. Not sure before that he was ready, he'll never forget that 15 minutes or the feeling. In May of '44, he received his wings and 2nd lieutenant commission.

At Hobbs, New Mexico, Gene finally got to get in a B-17. "There's no way one person can read all those instruments," he said. But training went well. At Lincoln, Nebraska, as a 1st pilot, he picked up his assigned crew on their way to Dyersburg, Tennessee. They became very close and still correspond.

Gloria was pregnant and her December 4 due date was approaching. However, Gene was ordered shipped out from Tennessee on December 2 to Boston to go on to England. Gene and Gloria were not able to communicate at all after he left Tennessee. Gene left Boston on the troop carrier *U.S.S. America* on December 12 - the very day that his son, David Eugene, was born. Gene and Gloria were not able to get any messages through to each other until February.

At Stone on Trent, England, Gene was assigned to Knetishall, Station 136. He was part of the 561st Bomb Squadron of the 388th Bomb Group. In the 561st, he flew 5 missions as a wing man and 1 mission as an element leader. He was then assigned to the 562nd as deputy lead, flying the last of the 30 missions of his tour in April, 1945, over Ingolstadt, Germany.

Some memorable missions included one in February, 1945, during the Battle of the Bulge. On the way to his target at Cottbus, Germany, on the Polish border, one of his four engines quit because of a mechanical problem. A second engine quit over the target. Being deep in enemy territory, this was a definite handicap. After getting in formation at the rally point, the B-17 directly above him was shot

down and was later reported to have been his plane. He dropped out of formation because of lack of power, and he was slowly losing altitude. The navigator quickly suggested Sweden as an emergency landing site. Gene said, "If we lose another engine, I'll consider it." The plane had only 1,000 feet of altitude (down from a usual bombing altitude of about 28,000 feet) left when they crossed the front lines. They landed at a small field in Florennes, Belgium. As they landed, a third engine quit for lack of fuel. Their radio was too weak to get a message through to their home base. After repairs were made and they flew back to home base three days later, the crew found their personal effects were being packed up to send home. They had been listed as "Missing in action - went down over target."

In April, 1945, his plane was hit by a group of German fighters. Some said that Germany didn't have any fighters left by this time. Not true! Gene's top turret gunner was credited with downing both a twin engine ME 262 and an FW 190. The enemy fighters would even dive through the tight American bomber formations.

The worst problem near the end of the war was anti-aircraft fire. After one mission, Gene's ground crew counted 300 holes in his B-17. On another mission, a live round came up through the navigator's mat and exploded, breaking out the window by Gene and stopping his engine #2.

Gene was also part of the Amsterdam food drop. Because the Dutch flooded their lands to keep the Germans from coming in, they were starving. When a truce was signed, Gene flew the first plane in with food. His plane was the guinea pig, flying low for about 30 minutes to see if anyone would shoot. It was safe so he dropped the food cargo and called in the other planes. What a sight to see people on the roof tops waving American flags in appreciation!

He also flew Victory Missions at the end of the war. In these missions, the B-17s took up the ground support personnel. The planes flew in formation over the war zones at an altitude of only 1 or 2,000 feet so these servicemen could see the effects of their teamwork.

After the war, he could have stayed on to help map and photograph Europe. He wanted to see his family, though, and he came home to Ohio.

In May, 1948, he joined the newly formed Ohio National Guard. From 1948 to 1963, he flew C-47s, a multi-engine cargo plane, with the Mansfield unit. He was part of the Berlin call up in 1961-62. In 1963 he moved to the Clinton County Air Guard unit and flew the KC-97, a tanker plane for refueling fighter planes in flight. Later he moved to the jet engine air refueler, the KC-135. The Clinton County refueling group moved to Rickenbacher Air Force Base in Columbus in 1971. In May, 1972, Eugene Yarger retired with the maximum 28 years commissioned service as a Lieutenant Colonel.