

The combat stories of **WALTER R. SAWYER**

Dates in Service: October 22, 1942 – ?
Branch of Service: Air Force
Unit: 15th Air Force
Location: Italy
Highest Rank: Sergeant

Walter Sawyer recalls being a top turret gunner in a B-17 flying missions over Germany, and preparing the bombs to be dropped over the targets.

These stories were compiled by an interviewer, who prefers to remain anonymous, and goes by the nickname 'Kilroy Was Here.' These stories are posted through a partnership between 'Kilroy Was Here' and the Witness to War Foundation. Permission to use any of these materials must be granted by 'Kilroy Was Here,' which can be obtained through the Witness to War Foundation.



I was born in Shiloh, North Carolina in 1916 and have seen more changes in planes than most today. I still remember as a boy working out in the field and hearing an old biplane off in the distance, watching as it came into view until it disappeared out of sight. I would go home in the evening after working all day in the fields, telling my dad about watching it fly over and how one day I too would learn to fly. Each time dad would tell me he didn't want me flying in no plane and had even offered me money to get it out of my mind.

After spending a year in the Virginia National Guard in 1938 I was discharged and three years later on October 22, 1942, I decided to enlist in the Army. Twelve days after I left home for my basic training, my mother passed away. After attending basic training at a base near Birmingham, Alabama, I was sent to Nashville where I was given my classification as to where I would be going next. After passing a number of tests, I was off to fulfill my lifelong dream of learning to fly.

My first stop was in Helena, Arkansas, where I trained in PT 19s and PT 23s. On my first solo flight, my instructor said to me, "Now go ahead and kill yourself." After six months of training and having 187 hours of solo flying, I was sent on to Greenville, South Carolina to finish my training.

One of the first things we were given was a checklist that we referred to as our laundry list. It was



no more than a pre flight list you went over before taking off. You were to learn it and keep it on you at all times. Of course, we all said it was going to be the first thing we tossed. For the following two months, I trained in a BT-13, and it was during those two months that World War II really heated up. A week later we were advised that pilot training was ending and that we would be sent to different schools. Boy, you talk about being mad, I was mad.

From there, I was sent to a base in Florida where I was placed with a B17 crew as their flight engineer and top turret gunner. Our bombardier was anything but that, that is to say he couldn't hit a barn, and the only thing he managed to hit was some old man's cow in a field that wasn't even near the target. It was because of him that we had to fly more bombing training runs than any other crew.

One day, while some of the crews were flying a training mission firing their 50 cal machineguns at targets, one of our guns got too hot and jammed. When the round finally went off, the round passed through a house and hit their bathtub. To make a long story short, after finishing there, our crew was sent to two other schools before being sent overseas.

After being assigned as a replacement crew, we made the trip over on a ship along with a number of other replacement crews. We landed in North Africa where we spent two weeks before being sent on to



Foggia, Italy and it was here that I flew 12 missions.

Our pilot was a guy from Texas by the name of Emerson and he was the one who named our plane “Pistol Packin Mama”. The nose art was a woman wearing a cowboy hat, boots, dressed in very little with two guns on her hips. Just before our first mission, the base chaplain came out and saw us as a group. At the end of the service we were given the opportunity to except God. His last words were, “in 30 minutes you will be looking for me, but he will be looking for you.” The guy beside you may not return and be here tomorrow. That really made me start thinking.

That day had started at six in the morning, when they came around and woke us. By seven I had been to the mess hall and had eaten before making my way to the briefing. As the flight chief, I stood behind the pilot where I could watch the air speed as we made our way down the runway, all the while telling him, speed 80, then 100 and so on until it reached 155. The others sat just behind the radio room with their backs to the wall. Once in the air, the crew made their way to their gun post.

Our first mission was flying support for the Anzio landing and was told it would be a milk run, but it turned out to be anything but that. As we neared the target area, anti aircraft fire and flak was so bad I didn’t know if we were going to make it through at all. After returning to base, we made our way over to the



debriefing and as we waited our turn, each of us was given a shot of whisky. They asked questions about anti-aircraft fire, flak, fighters, and if you saw a plane go down and if so, could you see any chutes.

On the base all the crews slept together. In our tent two of the boys were from the North and the other three were from the South, so every night we refought the civil war. Just in fun.

As time went on, our crew was on call non-stop but this other crew was to fly the mission. Their plane was down being worked on so they used our plane. When it came time for the group to return, we learned that our plane had been shot down with the crew.

On a mission to Berlin we passed over this forest that was full of anti-aircraft guns, so on the return flight our pilot advised the navigator to plot a course that wouldn't take us over it. Needless to say, he failed and our number three engine was hit which was also the engine that supplied the power to our suits that kept us warm. The flak was worse and a lot of planes went down. That was the last mission that guy flew or at least with us. When it came time to patch up the plane, everyone helped out. Tin cans were saved at the chow hall and that was what we used to patch the bullet and small holes.

One of our waist gunners was from Tennessee and the other boy was from New York, who had a bad habit closing his gun port window while on a mission. He had



said he done it because of the cold. The other boy had told him a number of times not to do it. Well, he did it again and the Tennessee boy looked at him and said, “If I tell you one more time, I’m going to open that window in a way you’re gonna wish I hadn’t. He was known to carry a .45 under his suit.

For the target over Bitsburg, Germany I had to fly in the ball turret. It was so cramped that you didn’t have the room to wear a chute and if the plane was hit and went down, you hoped that the ball wasn’t jammed and you had time to get back up in the plane, put your chute on and bail out. From the ball turret, all you could see was the bottom of the plane. It was on one of these missions to Germany that I saw a ME 262 come through our group and even get shot at as it passed by. I never came close to hitting it. Most of the time, we had the ME 109s and 190s to deal with, and I can’t recall any missions that we didn’t have to fly through flak.

As the flight engineer, it was my duty to arm the bombs before they were dropped. I would have to go down into the bomb bay and make my way down the catwalk, pulling the bomb pins as I made my way down. There wasn’t a lot of room, so I had to take my chute off before going down there. I would keep each pin in my pocket as I pulled it. After arming the bombs, I would then take the pins to the pilot and hand them to him. That was to let him know the bombs were armed and that I was out of the bomb bay and it was safe to open



the doors to the bomb bay. Well, one day just as I pulled the last pin and turned around, the bomb bay doors opened. As they opened, I was almost sucked out and to keep from being sucked out, I had to jam both of my knees against the bombs as I made my way down the catwalk until I got out of there. As I handed him the pins, I had a few words for him.

As we got airborne, the radio operator would sometimes tune in some music from a station for us to hear. One day they played ‘The Great Specked Bird.’ I have to say, it got to me and had me really homesick.

On one mission a round passed through my turret and hit the ammo can next to my head. It scared me so bad; I jumped down and ran towards the radio room. Just as I got to the doorway I stopped and said to myself, “I don’t think they can hit the same place twice.” After checking the box out, I found the round stuck in the side of the box.