

Title:

Bombers of the Second World War

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Summary:

The life of a second world war bomber pilot was probably the most dangerous of all the armed forces of the second world war. Less than 50% survived their tour; each tour consisted of roughly 25 operations or raids with the chances of survival for each raid being 96%. That is what the commanders always told the crew before a raid to keep up morale. But if you compound 96% over 25 times, the survival rate was closer to 50%.

Keywords:

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Article Body:

The Lancaster is probably the most famous of all the bombers of the second world war. According to Capt. Donald Macintosh (ex-second world war bomber pilot, and author) it was a lot smoother to fly than the Wellington; the experience of which was close to that of a fighter plane (with no payload, of course).

Survival rates on bombers.

The life of a second world war bomber pilot was probably the most dangerous of all the armed forces of the second world war. Less than 50% survived their tour; each tour consisted of roughly 25 operations or raids with the chances of survival for each raid being 96%. That is what the commanders always told the crew before a raid to keep up morale. But if you compound 96% over 25 times, the survival rate was closer to 50%. When Donald looked at his Florida academy group photograph after the war, he counted around half of those still alive.

WHAT KILLED BOMBER CREWS?

Training

Enemy fighter planes

Lack of rear radar (called Monica: only introduced later in the war)

An incompetent navigator

An incompetent rear gunner

Flak

Poor attitude

Bad luck

TRAINING - Rushed training caused a few deaths. President Roosevelt wanted to train pilots within 2 years which would be woefully short in peacetime, but due to the high chop rate they had no choice. Donald sometimes saw burnt-out bombers on the runway from fatal mistakes made by cadets. A fairly experienced New Zealand pilot and his crew died in a ball of flames in the air during training. They speculated it was because one of the crew members had smoked during the flight.

Also, the bombers used in training were not maintained properly, if at all. All the good maintenance staff were looking after the bombers flying real operations. This could cause engines to fail, which killed a few crew members.

In fact, Donald had several very near misses himself in just such scenarios. The excerpt: "The Landing" from his book is just one example of inexperience nearly killing him. "Russian Mechanics" is another; the Russians didn't have the competence or equipment to maintain planes as Donald found out.

ENEMY FIGHTER PLANES - Fighter planes out-gunned and could out-maneuver bombers. The typical fighter tactic was to dive under the bomber and swing around and up, shooting up at the undercarriage. This wasn't without total risk to the fighter, as the explosion of the payload could also destroy the fighter if he was too close. Donald experienced a Focke Wulf 190 first-hand using just this tactic.

The best defence was the cork-screw dive. This meant diving 45 degrees to the left, then 45 degrees to the right and then fly back upwards 45 degrees left. The odds though were still against you. At night time, if an enemy fighter was detected soon enough, the cork-screw dive was very effective at shaking them off. .

LACK OF REAR RADAR - Rear radar, or Monica as it was called, saved countless bomber crew's lives. This enabled the crew to detect an enemy fighter sneaking up behind very early. The cork-screw dive maneuver was then quite effective. Using Monica, during night-time raids especially, allowed the bombers to easily shake off enemy fighter planes. Monica saved Donald's life when it was introduced. It was a pity that his Squadron Leader also didn't have it when he battled a German ace. See "Squadron Leader" for this story.

AN INCOMPETENT NAVIGATOR - According to Donald, the navigator was absolutely crucial to survival. If you got lost over enemy territory, you had had it. Not only could you accidentally fly over enemy fighter bases or flak installations, but your fuel would run out. Donald's bomber crew experienced their fuel running out twice, once in training and once over Russia.

AN INCOMPETENT REAR GUNNER - Although, the rear gunner was not as important as the navigator, he needed to be very alert for detecting enemy fighter planes coming in from behind. He would call out the ranges and shout out the exact time when the pilot should cork-screw. The actual gunfire was usually inadequate to bring down the fighters; it distracted them more than anything else.

FLAK - At the end of the war flak was largely ineffective. This was because the German flak crews were the old men or inexperienced young boys who weren't trained well enough to operate them properly. Of course, you could be exceedingly unlucky. If a professional flak crew were shooting at you, then you would be in trouble. When Donald was carrying out a raid over Holland, he flew over German Naval Gunners who shot down the plane three behind him, killing all but three of her crew.

POOR ATTITUDE - Those pilots and crew who didn't put everything into it, who didn't really want to be there, were often the ones who got what they wished for. Donald tells of an Australian pilot Tyrell, who had an apathetic attitude always asking when his leave was etc. He died on his first mission over Stuttgart.

Another important factor was team work amongst the crew members. Some crews couldn't get along with each other. They constantly argued, even disobeying orders. Unsurprisingly, this raised the probability of not making it over a raid.

Nervous disorders were a common problem with crew members who were nearing the end of their active duty. In fact, according to Donald, at this stage of their careers just about everybody had some sort of nervous disorder, whether it was a nervous tic or the hand shaking when lifting up a glass or tea cup. It was far worse with bomb-aimers. They saw everything below: flak exploding just beneath them etc. Bomb aimers were usually relieved earlier of their duties than most since after a while they would crack up. "The Mad Gunner" is a short story of a bomb-aimer who had done around 70 raids and had completely lost it. He was allowed to continue because he loved doing it and also the fact that he was very good at his job.

BAD LUCK - A lucky flak shot, or something critical overlooked in maintenance was what usually happened. When Donald had to choose his bomb-aimer, he had a choice between Pete or his friend, George. They flipped a coin and Pete became his bomb-aimer and lived; George, however, never made it to the end of the war.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Capt. Donald Macintosh flew over 40 raids from D day until May 1945, including:

- 3 attacks on battleship "Tirpitz" (sunk) including flight to Russia;
- 1 destroyer, Gdynia harbour, night; prob sunk;
- 2 heavy gun emplacements;
- 3 dams;
- 2 oil refineries;
- 4 viaducts;
- 3 bridges;
- 3 submarine pens;
- 1 ammo dump;
- 2 flying bomb sites;
- 2 cities;

Finally, Hitler's home at Berchtesgaden, April 25th.

After the war he flew for another 30 years in civil flying some of which was almost as lethal as wartime. Based in the Bahamas, he flew Yorks and Lancastrians for British South American Airways and then went on to fly the world's first passenger jet, Comet 1, to Africa and the Far East.