

# A gunner's tale

**Drafted by the Army in 1942,** Sgt. Robert Sweatt left the service after serving a four-year tour of duty. He completed his degree in geology at the University of Houston in 1952. After 26 years teaching, he retired and moved to his Burton, Texas, ranch in 1981.



*The sole survivor of his crew, Robert Sweatt's courage and determination were testaments to his crew and all others who flew in the face of danger*

by 2nd Lt. Chuck Widener  
opening photo by Master Sgt. Efrain Gonzalez

**W**hen the shooting started, he was only expected to survive about 17 seconds.

At least that's what airmen believed was the average life expectancy of an aerial gunner in combat. More than 12,000 B-24 Liberators and B-17 Flying Fortresses were lost during World War II — a war that claimed the lives of more than 71,000 enlisted aircrew members.

He escaped near-certain death, but some 60 years later Robert Sweatt still harbors many haunting memories and feelings of his crew members — all dead from a single attack over France.

In all, the former sergeant and aerial gunner aboard the B-24 during World War II survived 16 missions over Europe before stepping into "Trouble," the name of his bomber on Jan. 7, 1944.

"It was one crisis after another," he said. "You just never knew what was going to happen on the next mission."

## **The last mission**

Sergeant Sweatt recalled the details of that January mission along with his three-month evasion of the Gestapo with vivid clarity. The 81-year-old rancher and retired schoolteacher remembers every detail of that tragic day as if he's lived it more than once.

Drafted into the Army in 1942, he was on his way to becoming a cook in the infantry. But the opportunity to fly, collect flight pay and “enjoy” faster promotion rates were all big factors that appealed to him during a time when the nation was coming out of the Great Depression.

One year later, the gunner found himself flying in B-24 formations surrounded by heavy flak during bombing missions over Germany. From being fired on by enemy fighters to crash landing on the English coast, he and his crew had experienced it all in 16 missions. They survived the loss of three aircraft during bombing missions in Germany, Africa and Portugal. But the 17th mission proved to be the last the gunner and his 10 fellow crew members would fly.

His Liberator was the lead aircraft for the group of B-24s flying the mission against a German chemical plant in Ludwigshafen, Germany. Originally, the crew wasn't scheduled to fly.

“We were supposed to be on ‘R and R’ [rest and relaxation] in Scotland,” he said.

**“Trouble” (below) awaits its next mission** while sitting at a base in England. The plane flew its last mission January 7, 1944, after completing a bombing mission against a chemical plant in Ludwigshafen, Germany. A 1943 photograph (below right) shows Sergeant Sweatt proudly displaying his jacket. The gunner was on his way to becoming a cook in the infantry until he heard a pilot in front of the mess hall shouting out for potential recruits to become aerial gunners.

courtesy photo



But the crew was called in by command pilot Maj. Kenneth Caldwell, who wanted to lead the group on the mission.

Instead of enjoying some much needed time off, the “Trouble” crew found themselves trailing hundreds of B-17 Flying Fortresses to the target.

“The sky looked like it was filled with blackbirds,” Sergeant Sweatt said.

During the approach to the target and for the next 15 minutes, anti-aircraft shells from the German 88 mm cannons were bursting all around the formation.

“The sky was black,” he said.

### Off course

As “Trouble” dropped its bombs and broke from the target, Major Caldwell asked for a heading back to England. Capt. David Wilhite, the other pilot, quickly informed the major that the crew had orders to follow the formation of B-17s back to base for cover, but Major Caldwell demanded his group of 23 B-24s return to base on its own — a decision he would not live long enough to regret making.

As the pilots waited for new directions, Sergeant Sweatt pulled out a candy bar. To his disappointment, it was frozen solid from the 40 below temperatures.

Suddenly the crew heard the navigator yell, “Make a 90 degree turn! We’re 100 miles off course.” The

courtesy photo



group of bombers had drifted into France and were heading into German occupied Paris. Immediately following the navigator's order, one of the gunners cried out, “Enemy fighters, 12 o'clock!”

Sergeant Sweatt watched in horror as the ball turret gunner was shot up in front of him by German ace Egon Mayer. He learned the identity of their attacker on a trip to Germany many years after the war. The German pilot was flying a Focke-Wulf Fw-190 and was credited with creating the deadly head-on attacks against the bombers.

The pilots were shot and killed instantly and had slumped over the controls, sending the plane into a spin. Bullets from the enemy fighter also penetrated the B-24's oxygen tanks and shot off the right wing tip.

Making his way to the waist window, Sergeant Sweatt reached for a parachute with his left arm. To his surprise, his arm had been hit by bullets and was useless. As the B-24 bomber began spinning out of control, the gunner lunged for a parachute a second time with his right arm. Successful, he slung it across his back as he was thrown against the frame of the aircraft.

“I felt like I was 500 pounds,” he said. “I was trapped.”

### Escaping death

As he and other members of the crew who survived the initial attack helplessly struggled to exit the falling plane, an explosion ripped the B-24 in two — knocking him unconscious and launching him into the sky.

“It just got deathly quiet,” he said.

He awoke while falling from about 15,000 feet in the sky. His face was riddled with more than 100 pieces of flak and metal shavings; he couldn't see.

“I couldn't tell if I was going up or down,” he said. “I reached up to feel my face and realized the explo-

courtesy photo



**The wife and two daughters of Kibler Duplant**, the elderly Frenchman who brought Sergeant Sweatt home after his plane was shot down, provided vital medical attention to his shrapnel and bullet wounds.

sion yanked my oxygen mask across my face.”

After yanking the mask off his face, he saw pieces of the bomber falling with him.

“It was like a junkyard,” he said.

The most horrible sight was watching one of his crewmates falling without a parachute.

“I couldn't help him,” he said with regret as if still trying to figure out a way to save his friend. “I've tried to forget that all these years, and I can't.”

Taking one swipe at his ripcord, Sergeant Sweatt realized the three pairs of gloves he was wearing prevented him from gripping anything.

“I know I was scared,” he said. “I think I was frightened to the point I was calm. I pulled my gloves off with my teeth and then pulled the chute open.”

### Escaping capture

The airman then began thinking about evading capture, but those plans were crippled when he severely sprained his ankle as he landed on the frozen ground of Chartres, a town south of Paris. Regaining the use of his left arm, he immediately started digging a hole to bury his chute. The ground was so hard it ripped his fingernails from the quick.

"I said the heck with this and just ran," he said. The sergeant quickly shed his fleece coat, ripped off his boots and started hobbling away. About 400 yards from the crash site, he dove into a shock of feed. With Frenchmen all around watching, he feared the worst.

As the Germans approached the site, he made eye contact with an elderly Frenchman. Realizing he'd surely be captured hiding there, he stepped out and began acting like the locals. His flesh looked dirty, and his clothes were torn and tattered. Sure that he'd be noticed, he looked at the elderly Frenchman again with a sense of help. Kibler Duplant looked back at the battered airman. Without hesitation, they began moving a large piece of debris toward the crash site like the other townspeople. They

passed by a few German soldiers, and when the enemy wasn't looking, he crawled into a small briar patch and covered himself with leaves on the frozen ground.

Soon, the echoing sound of dogs barking filled the air. The exhausted airman lay motionless, again preparing for capture. But he was never "sniffed out."

"The good Lord was with me," he said.

Drifting in and out of consciousness, Sergeant Sweatt hid there until nightfall when Monsieur Duplant took him to his house aboard a horse-drawn cart.

The injured and exhausted sergeant slept for two days while the French family took care of him. As the Germans' search intensified, the family became more nervous and feared what might happen if they were caught harboring the American.

After staying with the family for a week, he was shuffled through three other French handlers before arriving in Paris where he was introduced to three boys whom he lived with in a hotel for another three weeks.

Sergeant Sweatt was truly living among the locals as he went to movies, prize fights and local events. In some aspects, he was enjoying himself and a some-

what carefree lifestyle. The boys he was living with sold ration coupons, so food was always available.

"I was living high on the hog," he said.

### Meeting 'resistance'

But the time to plan his escape drew closer. In classic "mobster-style," Sergeant Sweatt was taken deeper into Paris where at one point he stepped into a car with a mysterious man.

"I didn't know what was going on. We drove about a block, and he started asking me a bunch of questions," he said. "Then we went into a café. He asked what base I was from, what the name of our pilot was, what our mission was, and what day I was shot down. Then he looked at me and said, 'I'm going to go check on this. If it's not right you'll be dead.' Now that made the hair stand up on the back of my neck."

The man returned and later introduced himself as "Mr. Ivan." Sergeant Sweatt learned the man's real name 27 years later — Marcel Cola was a double-agent for the Canadian forces. He was believed to be an executive for Ford Motor Co. in France. He worked closely with French-Canadian Raymond LaBrosse, who was a sergeant in Canada's Second Division Signals Regiment. Sergeant LaBrosse had organized a secret escape network, code-named "Shelburne," with the help of the French Resistance.

Before he knew it, Sergeant Sweatt found himself living with a mechanic and his wife.

"Right across the street from where I was staying were thousands of Germans doing calisthenics every morning," he said. "I was also there when a group of B-17s bombed Paris. You could hear the machine guns everywhere, and the flak was falling like hail."

After about two weeks, Agent Cola took the airman to the railroad station to escape, but the American bombs kept the trains from moving. On the trip back, they were stopped by the Gestapo.

"One guy stuck his flashlight and machine gun in my face. I just sat there while Marcel showed him our fake IDs. He told them I was a deaf-mute."

### Final journey

A week later, Sergeant Sweatt returned to the train station. This time the trains were running.

"I was told to follow a little boy with a suitcase. They told me to stay with him and not to lose him," he said. He was soon joined by about 10 airmen also included in the escape plan.

The airmen were taken to Plouha, a town on the coast of Brittany, as part of the operation. But their hopes of returning home were again interrupted when the train was stopped and searched by the Gestapo.

"The plan was for me to stab the [Gestapo] when the other guys grabbed them," Sergeant Sweatt said. "Just imagine the stress. I'd never killed anyone."

And he never had to. The Gestapo never made it to their railcar, and that evening they arrived in Plouha and were taken to houses in and around the town. These "hiding places" were the last stop before their final rendezvous.

The next evening, a British Broadcasting Corp. message sounded.

"Bonjour tout le monde à la maison d'Alphonse."

The message meant that a British navy motor gun boat was on its way to nearby Bonaparte Beach to pick them up. Receiving their cue, Sergeant Sweatt and the other airmen slipped in small groups through the woods to "Maison d'Alphonse," or House of Alphonse. They were told about the many people who risked their lives getting them this far. They were also told that the most dangerous part of their journey was in the next mile they'd trek to get to the beach.

Enemy sentries and patrols were scattered throughout the area. Mines along the path were marked with pieces of cloth. They were also expected to kill any enemy soldier they encountered by any means necessary, but it had to be done quickly and quietly.

Slipping through the darkness past the patrols and enemy mines, Sergeant Sweatt and the others came to the last obstacle between them and the gun boat — a 250-foot cliff.

"We had to stand on each other's shoulders to get down," he said. "Nothing was going to stop us at that point."

With the help of the British navy, Canadian forces and French Resistance, the airmen escaped. In all, the multi-national secret escape network helped more than 300 Allied airmen and secret agents escape Nazi-held territory. Sergeant Sweatt became one of those rescued airmen when he reunited with his squadron in March 1944 — two-and-a-half months after he was shot down.

"It was just one crisis after another," he said a second time. "You just always thought you'd make it back."

And he did, despite the fact he was only expected to survive for 17 seconds. ☺

Learn more about escape

*Had it not been for Sgt. Raymond LaBrosse and the secret operation known as "Shelburne," Sergeant Sweatt and several other airmen might not have escaped the Gestapo. Read the details of this underground operation in a related story titled "Under the Nose of the Gestapo" at [www.af.mil/news/airman/0204/gestapo.html](http://www.af.mil/news/airman/0204/gestapo.html).*

**A map shows the routes of the Jan. 7, 1944, bombing mission** against a chemical plant and return flights for six groups of B-24 Liberators. Shortly after departing for the mission, two of the groups turned back and returned home after their missions were canceled. After successfully bombing the target in Ludwigshafen, the 389th Bombardment Group veered off course only to find themselves at the mercy of enemy fighters just outside Paris. The surviving B-24s were hit by flak off the coast as they made their way back to the United Kingdom.

courtesy graphic

