

Up In The Air

Hi, my name is Captain Mark Stepelton. I joined the US Army Air Forces as a Second Lieutenant on May 24, 1943. My first mission during World War II was to protect the B-17 from the German Luftwaffe, which is the German Air Force. I flew the P-51 Mustang which I think is one of the best planes in World War II. On my first mission, I got a kill (which is if you down an airplane). Later, I learned how to dive bomb which was one of the hardest maneuvers to master. When we took off from the airfield my squadron lined up behind me in a V shape. We started heading towards our target. We flew to 1600 feet and out of nowhere we saw a German Luftwaffe. He didn't know we were behind him. We all took fire but he retreated into a cloud. We continued and did not meet anyone else until we got close to the target.

We had many more missions, most were successful. The morning of February 19th, 1944 my commander told us that we better get a good night's sleep because that night we would have to escort the B-17 for Operation Argument. That night we prepared our planes. The B-17s took off and shortly after, we took up stations beside them. When we were all in formation, there were about 3,500 bombers in the air. We started fighting across the North Sea to Leipzig and its four factories. The mission was not only to destroy the factories that produced aircraft and ball-bearing production plants but also to take down the German Luftwaffe once and for all. It took us half of the night to cross the sea. Eventually, we got to our target. We started to circle the city. There were supposed to be pathfinders (planes that go before the bombers and set flares to mark the target) already there, but they were nowhere to be seen. Soon the Luftwaffe advanced!

They started firing at us. It was chaos, but I got one kill! Then a bullet hit a B-17 fuel tank and exploded! I couldn't see a thing; I was flying blind! I heard a BOOM next to me (later I learned it was two bombers colliding). I started to pull up to get out of the fog. When I did I saw 20 or so Pathfinders flying toward us. They got underneath us and dropped red and green flares that the Germans called Christmas trees. We dropped into position, we were being rained on by enemy fire! Bombs away! The B-17s that I was protecting dropped their bombs. We destroyed most of the factory but unfortunately due to the constant fire from enemy fighters, we also hit a lot of the town. The next six days it would be more of the same. We would head out the next day or night. This is one of the things that made Operation Overlord, otherwise known as D-Day, possible.

On June 5th, 1944 we were told that our P-51s were temporarily grounded. The ground crew started to paint our planes' wings with white stripes that would be later known as D-Day stripes. We were then called in for a briefing. We were told that we would escort B-17 to Nazi-controlled beaches along the Normandy coast in France. Then we were to keep the German Luftwaffe from getting to the beach. I was extremely excited! They told us to get sleep, so I went to bed. I was too nervous to sleep. An officer came and woke us up at 2:00 am. We were told to get ready and then report to our planes. I walked to my P-51 and was told to start my preflight checks. After that, my crew chief patted me on the back and said "Take care of yourself."

We took off and I knew that this might be the last time I saw this airfield. We started towards Normandy and reached it around 6:30 am. Soon we heard bangs and explosions. The bombers we were escorting, dropped their bombs on nearby trains and vehicles. Once they left, we started to look for German Luftwaffe planes. We fought as hard as we could. I lost one of my

wingmen in the fighting, but the men below us had it much harder. I felt bad being up here while they were fighting down there. We went back once to refuel and reload. When we went out we were told to give “area support”. We located a train heading to the beach. We flew near the train then circled back around and opened fire. We kept patrolling for a few hours. Then we headed back to our base. I was so exhausted that my crew chief had to help me out of my cockpit. I collapsed on my bed and slept, but what I didn’t know at the time was German General Alfred Jodl had surrendered at Reims, France.

This story is based on Captain Mark Stepelton and his brave actions during the war. Afterward, he served in the Air Force in my hometown of Colorado Springs.

I think what we learned from Operation Overlord is patience, organization, and cooperation. Some of the leaders knew that an invasion was essential to win the war years before. They disagreed about launching D-day sooner and had to wait patiently until the agreed-upon time. The second thing we learned is organization. The operation was so well executed with ships, B-17s, and paratroopers all accomplishing their specific missions at different times and places and working together for a common goal. Many countries were involved in Operation Overlord: United Kingdom, Canada, The United States, Australia, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France, Greece, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway and Poland. It took a great amount of cooperation for all these countries to work together to make Operation Overlord a success.

When thinking about how this battle affects me today, I realize that we take our freedom for granted. Do you ever think that if we weren’t free we would have to think before we say anything about the government because it might be illegal? I can be friends with whomever I want, I can choose which church I go to, and I can grow up to be what I want. It’s easy to take

these things for granted because I've always had them, but I realize it's because these men risked their lives for our freedom, and we still feel their sacrifice today!

D-Day and The Normandy Campaign. The national WW2 museum

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Captain Stepelton, Mark. Normandy Invasion with Captain Mark Stepelton. To Fly And Flight. [Normandy Invasion with Captain Mark Stepelton - Bud Anderson: To Fly and Fight](#)