Robert S. Littrell

A military history

He was 19 when he joined on December 4, 1940 as a private. Back then it was called the U.S. Army Air Forces (AAF). He didn't know World War II was just a year away, but after graduating from Chamberlain-Hunt Military Academy in Port Gibson, Mississippi, Robert R. Littrell (Bobby) decided that, I'd rather "put in my 2 cents worth instead of going to college."

During his military academy days, his family lived in New Orleans, and his youngest sister Virginia remembered Bobby would catch a ride on a freight train to come visit. His mother, Majorie Senter Littrell, was divorced from his father. She lived at 2423 General Taylor Street in New Orleans. His two sisters, Virginia and Nancy, were not far away at 2405 Prytania Street. At the time of Bobby's enlistment, Virginia was 16 and Nancy almost 18. They hoped to see their brother on his first furlough home on December 8, 1941. But after news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7th, they knew better than to expect him.

Bobby hoped to become a pilot, but he was washed out due to his poor eyesight. He still wanted to fly, so he became a radio operator on a heavy bomber, the B-17, known as the Flying Fortress. His training had taken him all over the country, from MacDill Field at Tampa, Florida, Jefferson Barracks at Lemay, Missouri, Camp Lowry in Denver, Colorado, and Geiger Field at Spokane, Washington. From there it was on to Richard E. Byrd Field at Richmond, Virginia where he arrived on May 27, 1942. In addition to being the bomber's radio operator, Bobby was trained as a waist gunner and performed that duty during combat.

He was assigned to the 301st Bomb Group, a group of B-17 bombers comprised of several squadrons. His was the 353rd Bomb Squadron. Usually a bomb group consisted of 28 planes, with 7 bombers in each of 4 squadrons. In July-August 1942, the 301st was moved to England to be part of the Eighth Air Force.

During his tour in England, Bobby did have some time to explore London. He said he was just "taking things in stride."

The group begin its combat missions on September 5, 1942 by attacking the marshalling yards at Rouen, France. On October 2, 1942, 32 B-17s, including Bobby's squadron, bombed an aircraft factory in Muelte, France. The raid was escorted by 38 P-38 fighters. Six B-17s were damaged, but all returned to base intact. Still, the fighting was intense. One pilot reported "flak ripped a six-inch hole in our wing. A Focke-Wulf 190 shot away part of the stabilizer. One bullet went through four inches from my head, and there were dozens of holes in the plane when we got back."

Two days later, on October 4, 1942, the 353rd sent two bombers to Roubaix, categorized as a target of opportunity, as part of the largest aerial attack of the war to date with over 100 American bombers (both B-17 Flying Fortresses and B-24 Liberators) participating.

Later in October, 1942, General Eisenhower made Operation Torch, the invasion of German-held North Africa, the overarching imperative, and required the Eighth Air Force to protect the movement of men and materials from the United Kingdom to North Africa. The primary task of the Eighth was to attack German submarine bases on the West coast of France, as well as shipping docks, aircraft factories, and depots.

By now, Bobby had become a sergeant. After engaging the submarine pens in France, the 301st Bomber Group was transferred from the Eighth Air Force to the Twelfth Air Force in late November. The new task was to engage and clear out the enemy in North Africa and Sicily, with the goal of invading Italy. The 301st Bomb Group's first attack was on Bizerte Airfield and docks in Bizerte, Tunisia on November 28, 1942.

During the attack on Bizerte, another B-17 in the 352nd Squadron was hit by flak, causing one of the four engines to become disabled and knocked the bomber out of formation. It lagged behind and two German fighters attacked. Five of the crew were shot. A cannon shell from one fighter exploded in the cockpit and started a fire. The pilots, desperate to put out the fire, lost more than 7,000 feet of altitude while fighting the fire. The navigator prepared to bail out but hesitated when he saw the bombardier having trouble putting on his parachute. He climbed back to help. In the ensuing seconds, the pilots were able to regain control of the aircraft, and the navigator was saved from jumping. The plane limped back to base, but the radio operator died from his wounds and became the first death in combat for the 301st.

The Twelfth Air Force was in for a fight. During the latter part of November and the early part of December, one general reported "the Axis forces still had limited control of the land, sea and

air in the area surrounding Bizerte, Tunisia." Bobby's squadron continued to bomb targets in North Africa in the early months of 1943. In March and April 1943, he was flying out of Saint-Donat Airfield, near Tadjenanet, Algeria.

The 301st earned its first Distinguished Unit Citation for an attack on an enemy convoy off Bizerte on April 6, 1943. They braved intense antiaircraft fire from shore defenses and nearby vessels to destroy supplies essential to the Axis defense of Tunisia. This citation, along with multiple Air Medals and the Purple Heart, are part of Bobby's military achievements.

On April 18, 1943, Bobby flew out of Saint-Donat on his last mission. Flying in B-17 #41-24371, known as *Devils from Hell*, he was one of the waist gunners on a mission to attack the marshalling yards at Palermo, Sicily. The official military account read: "Plane dropped out of formation with its #2 engine out over target." He and his crew had been shot down by German ME 110 fighters. They were listed as Missing in Action, but one year and a day later they were officially declared deceased.

Back in the 1930s, Bobby had worked summers in construction as a water boy, bringing a refreshing drink to the workmen at the job site. Later he would drive a truck. His mother did not

like him doing those jobs, considering them to be too menial. He was, she thought, destined for better things. He was ultimately destined to become a hero, for as every veteran knows, the real heroes are the ones who don't make it home.

Eight others on that B-17 did not make it back that day.

The pilot, Lt. Bobbie Godwin, was a year younger than Bobby. He was from Ft. Worth, Texas. His father was a bank manager.

Lt. Virgil Hope, co-pilot, was from Oklahoma, the fourth of five sons. Before joining, he was a stage manager at Stillwater A&M College. His father was a company manager.

Lt. John Houck, navigator, was from Detroit, Michigan.

Lt. John Person, bombardier, hailed from Racine County, Wisconsin.

Sgt. Robert Imler, engineer/gunner, came from Pennsylvania. His father worked as a fireman in the coal mines.

Sgt. William Hawkins, tail gunner, was born of an American father and German mother in Massachusetts. His father was a machinist in the Navy Yards.

Sgt. Arthur Nilges, ball turret gunner, was a year older than Bobby, and was born in Missouri. His father was a farmer.

Sgt. Frank Spatafore, the other waist gunner, was also from Pennsylvania. His father was a laborer at a glass company. Both parents were born in Italy.

B-17 41-24371 / Devils From Hell Details

From MACR 16508

Aircraft B-17F No. 41-24371, piloted by Lt. Godwin on 18 April 1943: Raid was over Marshalling yards and Roundhouse at Palermo, Sicily. Aircraft was attacked by several enemy fighters over target area who knocked out #2 engine. This aircraft was last seen to drop out of formation near target area and immediately enemy aircraft concentrated their attack on this airplane which then went into a steep dive. One parachute was see to open.

In 2015, an Italian underwater search team found the wreckage of *Devils from Hell* about 4 miles off the coast of Sicily. There is a YouTube video (in Italian) discussing their search, discovery and findings. https://b17flyingfortress.de/b17/41-24371-devils-from-hell

Although Bobby's real name is Robert R. Littrell, he joined the Army under the name Robert Senter Littrell as a gesture to honor his mother's maiden name and her family.

Bobby was the uncle I never met, but I am proud to be his nephew. He was definitely one of the good guys, and as Tom Brokaw said, one member of "the greatest generation any society has ever produced."

Footnote: The historical record does have contradictions. One report says after the *Devils from Hell* B-17 was shot down one parachute was seen; another report says seven. In any event, everyone perished. There was also an inaccurate report that Bobby had participated in the first US bombing of Berlin. That raid happened after his death.

Note: attached to this report is an article written by Donald Herman entitled "I Remember Mama." I include here because his experience coincides with the same time and place as Bobby's in December 1942. He could have been in Bobby's squadron.

I Remember "Mama"

By Donald Herman

It's been 36 years and when I close my eyes I can still see all 200 pounds of him through the little circular window in my ball turret. His name was Jerry Yates and he was the radio operator on "The Maverick," our B-17. We called him Mama because he took such good care of us between missions. Jerry was from Omaha and he never stopped talking about the girl who was waiting on him to win the war so they could get married. He seldom left the base and saved every dime he could. When he wasn't cleaning his machine gun or working on his radio equipment, he was sewing on buttons or pressing pants for the rest of us. He wanted to go home with as much money as he possibly could so he and the little woman could get married right away. He was probably the straightest man I have ever known and we all respected him for it. He was actually willing to put off living until the war was over.

We had just formed the 8th Air Force and our casualties were extremely heavy. We were bombing occupied France with 36 B-17s and losing 5 or 6 on each mission. Most of us grabbed every pass like it was going to be our last one and live every minute to its fullest. Jerry just laughed and said a German hadn't been born who could keep him from going back to Omaha.

It was late 1942 and we had to fly 25 missions before we could return to the States for a rest. Shortly before Thanksgiving we heard that our guys had invaded North Africa. Four days later we were stationed at an air base just outside Oran. Now we were in the 12th Air Force and instead of 25 missions we were required to fly 50. There were snipers all over hell and we were loading gas, ammunition, and bombs ourselves. Our ground crews couldn't keep up with us. Try loading 1700 gallons of gas in a B-17 from 5 gallon cans, load all the ammunition for 11 50 calibers, and crank the bombs in by hand, after you fly a 13 hour mission to Naples, Italy. In addition to that, the Italians were giving up by the thousands and had to be fed, so we were on short rations and hungry all the time. I remember trading a mattress cover to an Arab for 300 eggs and we scrambled them in out helmet liners. We were practically living on eggs and veno.

We were not in Africa very long before the most important target we had was the port of Bizerte. The 'Flak-run' was murderous and the fighter opposition was worse. I have seen hard men come apart at the seams when they found out our target for the day was Bizerte. It was on such a day in December of 42 that our crew was given a nice big orange to eat during the mission so we wouldn't get too hungry. Prior to assuming our combat positions, Jerry and I always sat in the radio room and tried to make each other forget that in a few short hours, all hell was going to break loose. We were a couple of tired, hungry, 20 year old kids that were scared as hell. We knew Hal Brasher was an excellent pilot, Bud Sharp would cover our rear from the tail gun position, and Don Kopp was a damn good man on the upper turret, but it didn't help much.

During the small talk, Jerry decided he would wait to eat his snack (the orange) until we were on our way home from the target. I remember telling him I wasn't so damn sure we would return and he sat there and watched me eat every bite of mine.

I had been in my turret for about 4 hours when we approached the target. The flak was exceptionally accurate and we all dreaded the final bomb run when Milton Zahn, our bombardier, would have to fly the ship perfectly straight to allow the bomb sight to function properly. The enemy fighters never bothered us while we were in the Flak-run but we could see them waiting to jump us as soon as we left the target. We were about halfway through the 30 second bomb run when it happened. We took a direct hit from a German 88 that knocked us out of formation and the plane went into a flat spin. We were at 32 thousand feet when we started spinning and finally leveled out at about 10 thousand feet. All the way down, enemy fighters made pass after pass at us, trying to finish the job. My oxygen supply was shot out, the front window of my turret was blown away when a 20 millimeter sheared off my left machine gun, the controls on my turret were shot out and if we hadn't lost so much altitude, the lack of oxygen would have killed me. I finally hand-cranked my turret to a vertical position so I could re-enter the plane. My first thought was to get into a parachute but it was blown apart. The door to the radio room was in splinters. I jerked it open and Jerry was laying on the floor. He looked up and said, "Please Don, don't move me." He was shaking real bad, so I took off my heavy flight jacket and covered him up. I didn't know it then, but he had been hit eighteen times with machine gun bullets.

I grabbed a waist gun and started to help our waist gunner who had a knee cap blown off. The intercom was shot out so I didn't know that Don Kopp was shot through the legs, Hal Brasher was flying the plane with one leg, the copilot was shot in the head, the navigator took one in the shoulder, and Bud Sharp and I were the only ones who weren't hit. The enemy fighters were still making passes at us when we finally ground looped the plane on a short 600 foot runway. We didn't know it, but we were 5 miles behind our own lines and had used a spitfire landing strip at Bone, Tunisia.

Once we found out that we had actually made it back to friendly territory, I returned to the radio room to see if I could help Jerry. He was laying very still and was real white, but he looked up at me and smiled. His next words to me have had more influence on the decisions I have made in the past 36 years than all of the things I learned from school, church, or parents. With a smile on his face and in a very weak voice he established my philosophy of life: "You were right, Don; I should have eaten that orange when I had the chance." Jerry died about 10 minutes later, but somehow I know he finally realized why some of us grabbed every minute of life we could and tried never to delay all the good things that life has to offer. I owe him much and realize it every time I see an orange.