

Docent Spotlight

By

Dan Heller

Lyon Air Museum Docent Herb Guinness was a B-24 Liberator Command Pilot who led bombing missions against some of the most crucial and heavily-defended targets in occupied Europe during World War II. His valiant efforts earned him a Distinguished Flying Cross, Air Medal with bronze cluster and a Purple Heart, along with three Distinguished Unit Citations.



Lyon Air Museum Docent Herb Guinness

Herb was a junior in college at the University of Pennsylvania in 1940 when the United States military approached him, offering to pay for his flight training with the stipulation that he would be available for service to his country if called upon. “It was the depression, so anything that was free I volunteered for!” he recalls with a laugh.

While in his senior year of college, Pearl Harbor was attacked and Herb enlisted in the USAAF (United States Army Air Forces) the very next day. Although already a pilot, it would take several more years of training before he was ready to fly combat missions in a heavy bomber. The training was not easy; out of 430 Cadets that started in Herb’s class, only 240 completed the program.

After flight training Herb was assigned a plane and crew in Wyoming. At 21 years old, he was the eldest amongst them. After several weeks of training together they flew first to Florida then to Trinidad in the Caribbean for refueling. Their final stop in the Americas would be Fortaleza, Brazil where they would again refuel and then start their flight across the Atlantic Ocean at night to Dakar, then part of French West Africa. “Part of the supplies in our plane was a carrier pigeon. We were told that if we went down in the Brazilian rain forest, to release the pigeon and it would get help!”

Herb and his crew arrived at their base in southern Italy just in time to participate in the Battle of Monte Cassino on February 15, 1944. On February 25 the crew earned their first Distinguished Unit Citation on a mission to hit industrial targets around Regensburg, near Munich. This mission was part of *Operation Argument*, also referred to as *The Big Week*. There was little respite as on April 5 they flew to Ploesti, Romania for a second great raid against the oil refineries supplying much of the German war machine.



Herb and crew with B-24H *Peace Terms* (Herb in back row, second from left)

The first Ploesti raids had taken place eight months before, on August 1, 1943. Referred to officially as *Operation Tidal Wave* and unofficially as *Black Sunday*, it was the single costliest mission for the USAAF during World War II with 53 aircraft and 660 men lost. In addition to the massive loss of life and aircraft, the low-level bombing mission failed to achieve many of the objectives due to, among other factors, poor intelligence and heavier-than-expected resistance. Within weeks of *Black Sunday* the refineries were not only repaired, but were exceeding pre-raid output levels.

The second Ploesti bombing focused primarily on the railroad marshalling yards and other infrastructure around the refineries. Despite relentless flak barrages and fighter attacks, Herb and his crew were able to reach their target and drop their bomb load, but shortly thereafter lost an engine to enemy fire and had to drop out of the formation. “That is when we were attacked by a group of German Me-109 fighters” Herb recalls. “We shot down two of them before I dove into heavy cloud cover to try and shake the rest of them off our tail. It worked, and we were able to make it back to our base in Italy.” The mission was a success for the Allies,

dealing a crippling blow to the Germans for which they would not recover. The Ploesti mission earned the crew a second Distinguished Unit Citation.

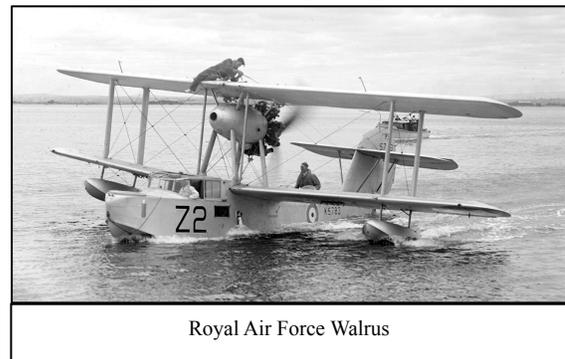
The pace of missions picked up throughout the spring of 1944 and on June 6 the purpose became evident - the Allies launched their long-awaited invasion of France. Four days after the invasion, on June 10, Herb and his crew were called upon for their 42nd mission - a daring raid against an aircraft factory near Munich.

“While over the target we took a direct hit to the left wing, which knocked out both engines on that side. We turned south to head back to our base in Italy, but were struggling to keep altitude on only two engines.” While flying over Austria, Herb began to fear that the damaged aircraft would not be able to clear the Alps. Consequently he gave the order for the crew to bail out. “One of our waist gunners was seriously wounded from flak, and the crew decided to stay with him. They wanted to ride it out.”

“We barely made it over the Alps and to the coast. While we were over the Adriatic Sea a third engine overheated and we had to feather it and shut it down. That is when I knew we were not going to make it back to our base. We were going to have to ditch.”

“Hitting that water was like running into a solid brick wall” Herb remembers. “When we ditched the incoming rush of water shattered the windshield. I was thrown part way out, which cut up my face pretty bad. The plane began sinking almost immediately, leaving us scrambling to get out.”

Shortly after their plane sank, an American P-38 *Lightning* fighter began circling over the eight survivors, who were in a rubber life raft. After several passes the pilot waggled his wings and flew away. “About three hours after the P-38 left, an amphibious RAF (Royal Air Force) *Walrus* landed right next to us. We found out the P-38 called British Air/Sea Rescue, which almost certainly saved our lives.”



Royal Air Force Walrus

With all survivors onboard the *Walrus* attempted to take off, but the pilot could not get the plane back in the air due to the additional weight. Instead, the pilot taxied the aircraft all the way back to Italy, taking about two hours to reach the coastline.

Herb remembers the rescue as a bittersweet event. “Eight of us survived, but two did not. The waist gunner who had been wounded over the target and my top turret gunner were both

killed upon impact with the water. I lost two of my crew that day, something I will never get over. They were good kids. When I got back to the states I visited their families to pay my condolences and let them know what happened.”

Once discharged from the hospital Herb continued flying combat missions. On August 23 a mission against the Vösendorf oil refinery on the outskirts of Vienna earned him and his crew a third Distinguished Unit Citation. His final mission was to a radar site in Albania, after which he returned stateside.

When Herb got back to the states he trained as a Communications Officer and started flying B-17s to prepare for the invasion of Japan. He was then assigned to a base in Victorville, California flying B-24 navigation training missions when the war ended. “After the war ended they told me I had one last mission to fly” Herb recalls. “They sent me to Willow Run, near Detroit to pick up a new B-24 from the Ford production line. I flew the plane to Kingman, Arizona where the next day it was chopped up for scrap. The plane only had about 15 hours on it! There were also several thousand B-17s there awaiting the same fate.”

After the war Herb stayed in the reserves where he flew C-46 cargo aircraft out of Bedford, near Boston. When the Korean conflict broke out he was re-activated and sent to London, England as a Communications Officer. While stationed there he flew C-47s and C-119s, also known as *The Flying Boxcar*.

Herb left the service as a Captain at the conclusion of the Korean War. He eventually retired from the private sector after many decades of owning an electronics manufacturing firm in Los Angeles. He also continued flying as a private pilot after he left the service, staying current up until the last few years.

Today Herb can often be found at Lyon Air Museum, educating schoolchildren on the timeless service and sacrifices of the men and women who served in World War II. He also donates his time speaking to various groups about his war experiences through the Orange County Freedom Committee.

Herb Guinness will never forget the two men he lost that day in the eternal waters of the Adriatic Sea, nor the countless other Allied soldiers, sailors and airmen who served, with some paying the ultimate sacrifice. As the torch of history is passed from one generation to the next, let us also make it our duty to never forget. The message must be carried forward, so that we as a nation will always remember those before us who selflessly served, and those who died, to pave the long and costly road of freedom and liberty in the world.

Herbert Guinness passed away on August 31, 2015.