

World War II gunner from Maryland flies again on B-24

Harold Bennett left his family farm to serve in the U.S. Army Air Corps

By: [Ross Simpson](#)

Three days after Japan's sneak attack on the American fleet anchored in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii on December 7, 1941, a day that will "live in infamy," Adolf Hitler and his Axis ally, Benito Mussolini, declared war on the United States.

Two years later, Harold Bennett left his family farm in Damascus, Md., and volunteered to serve in the U.S. Army Air Corps as a radio operator/gunner on a B-24 Liberator heavy bomber in the 451st Bomb Group, based at an captured Italian airfield east of Naples. Technical Sergeant Bennett and his crew completed 50 missions over German targets in Europe, and came home safely.

Last month, Bennett, who is 97, climbed aboard a B-24 like the one he flew in during World War II, and flew for a short hop from Frederick to Westminster. The plane was part of the "Wings of Freedom Tour," sponsored by the Collings Foundation.

Bennett said the flight reminded him of the war.

"It was cold and windy," said Bennett, who rode in the back where his radio operation position was located within reach of a .50 caliber machine gun sticking out an open window. "It was cold on those bombing missions, 20 to 25 below zero, but it could be colder. I think on one trip, it was 40 below."

Bomber crewmen, especially those in the back of the bomber who were exposed to the elements, wore heated flight suits, heavy leather jackets, fur-lined boots and gloves.

"But the heated flight suits rarely worked," Bennett said, "because they burned out frequently."

On one mission, something hit the front sight of Bennett's machine gun and bent it.

"I think it was a piece of flak that hit it," Bennett said, "not a bullet with my name on it."

Flak is a shell fired by German anti-aircraft batteries that bursts in the air around the bomber stream. If it had hit Bennett instead of his gun, it might have killed him.

But Bennett said at the least, it would have made a big hole in him.

The B-24 Liberator that Bennett flew in during the war was nicknamed "Three Feathers." He said it got its name from a crew that ferried the aircraft from the U.S. to Italy.

Over Trinidad, the pilot had to feather three engines and land for repairs. When the plane landed in Italy, the crew had a local artist paint a naked lady on the nose of the bomber.

"And you can guess where the three feathers were," laughed Bennett.

After completing 50 missions, it was time to go home. None of the crew was injured during the war, but the ball turret gunner fell going down the rear stairs of the bomber and cut his head after the plane landed at Homestead Air Base in Florida.

The gunner didn't receive a Purple Heart, because the wound did not occur in combat.

Bennett flew home on a battle-weary B-24 that had flown early in the air war in North Africa. The desert-tan bomber is enshrined at the United States Air Force Museum in Dayton, Ohio.

After the war, Bennett returned to Damascus and married a fellow classmate at Damascus High School. He also attended the University of Maryland on the GI Bill, and graduated with a degree in financial administration. He later opened an insurance agency, and fathered three children.

His beloved wife, Carolyn, died this past May at the age of 93. He is not only the last man standing in his farm family, but also the last man standing in his aircrew.

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