



the
Freedom
flyers

FLIGHT OF A LIFETIME
ABOARD THE FLYING FORTRESS *by Thomas Wilmer*



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The crew chief checked our seat belts as the pilot awaited takeoff clearance from the tower. The day was calm, clear and warm. The Boeing B-17's four radial piston engines rumbled and groaned as the craft shimmied and vibrated like a wild creature held back by a steel harness.

The pilot shoved the throttles forward and the craft roared down the Santa Maria Airport runway. The deep baritone growl of the radial engines filled the air with a dynamic sense of power and strength that turned heads on the ground for miles around.

Our destination: San Luis Obispo – but my mind raced with a hundred images of those incredible airmen who manned the 12,726 B-17 Flying Fortresses throughout WWII. The typical crew of 10 consisted of young men between the ages of 17 and 23. The captain, or “old man,” might be a grizzled 26 but likely not much older than 21. These were guys who had a one-in-



four chance of being shot down during their tour of duty.

These were guys who were strapped into a non-pressurized aluminum-skinned craft with likely no armor plating at their position. The B-17s often cruised above 30,000 feet where the temperature hovered around 40 below zero. Without fleece-lined boots, gloves, hats and overcoats (along with coil heated suits that sometimes failed), they would quickly succumb to hypothermia.

Without their oxygen masks they'd pass out in minutes. If a crewmember touched the outer aluminum fuselage bare-skinned, his hand would immediately freeze to the metal. These were guys who soberingly knew the odds were stacked against them but stoically did what they had to do.

I thought about those brave crewmen as I crawled through the bomb bay catwalk toward the flight deck. As we passed over Oceano, light thermals



