

Book Report: "Combat Crew"

By *Adverse Yaw*

The title is "Combat Crew" written by John Comer. I doubt that you can find a new copy of this book because the copyright date of the one that I read was dated 1988. However, I have seen them on the Amazon website, but they were paperbacks and used. The book that I read was loaned to me by a man whose father was a B-17 crew member in the 381st Bombardment Group at Ridgewell Air Base in England, the same Group that John Comer, the author of this book was in. They both flew 25 successful combat missions in the 'Flying Fortress.' The book is an awesome read. Being there and taking careful notes in his diary, the author was able to capture the emotions that these bomber crews felt and to translate those feelings into something that we can read and understand. However, unless you were there or have experienced combat, these emotions are impossible to comprehend in their entirety.

The chance of survival was one out of four, and the descriptions of the missions ran through a variety of emotions. Keep in mind that these young men, many in there late teens and early twenties had been rushed through training and sent right over to England and into combat. Some of the things that they faced on their arrival and in combat were: faulty oxygen equipment, temperatures of 60 degrees below zero, scary weather conditions, minimum fuel, the best fighter pilots in the Luftwaffe were continuously attacking them with cannons, rockets and machine-guns, and flak that sometimes seemed so thick that one might imagine walking on it. All this was done in an airplane that were open, without heaters, and unpressurized at altitudes where lack of oxygen for more that a few seconds meant total unconsciousness.

Near the end of the book there is a conversation between the author and some of his buddies just a day or so after completing his 25th and final mission. He was shipping out the following day. In the excerpt below is some of that conversation.

Jim looked at me, "we have talked often about mental attitude—about fear. Tell me something honestly, John—have you overcome fear in combat?"

"No. I doubt if anyone ever does completely. But starting with the way it was when we arrived here, I have gone seventy to eighty percent of the way toward controlling it. That damn flak still bothers me at times."

"I haven't done near that well," said George. "I doubt if I have gone fifty percent of the way."

"It depends on what you mean by fear," I answered. "How do you tell when it starts and when it ends?"

"I don't follow you," Balmore said. "I'm either scared or I'm not."

"Look at it this way: you are flying along knowing that fighters are going to hit you. When? Where are they? Hope we see them in time. You build up anxiety, the first stage of fear. I wish the escort would get here before they do! We got to be careful and not let them slip in on us out of the sun! Tension builds up. There they are! About sixty of them. Where's the escort? The sensation of fear wells up. Here they come! Look at those cannon flashes! You pour burst at them and excitement crowds out fear. The adrenalin is flowing. At two hundred yards, your bursts get longer and closer together. Excitement increases. The fighters are now at one hundred yards using their full assortment of weapons at you from close range. Your bursts are three times as long as they taught you at gunners school. You do not care if the barrels burn out. You are keyed up to your maximum performance—

Exhilaration! It's an emotional high that is a heady sensation unlike any other emotion you have ever experienced. A gunner could become addicted to it with enough experience. In time he may crave the kill-or-be-killed thrill as some people crave strong drugs. Maybe that's why some men become professional soldiers of fortune. Civilian life is too tame for them after years of combat and high excitement that goes with it."

There was silence for a while and Wilson said, "You're getting close, John."

This is an awesome read. I recommend reading each and every word. It describes what many of this "The Greatest Generation" went through and how many more of them didn't survive through to the end.

Two of the men that he was talking to were killed the following day. John Comer went back to the states for a while as an instructor, becoming board with that, later volunteered for more combat duty in Italy. ~ ~➔