

88-year-old former airman writes to Boeing:

‘Thank you for making such a good airplane’

This month marks the 75th anniversary of Boeing’s B-17 bomber, the “Flying Fortress” that proved its mettle in World War II. On the next four pages, Boeing historian Mike Lombardi writes about one of Boeing’s most famous airplanes, and of the young airmen who flew those B-17 bombing missions.

One of those airmen was Irvin Klanecky of Bellevue, Neb. Last month, Klanecky wrote The Boeing Company a letter. It began: “I would like to thank you for making such a good airplane, the B-17. I have been meaning to write for many years, but always put it off. I am 88 years old.”

He went on to describe a mission to Magdeburg, Germany, on Aug. 5, 1944. He was co-pilot, and his B-17 was on the right wing of the lead plane. What follows is some of what Klanecky wrote:

The bomb run was straight, with no evasive movements. The flak was really coming at us. A plane in the squadron ahead of us must have

gotten a hit in the bomb bay; it looked like confetti coming down.

A few seconds later, we got hit. The No. 2 engine started to over-rev and retarding the throttle didn’t slow it down. We decided to shut it down and feather [streamline] the prop. The No. 1 engine also lost power.

With the No. 2 engine dead and the No. 1 engine not putting out much power, we couldn’t keep up with the squadron. There also was a big hole in the gas tanks.

We headed out to the North Sea to get away from enemy fighter planes. Our radio operator got in touch with the British sea patrol so we could be picked up if we had to ditch our plane in the water.

We made it home to Sudbury, England. Because of flak damage, the landing gear wouldn’t come down; we had to crank it down by hand. Then the flaps, which give the wings extra lift so the plane can land at a slower speed, would not work; so we had to land at a higher speed than normal. When we hit the ground, the brakes did not work. We ran off the end of the runway into the mud before we stopped. We were very happy to get home

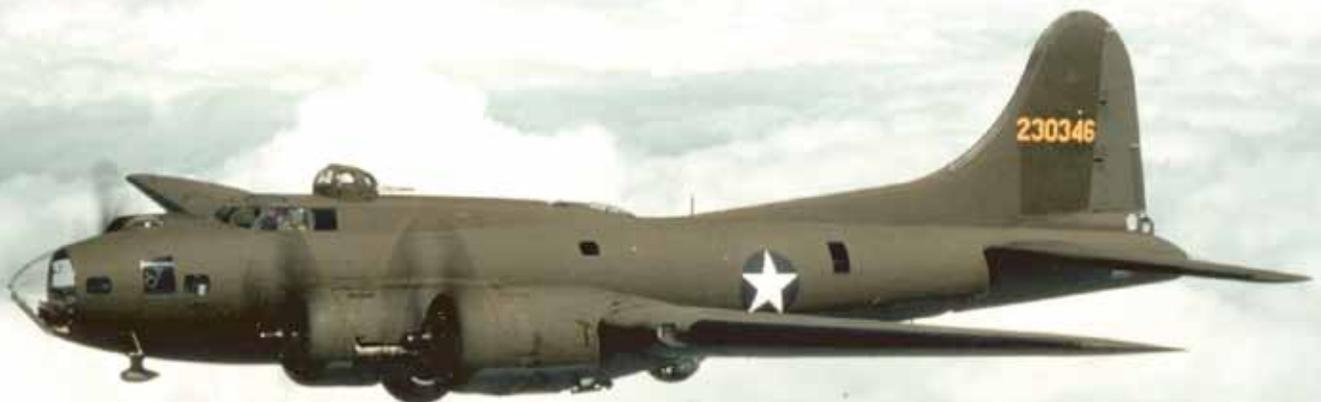
without anyone in our plane getting hurt.

Afterward, the ground crew told us there were 179 holes in the plane and the No. 1 engine had a small hole in one of the cylinders, which is why it wouldn’t put out much power.

Thank you for making such a good airplane. To make it back to England from Germany with 179 flak holes and only two engines being able to put out high power, I am glad to be alive. ■

EDITOR’S NOTE: Klanecky enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps in July 1942. He received his pilot training in Boeing Stearmans and was initially assigned to the 8th Army Air Force flying B-24 bombers. He switched to B-17s after his 24th mission and flew a total of 33 combat missions over Europe—six in “lead” airplanes, which had a high loss rate. He was discharged in September 1945. For his service he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

PHOTO: Fresh from the plant in South Seattle, a Boeing B-17F makes a test flight over Washington state. Nearly 13,000 of the bombers were built by Boeing, Douglas and Lockheed. BOEING ARCHIVES



A legend turns 75

Boeing's B-17 bomber has a storied history, but behind the Flying Fortress was a cast of thousands **By Mike Lombardi**

Seventy-five years ago this month, on July 28, a four-engine plane took off from Boeing Field in South Seattle on its first flight.

Rolling out of the Boeing hangar, it was simply known as the Model 299. *Seattle Times* reporter Richard Smith dubbed the new plane, with its many machine-gun mounts, the "Flying Fortress," a name that Boeing quickly adopted and copyrighted.

The U.S. Army Air Corps designated the plane as the B-17. And during the Second World War, individual planes carried names that reflected the affection of crews: *Memphis Belle*, *Homesick Angel* and *Lucky Lady*, to name a few.

Along with its many names, the Flying Fortress was also a plane of many people. The list begins with Boeing Chairman Claire Egtvedt, the "father" of the B-17, who set Boeing on a new course to build "big" airplanes, rather than the smaller models popular at the time. Along with Boeing designers C.N. "Monty" Monteith, Robert Minshall, E.G. Emery and a young Ed Wells, they had the vision of interpreting the U.S. Army's request for a multi-engine bomber to be one with four engines rather than the standard two-engine design—a decision that saved the 299 from being a footnote to aviation history.

Another on that long list was Boeing test pilot Les Tower, who took the 299 for its first flight that July day and later made a record-breaking flight from Seattle to Wright Field in Dayton, Ohio, where the airplane was to fly against its competition, the Douglas DB-1 (B-18). He died from injuries sustained when the Model 299 crashed.

There were also tens of thousands of employees at Boeing, Douglas and Lockheed-Vega who contributed to

PHOTO: Rollout of the prototype for the B-17, the Boeing Model 299, on July 16, 1935. BOEING ARCHIVES





PHOTO: The B-17 flight line at Boeing Field with “5 Grand,” the 5,000 built at Boeing since the U.S. entry into the war. The airplane was signed by all employees who had a hand in building it. **BOEING ARCHIVES**

the war effort by building 12,731 Flying Fortresses for the “Arsenal of Democracy.” They included thousands of women who joined the war effort working at non-traditional jobs who collectively became known as “Rosie the Riveters.”

Assuredly the most important people in the B-17 story are the young men who flew them in combat. The success of the daylight bombing campaign over Germany hung on their courage—and the ruggedness of the Flying Fortress. There are volumes of stories of shot-up B-17s that returned crews safely to their bases, some so badly damaged they never flew again.

The effort and sacrifice of all of the people behind the B-17—and those who

flew in them—is perhaps best summed up by General Carl Spaatz, the American air commander in Europe, who said: “Without the B-17 we may have lost the war.”

Extensively used during the war, the Flying Fortress became an icon of American air power and helped establish Boeing’s global reputation.

The B-17 story is also one about the partnership between Boeing and the Seattle community, whose support and generosity ensured that Boeing built Plant 2, the “Fortress Factory” at Boeing Field in South Seattle. It was a team effort that involved employees, unions and the local community that made it possible for Boeing to produce 6,981 B-17s at that Seattle plant.

Finally, a big part of the success of the B-17 was the working-together relationship between Boeing and the U.S. military that resulted in the bomber earning a reputation for performing missions with precision and success—a tradition of quality and excellence that has continued with each new generation of Boeing planes for the warfighter.

After 75 years, the few B-17s that remain are greeted at air shows and museums with a kind of reverence—an enduring tribute for those who designed, built and maintained the Flying Fortress, for those young airmen who flew it in combat, and especially for those who gave their lives defending freedom. ■

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PHOTO: The flight and ground crew of the B-17 “Hells Angels.” Miniature bombs painted on the nose indicate the number of combat missions completed. **BOEING ARCHIVES**



PHOTO: This B-17G was hit by an 88mm shell that nearly cut the plane in two and trapped a ball turret gunner. The crew elected not to parachute out but to stay with the plane because of the trapped gunner. After flying 2.5 hours, it landed safely. **BOEING ARCHIVES**

B-17 production by the numbers

B-17 production:	Boeing	Douglas	Lockheed	Total
Model 299	1			1
YB-17/Y1B-17	13			13
Y1B-17A	1			1
B-17B	39			39
B-17C	38			38
B-17D	42			42
B-17E	512			512
B-17F	2,300	605	500	3,405
B-17G	4,035	2,395	2,250	8,680
Total	6,981	3,000	2,750	12,731