

B-24 Gunner

The B-17 Flying Fortress was the more famous of the American heavy bombers attacking German-occupied Europe, but its sister ship, the B-24 Liberator, carried heavier bomb loads, flew faster, and was produced in greater numbers than any other American military aircraft. Robert LaVerne Anderson of Lake City was a crew member on a Liberator flying from a 15th Air Force base in Italy.

Anderson, an English major, attended Clemson for the 1941-42 academic year and then entered the service, volunteering for the Army Air Force. He trained as an aerial gunner and was assigned to the 758th Bomb Squadron of the 459th Bomb Group which deployed to Italy in early 1944.



Anderson and his comrades went to work in an “office” bristling with guns. The B-24 was armed with ten .50 caliber machine guns for self-defense: two in the nose, two in the top turret just aft of the flight deck, one on each side of the waist, two in the belly turret, and two more in the tail. The gunners, all given the rank of sergeant after the Americans learned that captured non-commissioned officers got better treatment from the Germans than lower-ranking enlisted men, worked in an atmosphere that could be described as inhospitable. Temperatures at mission altitudes of 20,000 feet and higher plunged as low as forty degrees below zero, forcing the crew, traveling in an unheated and unpressurized aircraft, to wear electrically heated overalls beneath their heavy flying gear. Any exposed skin was susceptible to frostbite. Thinner air at these altitudes also required the crew to wear oxygen masks.

And then there were the Germans. Even in tight formations in which B-24s sought to protect themselves and each other from German fighter aircraft, losses were frequent. And though the gunners, like Anderson, could shoot back at the fighters, German anti-aircraft fire was a threat against which Anderson and the rest of the crew could offer little defense.



B-24s of the 758th Bomb Squadron in formation.

https://www.459bg.org/758th_Bomb_Squadron.cfm

The job of the gunners was to protect their aircraft so that it could deliver a bomb load of up to 8,000 pounds on enemy targets like transportation hubs, airfields, aircraft factories, fuel facilities and other enemy installations deemed of value. On June 9, 1944, Anderson and the crew of *Hogan's Hellcats*, a B-24 piloted by 2nd Lieutenant Walter Michaels, were assigned to bomb a

target at Munich, Germany, about 500 miles north-northwest of their base at Giulia airfield outside of Cerignola, Italy.

For protection against enemy fighters, the B-24s routinely flew in well-ordered formations, with each aircraft in a position from which it could help defend not only itself, but the other planes in its flight as well. On this Friday morning, *Hogan's Hellcats* was flying in the number 5 position of its formation, the third airplane on the right side of a vee-formation. Ahead about fifty yards and level with Anderson's aircraft was another B-24. Staff Sergeant Michael Meindl was the tail gunner in this ship. Facing to the rear and scanning the skies for enemy fighters, Meindl had an excellent view of what happened as the formation released its bombs over Munich.

"After making a successful bomb run," Meindl reported, "five bursts of flak exploded directly under Lieutenant Michaels' ship. The tip of the left wing curled up and the ship went into about a 60% bank to the left." Michaels brought the airplane out of its dive, but the flak had damaged the bomber and the stress on the wing caused the number 3 engine to fall off. "The last I saw of the ship," Meindl continued, "it was spinning earthward, into the flak barrage below us."

Only the airplane's navigator, 2nd Lieutenant Leonard Brosky, escaped *Hogan's Hellcats*, blown clear when the ship exploded. The other nine crew members were killed. They were buried near Munich. After the war, their remains were returned to the United States where they were interred at the Zachary Taylor National Cemetery in Louisville, Kentucky.

