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# The NINE O NINE

by Ralph J Ferrusi

Thursday morning, October 14, 1943 383 8th Air Force heavy bombers—B-17's and B-24's—lifted off from nineteen bases in southeastern England: destination, the ball-bearing factories in Schweinfurt, in central Germany. Sixteen 305th Bomb Group, 364th Bomb Squadron B-17's lift off the runway in Chelveston, England. My wife Kathy's uncle, Staff Sergeant Russell Joseph Kiggins was a tail gunner on one of the B-17's. Schweinfurt was his sixth mission.

Schweinfurt was very heavily defended. 60 B-17's—600 men—failed to return to England. The mission became known as Black Thursday. Thirteen of the 364th's B-17's never even reached Schweinfurt, lost to machine guns, cannons, and rockets fired by swarms of single- and twin-engined German fighters. Only three actually made bombing runs, and one was destroyed by rockets after releasing its bombs. Two B-17's returned to Chelveston that evening. 130 men didn't; Sergeant Kiggins was one of them.



September 9, 2016, a month short of 73 years after Black Thursday, I clambered into the rear hatch of the Collins Foundation B-17G *NINE O NINE* at Dutchess County Airport, hitting my back and then banging my head in the process. The first thing I did was look back into the very cramped tail gunner's compartment, way back in the very narrow rear of the plane, past the tail-wheel mechanism, pretty much isolated from the rest of the bomber. Even the two waist gunner positions were barely in sight from there. I couldn't imagine what it was like being alone

there, in the cold, thin air at 25,000 feet in the flak- and fighter-filled skies over Germany in 1943. A big part of the reason I was here today was to try to imagine this...

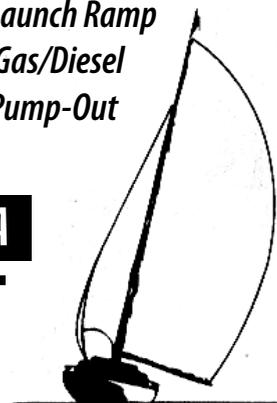
What lifetime events led me to this moment??? Back in the 60's I'd read Martin Caidin's *Black Thursday* (New York: Dell, *NINE O NINE*) the late 80's and early 90's I learned "Uncle Joe's" story from my wife Kathy and her family. In the "Uncle Joe" section of my own 2007 book, Uncle Ben, Uncle Bob, Uncle Joe, Uncle Pete, P.D., and Pop—Bataan,

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*^ The author, Mark Kollar and Paul Kollar about to climb in and fly.*



Saipan, Schweinfurt, the Bulge, Guadalcanal, and the Philippines 1945—I quoted an excerpt from Martin Caidin’s book (his heirs graciously gave me permission to use it).

As related in A Tale of Two Mustangs in the 2015 BOATING On The Hudson & Beyond Holidays issue, the Collins Foundation’s *NINE O NINE*, B-24H Witchcraft, and TP-51C Betty Jane visited the Dutchess County Airport in 2009, then returned in 2014 and 2015. I clambered through the very narrow confines of the *NINE O NINE* and the Witchcraft, and wished I could come up with the \$2500.00 for an hour’s flight in the Mustang. Rides in the bombers were a “mere” \$450.00, but in ‘14 and ‘15 this seemed like a lot of money. My old Army



*^ Wright Cyclone R-1820 1200 horsepower engines.*

*The navigator/bombardier’s compartment right in the nose - what a view!*





^ Pilots and cockpit.

buddy Tommy Garrison e-mailed me that the Collins planes were coming back September 9-11 2016. My birthday was the 12th: hmmm—I wasn't getting any younger—maybe I should take a shot at a B-17 ride as an early birthday present???

Long story short I called the Collins Foundation and reserved a spot on the *NINE O NINE* for a flight at 1700 hours on September 9, 2016. They said to get to the airport around 2:00 PM on the Big Day and to let Jamie know I was flying on the *NINE O NINE*. Here's the long and the short of it:

As in 2014 and 2015, I joined a small group on Route 376 at the end of the airport's long east/west runway to await the arrival of the Collins planes. It was 91 degrees, and muggy.. The planes were coming up from Morristown, New Jersey, and were to



One of two waist gunner positions.

arrive "around 1:30 or so". At around 2:00 PM I spotted a spec in the sky to the southwest, and, sure 'nuff, it was the *NINE O NINE*. I stood by the road right in line with the runway, and as it roared over my head, gear and flaps down, I thought "I'll soon be flying in that plane!!!"

Paul Kollor was also at the end of the runway, and he and his son Mark were also going to be on the flight! It took a while for the rest of the planes to show up, and when I spotted three specks in the sky, I knew they were the *Witchcraft*, the B-25N *TONDELAYO*, and the Collins' newest addition, a TF-51D Mustang two-seater *Toulouse Nuts\*\*\**.

Fast forward to 5:00 PM, and Paul, Mark, and I and seven others gathered, as ordered, next to the rear hatch of the 909 for a "briefing". Two things stood out: we were told under no circumstances to touch any of the

cables running through the fuselage, or "We would be flying the plane.....". And, not to step on the bomb bay doors, or we might become a bomb...

When we boarded, two guys—one a real old-timer—got to stand on the flight deck behind the pilots, three people were positioned in the radio room forward of the bomb bay, and five of us, including Paul, Mark, and myself essentially sat on the floor, belted into makeshift "seats", in the waist gunner's area, until the plane reached cruising altitude: about 3000 feet.

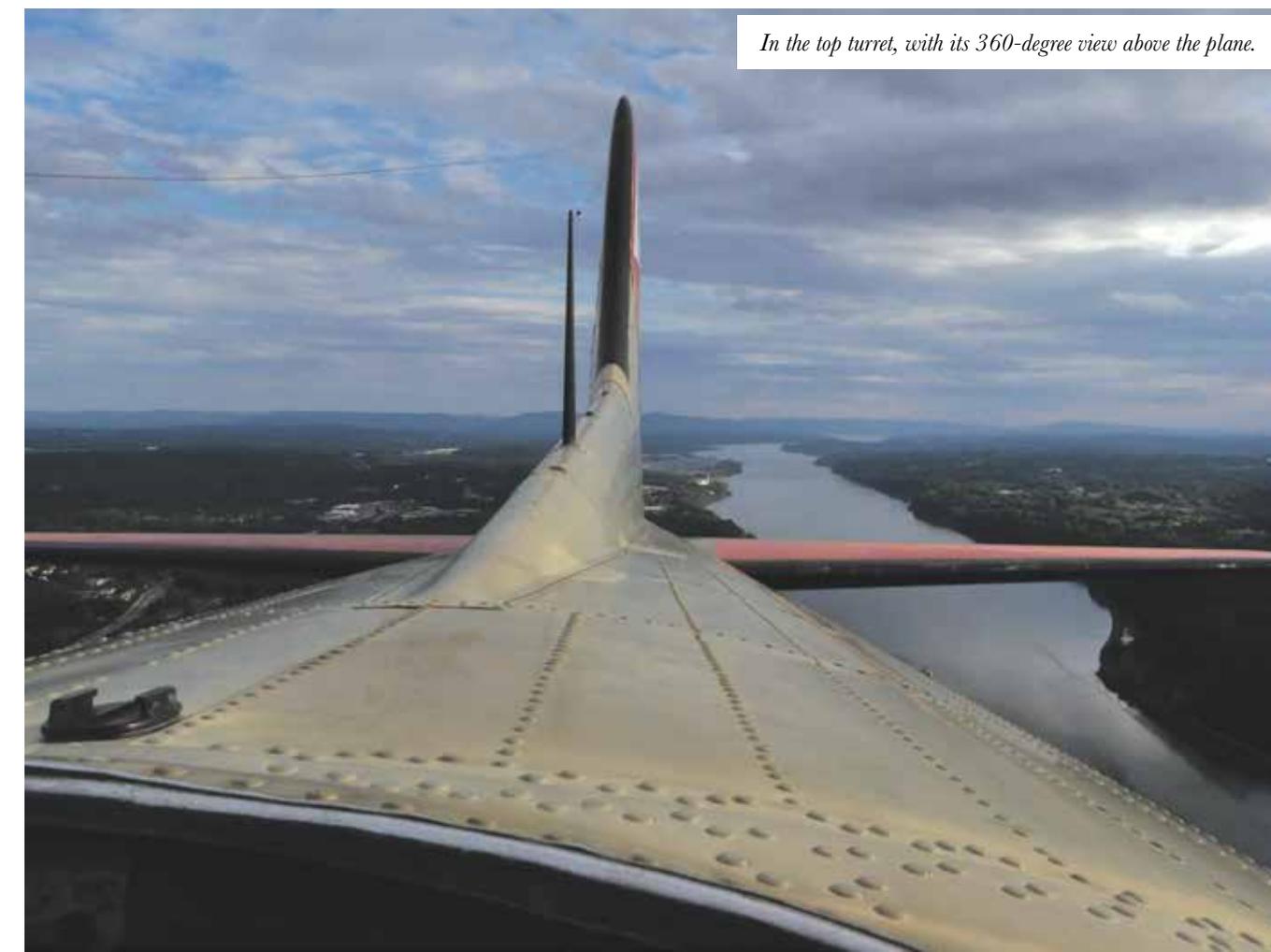
The engines fired up, and the plane started vibrating, but us five couldn't see anything! I could see out the rear hatch window, and had some idea what was going on. When I saw cars on 376, I knew we were at the end of the runway, and soon the four big Wright Cyclone R-1820 1200 horsepower engines opened up full throttle, and we were off! I was very impressed by

the acceleration: I was actually pushed towards the rear of the plane. The five of us were all grinning like kids on Christmas morning.

We finally leveled off and were given the word we could walk around. Two things: the plane is very cramped: I banged my head about a dozen times, and us ten tourists had to do a lot of dodging and tap-dancing not to knock each other over in our excitement to take it all in, and, take pictures.

First I looked out the waist gunner's windows, then threaded around the ball turret, through the bomb bay on a very narrow catwalk, and into the radio compartment, that had an opening to the sky. We'd been warned the 160 mph slipstream could tear off our hats, glasses, and, our cameras. I took some pictures—carefully—then went up into the top turret, with its 360-degree view above the plane, and then to the flight deck.

We had been told not to talk to the



In the top turret, with its 360-degree view above the plane.

pilots, so I took some pictures, then dropped down into the navigator/bombardier's compartment right in the nose. Whadda view!!! We were heading up the Hudson. I've lived in the Hudson Valley my whole life, but in all the excitement, I couldn't place any landmarks and figure out exactly where we were. We swung majestically around, and headed back to the airport.

All in all, it was an AWESOME—I'd have to say thrilling—experience: LOUD, cramped, lotsa vibration, but, awesome. If you have the inclination, Just Do It.....



Mustang fighter "Toulouse Nuts".

\*Postscript: As an added bonus, I got to sit in the cockpit of the *Toulouse Nuts*: my THIRD Mustang cockpit.



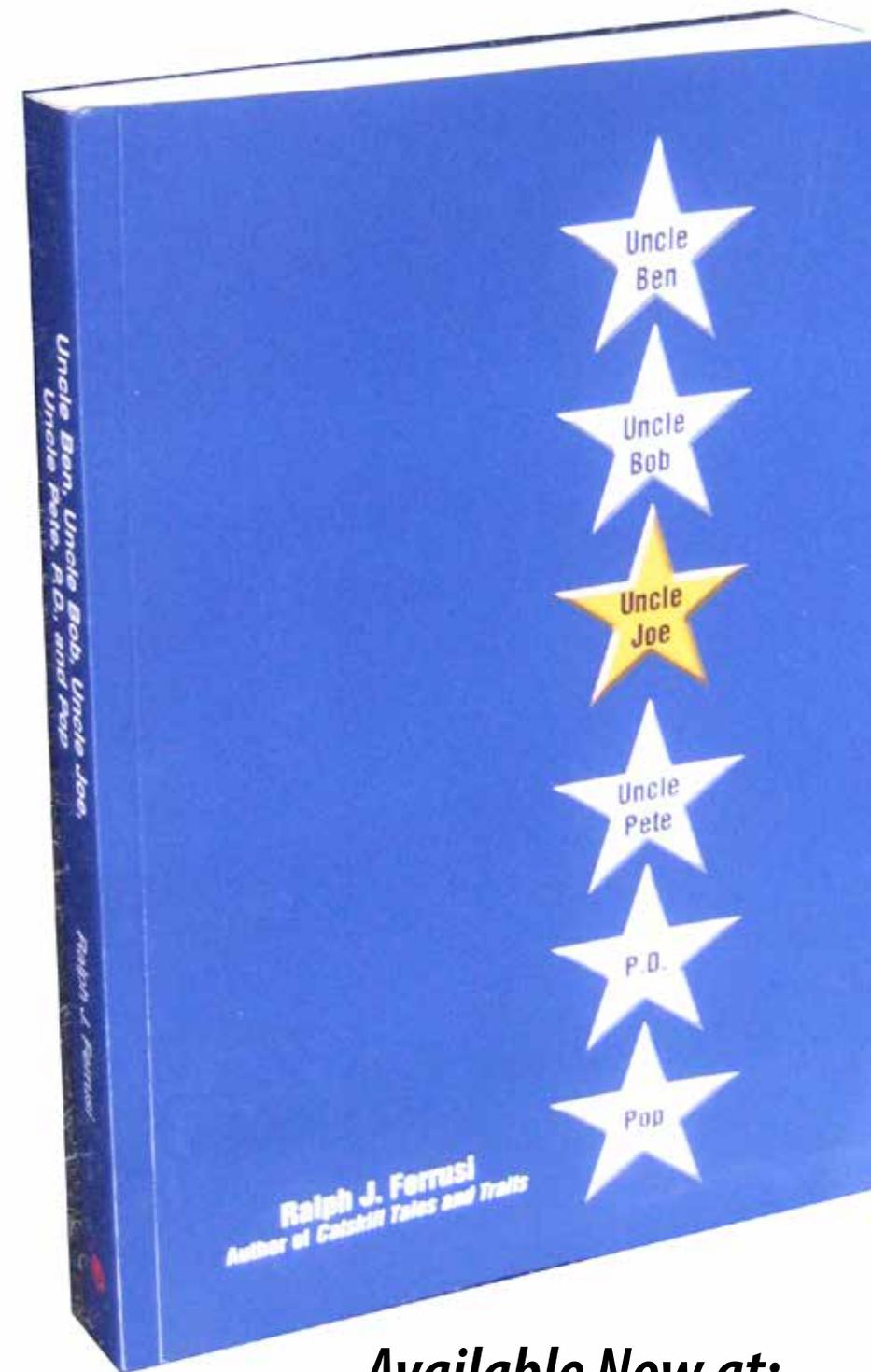
# UNCLE BEN, UNCLE BOB, UNCLE JOE, UNCLE PETE, P.D., AND POP:

Bataan, Saipan, Schweinfurt, the Bulge, Guadalcanal, and the Philippines 1945.

by Ralph J. Ferrusi

*This quote is from Page 116 of Uncle Ben, Uncle Bob, Uncle Joe, Uncle Pete, P.D., and Pop:*

Martin Caidin, and Black Thursday came to this conclusion, concerning the men who flew the [Schweinfurt] mission. From the Epilogue, pp. 272–273: Thus Mission 115 passes into history. Black Thursday saw the most violent, savagely fought, and bloodiest of all the battles in the titanic aerial conflict waged in the high arena over Germany. Mission 115, you see, contributed to a tradition. Despite the most intense aerial opposition in the history of man's combat in the air, our bombers did not turn back. The men in the great Fortresses did not falter. Despite their fear—and terror was a companion aboard those bombers—they did not consider forfeiting the mission. No matter how cruel the test, no matter how many giant bombers writhed in flame, no matter how many formations split apart and plunged earthward, there was no question but that the survivors would continue. That is their contribution to a tradition—that no American bomber force, once committed to battle, has ever turned back.



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