

THE WARS OF MYRON KING



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McDonough, James L., 1934-

The wars of Myron King: a B-17 pilot faces WWII and U.S.-Soviet intrigue / James Lee McDonough. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-57233-675-9 (hardcover)

ISBN-10: 1-57233-675-7 (hardcover)

1. King, Myron Lyzon, 1921-
 2. Bomber pilots—United States—Biography.
 3. United States. Army Air Forces. Bomb Squadron, 614th.
 4. World War, 1939-1945—Germany—Berlin.
 5. World War, 1939-1945—Aerial operations, American.
 6. World War, 1939-1945—Regimental histories—United States.
 7. King, Myron Lyzon, 1921—Trials, litigation, etc.
 8. Courts-martial and courts of inquiry—Russia (Federation)—
Moscow—History—20th century.
 9. United States—Foreign relations—Soviet Union.
 10. Soviet Union—Foreign relations—United States.
- I. Title.

D790.263614th .M33 2009

940.544973092—dc22

[B]

2009015036

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Preface

IN 1944 AND 1945, WHEN I WAS TEN YEARS OLD, THE MARVELOUS AIRCRAFT of World War II fascinated me, whether Allied or Axis planes. I built models of several of those airplanes. One of my favorites was the four-motor Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress. My interest in the planes of that vast conflict remained with me as I grew older, fueling a lifelong, ever-broadening study of the war that culminated when, for a number of years, I taught a course in the history of World War II at Auburn University.

All of this helped prepare me to write about the experiences of Myron Lyzon King. While I was building models of war planes, and generally “playing war” with some of my boyhood friends in 1944-45, Myron King and his B-17 crew were involved in the real thing, first training in the United States and then flying combat missions over Germany. King and his crew served with the 614th Squadron, 401st Bomb Group, 94th Combat Wing, First Air Division, of the Eighth Air Force. They participated in an air war like no other before or since. Nor, in terms of a maximum development of propeller bombers and fighters, will there ever again be such bloody campaigning in the air.

For that matter, they were involved in a war like no other. Never before in history has a conflict been waged on such a destructive scale or on such a global scale. For millions of people worldwide, there never was a war so totally and intensely consuming. Those who compare the present situation to World War II obviously possess little knowledge of

the conflict that raged in the late 1930s and the first half of the 1940s. Myron King's experiences in that unparalleled struggle were both fascinating and unique. And they were significant, particularly the events in Soviet territory. These proved not only adventurous but disturbing—disturbing relative to the Soviets, but perhaps equally disturbing relative to the Americans. It is a privilege and a pleasure for me to recount Myron's intriguing story. I hope that I have done it justice.

JAMES LEE McDONOUGH

OCTOBER 2008

Acknowledgments

SEVERAL PEOPLE ASSISTED ME WITH THE PREPARATION OF THIS BOOK. First, I must acknowledge the invaluable contribution of Myron Lyzon King. Myron generously met with me many times, recounting his pilot training and combat experiences, as well as his unique adventure in Poland and Russia. Myron also assisted my research both by providing a copy of the transcript of his trial by court-martial and by permitting me to borrow several books that proved useful in developing his story. Without Myron's help this book would not have been written.

Two other members of the King crew rendered important assistance to my research. Navigator Richard I. Lowe and ball-turret gunner Richard A. Reinoehl wrote letters responding to my questions and contributing their memories of various events. Reinoehl, fortunately, kept an "Overseas Diary," which I found very useful. The diary enabled me to pinpoint several facts and occurrences, as well as occasionally providing human-interest comments for the narrative. I am grateful for the input of both men.

Also, I must thank George Menzel, a bombardier who served with the 401st Bomb Group. In the early 1990s, Menzel wrote a book about the B-17 Flying Fortress, known as "Maiden U.S.A.," and the crews who flew her—which included the King Crew. Menzel graciously shared some of his research materials with me. Most significantly, he sent me a copy of the petition for a new trial of King, prepared by Lieutenant Colonel John A. Doolan, United States Air Force, which analyzed the

proceedings at the King court-martial, pointing out the numerous errors made during that trial and clearly, convincingly demonstrating the gross miscarriage of justice. Menzel also sent a copy of the various cables exchanged between U.S. military personnel at Moscow and Poltava relating to the King court-martial. Important, too, Menzel shared a letter by Leon Dolin, now deceased, who was King's assistant defense counsel at the court-martial; in that letter Dolin described, at some length, the bizarre circumstances of the trial as he recalled them years later.

I appreciate also the assistance of Myron's wife, Eleanor, and their son, Ron. Deserving recognition as well are Dr. Walter E. Brown and Dr. Vivian Rogers-Price of the Mighty Eighth Air Force Museum, Pooler, Georgia, and Ms. Marcie Green at the Historical Records Division, Maxwell Air Force Base, Montgomery, Alabama. The readers for the University of Tennessee Press caught some errors of fact that I made in an earlier version of the manuscript. Also, I wish to acknowledge the good work of Scot Danforth, director of the University of Tennessee Press; Gene Adair, manuscript editor at the press; and all other UTP staff members who assisted with publication. I am grateful to my wife, Nancy, and our daughters, Dr. Carla McDonough and Dr. Sharon McDonough, who read large portions of the book in manuscript form and shared with me their impressions of the work. To all who labored on the production of this book in any manner, I wish to convey a sincerely felt "thank you." I hope that any mistakes are few and trivial. Obviously, any errors are solely my responsibility.

Finally, as anyone with a little age on him or her and who has thought about the accuracy of memory, is aware, people do not always recall events correctly when they describe them years later. While I cannot guarantee that everything Myron King told me is unquestionably true, I do have good reason to believe that the story he recounted is substantially accurate. First, I could compare what he said years afterward with his trial testimony in 1945. Also, the trial testimony of three crew members who were with King in 1945 assisted me further in testing the truth of his account. In some instances, what King told George Menzel in an interview in the early 1990s could be assessed by what he told me in 2006 and 2007. Phil Reinoehl's diary at times provided still

another check. Three letters written by Richard Lowe confirmed some of the incidents that King related. And, of course, there are significant books and records about the operations and missions of the Eighth Air Force. Perhaps I should also add that I first met King soon after he came home from the war and heard him then describe, in general outline, his experience in Poland and Russia. All in all, I am convinced that his memory of those stirring events remained basically sound and consistent through the years.

Prologue

THE AIRFIELD LAY ABOUT SEVENTY MILES NORTH AND SLIGHTLY WEST of London. Designated Station 128, in the parlance of the United States Army Air Forces, the base was located between the villages of Deenethorpe and Upper Benefield, Northamptonshire. Familiarly known to the airmen as Deenethorpe, it was home to the four-motor Boeing B-17 Flying Fortresses of the 401st Bombardment Group, U.S. Eighth Air Force. Dawn would not be graying the east for another three hours or more, but the area already pulsated with activity, as hundreds of men and machines had come alive despite the early morning darkness. The date was Saturday, February 3, 1945.¹

Several years had come and gone since the pompous Hermann Göring—flying ace of World War I, recipient of the Blue Max, head of the German Luftwaffe, and a man of “monstrous” girth (to borrow Sumner Welles’s term), with an ego of like proportion—uttered his euphoric boast (and anti-Semitic slur) that, if an enemy bomber ever penetrated the Fatherland, “My name is not Hermann Göring. You may call me Meier!” Quite some time had passed, too, since the blustering Reichsmarschall’s condescending, dismissive proclamation that the entrance of the United States into the war “would have little effect.”²

Hundreds of missions had since been flown by the Allies, and thousands of heavy bombers had toured the Fatherland, striking the German Reich again and again. Yet, February 3, 1945, would be a special day. The Eighth Air Force was going to “Big B,” as the airmen commonly

referred to Berlin. From the onset of the war, bombing the German capital symbolized the ultimate objective for many an airman, both American and British. Not only were the bombers going to “Big B,” but they were going in massive force. The mission would be an awesome display of U.S. air power, sending a thousand heavy bombers and a total strength, including the fighter escorts, of more than two thousand Eighth Air Force planes over the capital of the Reich. The air leader of the Eighth for the historic strike would be the able and experienced Colonel Lewis E. Lyle, commander of the 379th Bomb Group.

Never before had the Eighth hit Berlin with such strength. Additionally, the timing, thought some, could not be better. A wrathful Red Army lay within thirty-five to fifty miles of Berlin, and its blood-soaked advance, ranging over a wide swath of the eastern Reich, had packed the capital with large numbers of refugees, mostly women, children, and the elderly. They had fled before the path of the revenge-seeking Russians as they pillaged, raped, and murdered their way westward. A major air raid under such conditions, targeting the German War Ministries that were concentrated in the central city, as well as military installations, would create even more problems than usual for the German authorities in Berlin. And, obviously, it would kill a huge number of civilians. In Nazi-occupied Europe, General Carl A. “Tooley” Spaatz later wrote, “We never had as our target . . . anything except a military target—except Berlin.”

This is not to say that Spaatz favored the mission. An advocate of precision bombing, with oil targets as his primary concern, Spaatz thought that striking the center of Berlin was of little value. Other brass at High Wycombe (the Eighth Air Force headquarters on the outskirts of London) agreed. Above all, General James H. Doolittle, commander of the Eighth Air Force, was against the raid. Significant military targets in Berlin were few, and Doolittle, on principle, did not believe in targeting civilians. Besides, terror bombing did not break German morale, which Doolittle considered the British night attacks to have proven.

But orders had come from higher up. Specifically, General George C. Marshall, the army chief of staff, was ready to try anything that might shorten the war in Europe. Worried about growing American war wea-

ness, he wanted to get on with the struggle against Japan, the conclusion of which seemed far away. Generals Dwight Eisenhower and Omar Bradley also favored any measure that might possibly lessen the losses of U.S. ground forces in Europe. This was particularly true after the surprise German counteroffensive of mid-December 1944. While Eisenhower declared that he had always favored “precision targets” for U.S. air power, he then stated that he was open to “anything that gives real promise to ending the war quickly.” And so the controversial Operation Thunderclap, as the February 3 attack on Berlin is known, had been approved and ordered by the highest American military authorities.³

Group briefing for the 401st took place at 0300 hours, at which time the crews had already been awake an hour and a half, with some men feeling they had hardly slept at all. They had washed, dressed, shaved (generally the men thought shaving advisable to minimize the discomfort in an oxygen mask), and breakfasted on fruit juice, cereal, eggs, or pancakes, with toast and coffee. “If they gave you eggs you *knew* you were about to go a long way,” remembered one of the pilots. Briefing for the mission then followed, held in the customary large Nissen building, at one end of which a huge map of western Europe, concealed behind a curtain, awaited unveiling. As if in a movie—only this was for real—an instant of drama occurred as the group commander entered the building, strode between the rows of seated men to the front, and drew back the curtain.⁴

There, marked with colored ribbons and pins, lay the mission route, the rendezvous points for the escort fighter planes, and the target for that day, February 3: Berlin! Reactions, expressions, and comments varied, but one opinion was universal. Nobody thought this mission would classify as a “milk run,” the common description for an easy assignment when little enemy opposition was anticipated. “Big B” meant a deep penetration into Germany, entailing nine or ten hours of flying time. It meant encountering enemy fighters, even if the Luftwaffe had been greatly reduced in strength from the earlier days. Probably, Messerschmitt 109s (ME 109s) and Focke-Wulf 190s (FW 190s), the small, single-engine, fast, and heavily armed aircraft that had long been the staple of German defense, would be trying to break through

the shield of American fighters; certainly they would be seeking out any crippled, straggling bombers. Perhaps also Messerschmitt 262s (ME 262s), the Luftwaffe's new twin-engine jet fighter, faster by far than any fighter flown by the United States or Great Britain, would be prowling the skies in search of easy prey. And "Big B" meant heavy anti-aircraft fire (or "flak," as it was commonly known, short for *Fliegerabwehrkanonen*, anti-aircraft artillery), which, since the protective cover of long-range fighter escorts had become the norm, typically constituted the greatest menace the big bombers faced.⁵

The briefing lasted about thirty to forty minutes, revealing—and what an attention-grabber it was—that this mission would attempt to strike the Reich capital with more bombers than ever before in a single mission. Engines were to be started at 0630 hours; taxiing would begin at 0645, with the first bomber taking off at 0700. The briefing included approximate target time, bombing altitude, route from the Initial Point (IP, from which the bomb run began) to the Mean Point of Impact (MPI, the actual target for the bombs), predicted flak activity, and the weather forecast of heavy clouds over the continent but clearing at the target. Also, the group received warning that they would be flying within thirty-five to sixty miles of the Russian lines advancing on Berlin. Possibly Russian aircraft (fighters) would appear near the target area. If accosted by a Soviet plane, the bomber commander should "drop feet [wheels] and flaps," fire the red flare gun, and follow the Russian. This was not a particularly appealing thought, constituting yet another unpleasant scenario possibly awaiting some unfortunate crew. Then there were words of encouragement and the opportunity for questions. Meanwhile, as the flight crews were briefed, the ground personnel, already hard at work for some time in the cold, dark morning (the base was blacked out in case the Luftwaffe should surprise with a night attack), continued their task of preflighting the planes.⁶

Ordnance and armament men were hauling and loading the twelve five-hundred-pound bombs carried by each Fortress and supplying the .50-caliber machine gun ammunition for every aircraft, although the guns would not be loaded, as a precaution against accidental firing, until the bombers were airborne. Flak protective suits and steel helmets were also delivered for each crew. And all around the field, crew chiefs

and assistant crew chiefs of every plane were busy checking out the engines. Their toughest work, physically, was hand-pulling the heavy propeller blades to turn the motors, thus removing oil build-up in the cylinders.⁷

Then, one by one the motors were started, run up, and held at full power. The mechanics looked for any indication of a possible malfunction as they monitored the oil pressure, turbo-supercharger, and magneto. With the performance pronounced satisfactory, the engines were shut down to await the gas truck's visit, when fuel tanks would be topped up to the full load of over twenty-eight hundred gallons of high-octane gasoline. The mechanics also checked out electrical and hydraulic functions and inspected the tires, flaps, ailerons, elevators, rudder, and trim tabs—actually, everything that could be examined while the plane was parked. Ground personnel strove to complete all preflight operations before the air crew showed up to man the particular Fortress designated to them for the mission. Little wonder that crew chiefs, who always maintained the same aircraft regardless of who flew it, thought of that bomber as “their” plane.⁸

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The time was between 0500 and 0530 when First Lieutenant Myron L. King, pilot, and his crew, part of the 614th Squadron of the 401st Bomb Group, arrived in the big truck at the hardstand, a concrete circular pad where the plane assigned to them for the mission was parked. Crews typically were expected to be at their bomber at least an hour before engines were started. Thus the pilot had time to fill out the required forms and, together with the crew chief, walk around the aircraft for a last-minute inspection. Gunners could carefully examine their weapons again and clean them once more, if necessary, before installation. Everyone had ample time to see that all was in order to carry out his assigned duty. And usually, for those who smoked (although King did not), there was time for another cigarette or two before climbing aboard the plane.⁹

Once more the King Crew would be flying aircraft number 44-6508, a silver B-17G—a Fortress model readily identifiable by the chin turret,