

Robert C. Busby
Biography
HS211
Dr. Judy DeMark

(Revision)

Preface

The sole source of information for the following biography was the subject himself. No outside sources were consulted.

¹Bernard Morgan, Interview by author, Tape recording, Marquette, Michigan, 20 October 1994.

On December 7, 1941, the history of the United States was changed irrevocably when the Imperial Japanese Navy attacked the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor. The surprise attack brought the United States into World War II and changed the lives of nearly all Americans.

On that famous date Bernard Morgan was a typical fifteen year old high school kid who liked fishing, hunting, and baseball. Growing up in Coral, Michigan, just outside Grand Rapids, Bernard graduated from Howard City High School. To Bernard and his friends, the war seemed a far away event, and one they did not have to worry about, at least not at the moment. Bernard and his friends tried to continue living as before, but the war increasingly became the only news event around. Eventually, friends and relatives began to ship out to different branches of the military. Some of his friends went to enlist in Army, and some the Navy, but Bernard was only sixteen, too young, and was denied enlistment. Bernard knew that it would be his generation that would end up fighting the war, and he began to make preparations to go.

Bernard had a keen interest in aircraft so he made his way down to Willow Run Airport, just outside Detroit. There he worked on the assembly line, putting together B-24 Liberator

bombers for the Air Corps. Although he did not know it at the time, he would spend much of his service time working in and around these B-24s. While at Willow Run Bernard met many Southerners who had come north for work. One fond memory was of a fellow from the hills of West Virginia who nearly passed out the first time he saw one of those B-24s taking off. Apparently this gentleman had never been out of the "woods," and the sight of this giant airplane was about all he could handle. Bernard left Willow Run after a year and made his way back home. When he got back to Coral, he found most of his friends had already left, and everyone else figured it was time for him to go too.

Bernard eventually volunteered for the U.S. Army Air Corps because of his interest in aircraft and his desire to be a pilot. Another reason for choosing the Air Corps was that Bernard had some friends already in the service and they all felt the Air Corps was the way to go. He did not want any part of the Navy or the regular Army and he firmly believed the Air Corps was the best of the services, but his application was turned down. Apparently he failed the required physical for aircrew and was thus denied entry. However approximately two weeks later, the Air Corps turned around and drafted him anyway.

After being drafted, he was shipped off to an induction center at Ft. Custer for a battery of tests and exams. He did

not score high enough to become a pilot, but he was rated high enough to be selected for gunnery school. After completion of numerous tests he was sent in August of 1943 to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, for basic training.

Basic training consisted of numerous drills, exercises, and overall familiarity with military customs and equipment. One highlight of Bernard's basic training was an exhibition put on by the two heavyweight boxers, Joe Louis and Billy Kahn. The hunting Bernard had done as a kid helped in the shooting drills the recruits completed in basic training. His ability to hit what he was aiming at almost singled him out as a future gunnery instructor. After the tests he had taken at Ft. Custer were analyzed (by someone who presumably knew what they meant!), and he was deemed qualified, he was sent to Williamsport-Dickenson Seminary to the college cadet program.

Bernard has many fond memories of his time in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. At the seminary, he and his group of fellow cadets were known as "Hell's Angels," and, according to Bernard, deservedly so. Bernard repeatedly recounts how friendly the civilians were towards the cadets. It was the proverbial "home-away-from-home" in Williamsport, and many of the families would have cadets over for dinner on the weekends. Nearby the

town of Indian Gap was a major "jumping-off" point for soldiers on their way to Europe. The trains would pass right next to the cadet barracks at the seminary, and most would stand outside to lend their support to soldiers. After approximately a year in Williamsport, Bernard received orders to gunnery school in Laredo, Texas.

Gunnery school was a very important part of the Army Air Corps training regimen. The school trained personnel for aircrew service as gun operators aboard American bombers. Because the 50-caliber machine guns on the aircraft were their only line of defense, training was taken very seriously and was under constant revision. Bernard was in the basic gunnery school for six weeks. This basic course consisted mainly of indoctrination on Air Corps weaponry, especially the 50-caliber guns. On arrival to gunnery school, Bernard was processed in, and then began training by shooting skeet and trap with a shotgun. His hunting experiences as a kid continued to help so this type of training also came quite easily to him. The skeet and trap shooting was used to allow a person to develop a skill at hitting a moving target. From the skeet range, personnel would graduate to the aircraft simulation training. Bernard says that one of the biggest obstacles to be overcome was the lack of equipment available

for in-flight gunnery training. To combat this situation, gunnery instructors built a circular railroad track and mounted an old ammunition carrier (four-wheel drive truck) on top of it. This would then travel around the track at approximately 30 to 35 miles per hour. On board this truck was an actual 50-caliber machine gun and turret that was used to simulate the aircraft. This motion targeting, what Bernard calls "negative lead," was an essential skill required by aircraft gunners. It involved the ability to calculate the aiming point from one moving target (the bomber) to another moving target (the enemy fighter). This skill was one of the hardest to acquire and required constant practice and refining of technique. Another technique Bernard experienced was 50-caliber training from a stationary spot to a slow moving target approximately one thousand yards in the distance. This was to help accustom the gunners to the vast distances they would be firing at while in the air. One of the most important aspects of ground training was the actual operation of the gun. Bernard said that many times instructors would leave a spring out of the gun or jam the ammunition feeder to see how the students would react. Students were required to wear gloves at all times to simulate the cold they would experience in the air. A final test was the breakdown and reassembly of an entire .50 caliber while blindfolded. Bernard said that a premium was placed on the

gunner's knowledge of the gun itself. Following a few weeks of indoctrination on the ground, students were transferred to the actual aircraft.

Bernard thoroughly enjoyed the flying part of gunnery training. He said that the primary target plane was a B-26 which would tow a target about 500 feet behind itself. The training aircraft, usually a B-24 or B-17, would fly along side and the gunnery students would shoot at the target. Bernard says that often someone would get overly excited and hit the tow aircraft itself! Although hitting the tow aircraft was more often than not a problem, the biggest problem was airsickness. He related a story about one fellow who was so terrified of flying that he would get sick while walking out to the airplane! During the entire flight this gentleman would be sick and would not stop vomiting until the aircraft landed! Needless to say, he did not receive much valuable training on the aircraft. Overall, the basic gunnery course was six weeks long and after this time most transferred directly to their respective squadrons. Bernard, however, was transferred to advanced gunnery school in Florida. Here he would hone his gunnery skills and eventually be selected as an instructor.

While in advanced gunnery school, Bernard received further training in air-to-air firing. He was also exposed to a new type

of training the Air Corps had developed. This involved actual gun-camera footage from the war being projected onto a large wall, and the gunners would aim at the images. This provided very realistic training for almost every gunnery position, and was used extensively for aircraft identification training. Now the gunnery students could actually see an enemy aircraft approaching their position, and the students could be instructed on how they should and would react.

Another part of advanced gunnery school was learning how to teach the techniques to novices. By now, Bernard and his fellow students had been selected as instructors and they began to receive various forms of training. The newest and most exciting training program was for a new aircraft called the B-29 Superfortress. Bernard and his classmates had heard rumors about this aircraft, but had yet to see one. Now would be their chance.

Bernard and a few classmates were transferred to Clovis, New Mexico. Bernard recalls how amazed he was at the size of this new bomber: "I'd flown in the B-17 and B-24 and thought they were big, but I'll be damned if this B-29 didn't dwarf those other two."

Bernard said that training on the new aircraft was much different. The B-29 possessed an advanced gun system that worked in unison. It did not require a man at each gun because it could

be controlled remotely. He says that the most amazing thing was the gunsight. It was similar to the Norton bombsight in that the gunner looked into a little box that had a red circle in the center. The idea was to maneuver the circle to encompass the enemy aircraft and then pull the trigger. The sight automatically calculated "negative lead," and it knew which guns needed to be fired to destroy the target. All of this was accomplished by a gunner sitting about 20 feet behind the tail turret.

After some time at Clovis, Bernard was transferred to Pueblo, Colorado, to train more B-29 gunnery crews. It was while stationed in Pueblo that Victory in Europe Day arrived. Bernard recalls that everyone was happy, but not overly excited because the job (Japan) was not finished. Bernard helped train most of the B-29 gunners who were on their way to Japan, among them the gentlemen that flew the Enola Gay on her fateful mission to Hiroshima. Bernard says that after V-E Day everyone knew it was just a matter of time before the fall of Japan. Of course, how many lives it would cost and how long it would take concerned everyone.

The dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima was, as Bernard puts it, "a good thing." Bernard feels very strongly that the bomb saved thousands of more lives than it expended, and that it

shortened the war.

After the end of the war, Bernard considered making a career of the military, but decided against it. He left the service in 1946 and returned home to Michigan. He then worked in a foundry for four years; something he calls the toughest work there is. After the foundry, Bernard got a job with the State of Michigan/Department of Natural Resources as a Conservation Officer. He met his wife while working in the Kalamazoo area. Bernard was eventually transferred to the Upper Peninsula where he and his wife started a family. Their son Mike is currently working as a Trust officer in a bank here in Marquette. One very interesting point concerning the life Bernard has led since the war is that about thirty years ago Bernard and his wife hosted a foreign exchange student from Finland. This gentleman is now the Finnish ambassador to China, and Bernard and his wife plan on visiting him soon.

Overall, Bernard views the war as a positive effect on his life. He learned how much his country meant to him, and what hard work was, and most of all, to appreciate what we (Americans) have got. After this interview, Bernard reflected on the war with the opinion that we (America) could not do it again. He is not sure that the younger people of today could put up with rationing of food, lack of gas, no new cars, etc. He also does

not believe the entire country would get behind a war like it did in the 1940s, and come together for the good of the country rather than for each separate individual.

I asked Bernard what he remembers most about the war and he said he was not sure. I believe he remembers the friends he made, the stories he heard, and the experiences he got, and he views all of it as a positive time.