



Savage Sky: Life and Death on a Bomber Over Germany in 1944 (Stackpole Military History Series) [Kindle Edition]

George Webster

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Gives the reader a firsthand look at war from inside a B-17 bomber in World War II. Focuses on the 92nd Bomb Group, 8th Air Force and includes missions to the Schweinfurt ball-bearing plant and Berlin. One of the first accounts of being shot down over Sweden.

The Savage Sky is as close as you can get to experiencing aerial combat while still staying firmly planted on the ground. The writing is vivid and intimate, describing the bitter cold at high altitudes, gut-wrenching fear, lethal shrapnel from flak, and German fighters darting through the bomber formation like feeding sharks.

Savage Sky: Life and Death on a Bomber Over Germany in 1944 (Stackpole Military History Series) [Kindle Edition] Details

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From Reader Review *Savage Sky: Life and Death on a Bomber Over Germany in 1944* (Stackpole Military History Series) [Kindle Edition] for online ebook

Ken Weinert says

False

Donna says

Written by the radio operator of a B-17 Flying Fortress, provides good insight into the daily life of these men in World War II.

Nostalgia Reader says

Interesting memoir of a flight radio operator during World War II. The narrative is quick and to the point, but still relays the emotional roller coaster that Webster was experiencing during his service. The story telling was a bit formulaic, but it didn't seem to lose its pacing or interest--I powered through the last half of the book in two afternoons, so the repetition must not have been an issue for me. Not incredibly interesting or informative, but if you enjoy the subject, then I'd definitely recommend it.

Marc A. says

Although the book is written at a young reader level, it deals with a great deal of death and destruction that might not be appropriate for a very young person. Overall, it is an excellent account of the life and death of bomber crews in WWII.

Alison says

Unexpectedly good. This is not a genre that I typically read, but my husband recommended it so I gave it a try. This is one man's real experience that is reminiscent of the movie *Twelve O'clock High*. This isn't the John Wayne version of the war. The book ends with his war experience, but you can find out more about what he did after the war by looking up the author online.

Marc says

There are lots of books out there on the 8th Air Force and the strategic bombing of Europe during World

War II, and this book definitely belongs in anyone's library who is interested in the subject. The author didn't want to be where he was, and due to a mishap with his paperwork he was essentially forced into being a bomber crewman. He does the best he can and the narrative is easy to read and very enjoyable. He describes life during the time between missions quite nicely, as well as the terror and dread he felt on virtually all the missions he undertook. After reading this book, you definitely will know that life aboard the bombers wasn't the way it's portrayed in the movies--frozen oxygen masks, barbiturates to fall asleep at night, amphetamines to wake up in the morning, paregoric to clog things up for long flights, looking around at breakfast and seeing empty tables day after day. Read this book--you won't be disappointed.

Chris says

A disjointed and unevenly paced account, which leaves the fates of major characters unresolved. The prose is repetitive and uninspired. Though there is a story worth telling here, the author's treatment of it is rather unsatisfying.

Beth Bedee says

I love this concept: a non-fiction 1st person narrative that reads like fiction. It makes the events so much more real and personal. I can't believe the author's luck, both good and bad. If this were a novel, it the events almost might seem unbelievable. But the fact that they are real blows my mind.

The book is simply written. I wouldn't say its the best writing I've every seen, but in a case like this, I think the content is what's important. I really liked the extensive dialogue. It helped with personalizing the story.

I'm a WWII buff and a History major. Of course, I learned all about the bombing of German factories and then eventual invasion of Normandy. But I never realized how terrifying those bombing missions were. I stupidly assumed that being in the air was safer than being on the ground. The numbers presented in this book of bomber and fighter crews that were lost is startling. The author does a really good job of making the reader realize that every flight was a possible death mission.

I really liked the more personal account of his relationship with Jane. I think we often look at soldiers in war as one-dimensional. But they all have mother and fathers, girlfriends or wives, children, friends, etc.

POSSIBLE SPOILER:

I'd love to know what happened to Jane. She must have assumed he was killed in action and moved away. I wonder how it affected the rest of her life.

I'd like to know more about his secret flying missions to Calais. I conducted some further research and discovered that his secret missions were a part of Operation Fortitude which was a deception strategy to divert the Germans away from Normandy. How incredible that he was a part of such a monumental part of history.

I'd recommend this book to everyone. We all could learn something.

Dachokie says

More Than the Average Combat Narrative ...", February 3, 2011

World War II's air war over Europe always seemed to conjure thoughts of sheepskin-clad knights battling in modern steel horses ... chivalrous and clean, to a degree. The reality of events is that the battles being fought in the skies high above the European continent were anything but clean ... they were just as dangerous, if not more so, as the battles being fought on the front lines. Mainly because the enemy was only one of the multitudinous deadly hazards facing the men; those steel horses became steel coffins for many. George Webster has penned a superb memoir of his days on board a B-17 bomber and struggling to cope with life between missions.

Webster doesn't waste any time introducing the reader to the trials and tribulations he experienced as a radio operation on a Flying Fortress ... the first chapter starts with one of his most dangerous missions: getting the plane and crew across the Atlantic Ocean to its eventual base in Britain. A flight wrought with storms, gale force winds, poor visibility, a rapidly depleting supply of fuel and navigating on instinct alone, we immediately wonder if Webster's memoir would begin with him being plucked from the Atlantic following a crash landing. So descriptive and eventful the recollection, we feel we're on board with the crew, sweating our way over a seemingly endless ocean, hoping the pilot and crew can instill enough confidence to suppress the growing sense of doom everyone must have felt. The drama of the first chapter alone sets the tone for the remainder of the book as Webster's writing style allows the reader to not only see, but feel what it was like to walk in his shoes.

While I was expecting a simple combat narrative, I was pleasantly surprised to get the whole experience of life in the Army Air Corps, whether it was relaxing between missions in a Quonset hut, freezing in the skies high above Germany or on leave in London. The life of Webster and the men that flew with him was not simply relegated to surviving German fighters and flak, they faced much more ... enough to give thought that conducting the war from a foxhole may have, at times, offered better odds of survival. The fear and misery of life for soldiers on the ground is well-documented; Webster paints no less a picture about combat on board a lumbering, vulnerable heavy bomber. While flak and German fighters were the obvious threats, the delicate balance of sustaining life at such high altitudes was echoed as being an ever-present danger on each and every mission, from start to finish. It was explained that breathing a few simple breaths outside the oxygen mask was enough to kill a man. Or a few seconds of exposed skin would almost instantly initiate the onset of frostbite and a few more seconds could require a digit to be amputated. Common issues such as a malfunction/short circuit in the heating system in the flight suit or an improperly fitting oxygen mask could mean certain death ... all prior to facing the dangers of Germany's defenses. And if a man was wounded or a bomber was damaged, the hazards of flying at such a high altitude remained at least until safety was somewhat assured by getting plane and crew across the English Channel ... assuming a crash landing was not required. Webster paints a bleak picture of his outlook on surviving the war and continually supports his rationale with the depressing fact that the average length of service of a bomber and crew was only 12-13 missions ... even though 25 missions were required. The mission number generated just as much fear as the mission itself ... Webster's sense of doom is overwhelming throughout the book. The missions that Webster experienced are recalled in the same gripping manner as that initial trip across the Atlantic Ocean.

What separates "The Savage Sky" from most air-war accounts is that we are introduced more to the personal side of the airman's life, away from the arena of combat. It becomes apparent that these men viewed time "on the ground" as a precious and lived life to the fullest when possible. The most enjoyable chapters of Webster's experience were his visits to London and his "live for today" attitude when it comes to the women

he encountered. Being very young and naïve, Webster takes the reader along his journey to manhood and his first true love. What makes this part of his story so compelling is that Webster is so open and honest when describing his innocence and naiveté. We feel the nervous anxiety he experienced in anticipation of visiting his girlfriend and we sense the dread he felt knowing the relationship had a possibility of ending every day he flew a mission. Webster's growing affection for the woman in London served as a major subplot for me as I found myself anticipating the war's end, the ensuing marriage and a future in small-town America. But, just when the reader seems assured of the outcome, the war interferes and everything changes.

"The Savage Sky" is one of the most enjoyable books I've read about an airman's experience of World War II. I found the author to be genuine and open with his story of being an innocent "kid" forced to become a man under wartime circumstances. The book is more than a run-of-the-mill combat narrative and has all the necessary ingredients to consistently keep the reader interested and excited about what will happen next.

Dan says

Interesting story, but a bit repetitive (each mission reads exactly the same), and oh God, that ending is horrible and loses a star just for that.

Martin Boulter says

It was very interesting and very real. You could imagine yourself in the bomber and living the life of a crew member. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in the bomber crew life during WWII.

John Podlaski says

"Savage Sky" is a coming of age story which follows the exploits of a nineteen year old American B-17 radio operator and his indoctrination to both war and love. The authors' writing style makes me feel like I am part of the ten-man crew inside a massive bomber - one of hundreds flying in a fixed formation that spreads across the sky for miles. The planned invasion of Europe is only a few months away and each mission takes this group deeper and deeper into the continent to bomb factories, airbases, rail yards, submarine pens and petroleum storage tanks. As a result, the Allied bombings deep within Germany are successfully limiting Germany's ability to continue the war. However, the cost is enormous as only 16% of these crews survive the required 30 missions to complete their tour of duty. German fighter planes zip through these formations like hornets, spewing lines of red tracer rounds into targets of opportunity...well beyond the range of support fighters, these behemoths must fend for themselves. If fighters aren't enough, each target destination has black clouds of anti-aircraft fire and flak awaiting them. German fighters will drop in again on the formation during their return flight to England.

Each member of the crew wears an inner outfit with electrical leads that helps to warm them in the un-pressurized plane. The temperature during these flights at 20,000 feet is minus 40 degrees, coupled with the 170 mph wind blowing through the openings in the aircraft body, it feels more like minus 100 degrees - making it difficult to fight back. Most disabled B17's catch fire and explode in mid air without a chance of the crew escaping. Survivors from nearby planes relive these experiences every night...to ensure crews are able to fly, medical doctors issue downers and uppers in an effort to help them sleep. They are all scared out of their wits, but dare not say anything in fear of being sent to the "nut house". So they man-up and deal with

the terror.

The main character loses his virginity to a waitress in London and later meets a stripper at one of the upper class theaters. He is smitten and asks the lady to dinner - only to talk. They become enamored with one another and soon fall in love. They write to each other continuously and he visits her whenever he is able to swing a two-day pass. Seeing Jane is his therapy for the PTSD he has...her words of encouragement are all that keep him going in this insane world. When he isn't scheduled to fly that day, the author becomes a tourist, visiting nearby towns and in awe of the history he encounters.

I only have two criticisms that prevented five stars in my review: First, the story ends abruptly. So much detail up to that point, then a brief epilogue finishes the story. I would have been interested in more detail about Sweden and learn more about what he did during those three months to find Jane. Secondly, I was bothered by the amount of redundancy in every mission. Appears like the the same paragraphs are used in every mission description.

I have to admit that "Savage Sky" kept me on the edge of my seat. Not only is it an exciting read, but I also found it educational and learned much about England's history and of the B17 and crews during World War II. Highly recommended! Great job George and thank you for your service - Brother!!!

John Podlaski, author
Cherries - A Vietnam War Novel

Hal says

review to come

Thom Eckles says

Good first hand of a warrior in a situation where he expects to die. Nice romance woven in.

Eric_W says

When reviewing a book, I like to compare it against my expectations for that genre: they vary. For a memoir I would expect to learn something about the author who must also have something to say and/or reveal something about the time and place of the memoir. Does it add anything to our knowledge is another question I might ask. Finally, do I give a shit about either the author or the time and place? Sometimes I begin a memoir knowing I'll learn something of the time and place only to discover I've begun to like the author and so actually do care about what happens to him or her.

Webster captures better than most the harrowing, terrifying, and just downright uncomfortable experience flying missions in a B-17 over Europe. Almost not making it, when the plane they were ferrying nonstop ran into headwinds, (the engines ran out of fuel while taxing after they managed to find an airbase in Ireland) his life thereafter was awful. His intent was never to be in the Air Corps but enlistees had little choice and went where assigned and because he had an aptitude for Morse Code was trained as a radio operator. The planes

were unheated and the slipstream would come through the plane at 20,000 plus feet at 20 degrees below zero at 170 mph making for a wind chill of, well I have no idea. (The Plexiglas top over the radio operators station didn't appear until the G model.) On one occasion his oxygen mask froze and it was only fortuitous that he recognized the feelings of well-being and warmth as symptoms of CO2 poisoning.

The reality of flying was the opposite of what they had been led to believe. The idea that their guns would provide an impenetrable barrier was "horseshit" according to his British instructor. "They shoot down our guys on almost every mission." And a pilot stunned Webster when he revealed he was to only one of his group to make twenty-five missions. Their instructor cautions, "you got no training in the U.S., for practical purposes. . .even with training half of new crews don't survive the first six missions." (The *Memphis Belle* crew was the first in May of 1943. In the previous eight months not one crew survived to make twenty-five missions.

There were no facilities on a B-17 and it was too cold to just whip it out and relieve oneself so voiding before they left was imperative. (I would have peed my pants although whether that would have shorted out the electric heating wires in the suits might have been a problem.) To avoid problems at the other end, crews were dosed with paregoric (containing opium) before leaving which bound them up tight, and then dosed with castor oil to unbind things if they returned. Medics issued amphetamines to keep them awake and sleeping pills to help them sleep.

To make things worse, it was revealed that German civilians were lynching bomber crews who had parachuted safely. If found by the German Army they were safe - unless they had killed a German civilian while defending themselves against lynching, in which case they were executed. Catch-22.

Assuming a successful bombing run escaping flak and enemy fighters there was always danger from friendly aircraft. Webster watched in horror as one returning B-17 trying to regain some altitude slammed into the plane above him sending both to a fiery grave below.

"I have flown only four missions, but I have learned a lot from talking with veteran crews that have survived twelve or even twenty missions. They say that the air force and news media in the United States misled us. The B-17 Flying Fortress is no fortress. It's a first-rate airplane and can survive much punishment, but German fighters can shoot it down easily, and its eleven machine guns are little protection. The gunners try hard and frequently destroy a fighter, but our pilots take violent, evasive action by throwing the bombers all over the sky to avoid the fighters' gunfire. This spoils the gunners' aim, and their bullets fly in all directions. I guess our commanders, being pilots, don't trust the gunners, so they decree this wild, evasive action. Real protection for us comes from an escort of our fighter planes. When we are beyond the range of our escort, we lose lots of bombers. Thus, we don't fly unscathed to a target and return in the best Hollywood tradition. We die from freezing, anoxia (lack of oxygen), altitude sickness, gunshots, shrapnel, being trapped in a burning plane, and explosion. . .I can't get it out of my mind that my chance of surviving twenty-five missions is so small, but if I refuse to fly, I face execution for desertion. What a dilemma to face: death if you do and death if you don't. No wonder fellows go insane. Most of us are depressed. I see it in pale faces and trembling bodies at briefings. I see men praying. A few try to joke, but I note that they are pale and fidget at the same time. As for me, I'm frightened out of my wits. I wish my headache would go away. I've had it for three days, and it's killing me."

By the time he reaches his seventeenth mission, only four of the original ten original crew members. On that mission his Group lost 40% of its aircraft and two of the planes in his squadron that managed to make it back will have to be junked they are so shot up. Exhaustion is a constant, fear is constant, the stress headaches have become almost unbearable and he's living on sleeping pills and amphetamines (all Army approved and prescribed, of course.) No one believes they can survive the next mission, let alone thirty.

One flyer, Charles , had enough and refused to fly any more missions. He could have been executed, but his superiors having faced similar terrors, demoted him to private and gave him the job of sweeping floors. The punishment was harsher than one could imagine, having to face his friends as they left on missions and then counting the number who didn't return. He finally decided to return to combat flying and filled in on a crew for a member who was sick. On April 11, 1944, in the B-17 just behind Webster's, Charles's plane exploded during an attack by FW-190s and Charles died.

Obviously, Webster survived the war. Just how, you will have to read the book to find out. He had to be one of the luckiest men around. Webster conveys a nice mix of naiveté that is often lacking from more polished memoirs. For example, the time he visits Cambridge and is just awe-struck by the sense of history and learning. Or his visit to a prostitute in London and the friendship that develops between him and a stripper he met on a bet. We genuinely see a nineteen-year-old terrified and the hopelessness of his situation.

Update 8/9/13 Just ran across this official Army video celebrating the Memphis Belle.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9LZP5R...> . Interestingly, I recently had a tour of the last flying B-29, the bomber, slightly larger than a B-17, that was assigned mostly to the Pacific. There was also a B-24 where I toured the B-29, and what struck me the most about all the planes was how very small they were. It must have been claustrophobic in those things.
