

The Gray Eagle Soars: The Diaries of Lloyd Sherwood Gray

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Lloyd Gray always has a twinkle in his eye and a mischievous grin on his face. “Some little boys grow up wanting to be firemen; I just wanted to be a pilot.” Shortly after graduating from high school in 1941, the son of Harold and Susan Miner Gray followed his dreams and learned to fly single-engine planes at Brainard Field, and, once Brainard was closed to civilian traffic, at Granby Field.

Gray quickly earned a reputation for “buzzing” homes, flying as close to the rooftops of houses as he could get. Generally, he was pretty lucky with his stunt flying. When he crashed a plane in Granby buzzing his uncle’s house, he walked away unhurt (one can’t say the same for the poor plane.) As Gray will tell you, this was bad timing; he had decided to join the Army Air Corps, and his interview with the recruiter was just days away. Assuring the recruiter that the plane crash really was an “accident,” Gray was accepted into the program, and soon was off to a number of schools in different states to learn how to fly B-17s, a heavy bomber affectionately known as a “Fortress.” When his crew was finally named, they did final training at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida before shipping out to England.

On the day he flew off to war, Gray gave his hometown of Hebron one last thrill: he buzzed them in his B-17 bomber! Coming within 100 feet of the ground, it was Lloyd’s way of saying: “See you soon.” When asked what people’s reactions were to this huge plane buzzing the town, he laughs and says, “Well, I hear a few chickens on Robinson Hill died of fright.”

Gray kept a diary of each of his missions; entries were made right after his return while the memories were fresh in his mind. His departure point was always England; his target was almost always Germany. Reading the diaries is sometimes like reading poetry, yet the stark reality of war is clearly discernable.

Gray’s first mission was to Stuttgart, Germany. *“Today we got up bright and early (3am), ate a good breakfast and went to a four o’clock briefing. It was well organized after which we left and got dressed. Funny how the equipment room was sort of like the locker room of a bunch of high school football players.”* Yet he was filled with pride as he left on this first flight: *“Now you are a man who has wings. No man can tell of this feeling, he must have this experience to feel it. This is another world. A man’s complexes leave him because there is no place for them up there.”* As he approached his target, he remembered: *“Now you say to yourself if I’m alive in five minutes, it’s one more mission closer to being home...you realize only God can bring you through.”*

Lloyd Gray the soldier quickly learned the realities of war. His second mission, to Cologne, contains a haunting image: *“Bombs away and I streaked for clear sky as I looked over my left shoulder for tracking flak; I saw a horrible sight. About eight thousand feet below me I saw the remains of Colonel Luper’s ship plunging toward the earth, a flaming mass, then an explosion that reduced his ship to confetti. A Fortress is a beautiful thing when it flies, but so ugly when it falls to earth helplessly.”*

One of the key strategies in the air war was for B-17s to fly in formation. This provided protection to the big planes, and also maximized their strike ability. Flying in formation was hard work, but falling out of formation (“falling out of the box”) was a bad sign. It increased the ship’s vulnerability to the small German planes that would go after the heavy bomber relentlessly, hoping to bring it down once it was out of the safety net of formation. In addition to the German planes, the Allied pilots had to deal constantly with “flak.” Flak stands for Fliegerabwehrkanonen, German anti-aircraft artillery. As the war progressed, and became more of a German defensive war, the Nazis began to rely heavily on flak. To put it into perspective: at the beginning of the war in 1939, Germany had 10,300 Flaks; by the end of the war in 1944, they had 29,960 Flaks. In 1944, Flak destroyed 3,501 American planes. The Luftwaffe had almost been destroyed by 1944; Flaks offered protection from Allied air power.

One of the most significant air battles in 1944 was over Mersberg, Germany, and Lloyd Gray was in the midst of it. The battle lasted days, as Allied pilots flew in, flew out, and flew back again to take this important target. Gray wrote: *“Well we’ve had it. I have never before been so close to death... We went after oil refineries... At first the white puffs mixed with the black flak – later I realized they were 20 mm explosions. They knocked down 9 out of our group. Harrison and Guptil among them. There is hope that they may be P.W.’s (Prisoners of War). F.W. 190’s hit us in groups of 9 wave after wave. We flew in lead box. They almost wiped out the low box then hit us. Harlan blew one up... It was pretty bad; there was no sport to it when they go after you, you don’t have a chance. Forty fighters on 1 or 2 planes at a time, well it’s suicide. We have no right to be here tonight. The Lord was very good to us today. I never needed Him so badly as that day. Til today, I knew I’d get back O.K., but now I realize that it’s really a game of chance, if they hit you, your number is up.”* In the Battle of Mersberg, 56 bombers were destroyed or crippled by Flak.

Gray’s 23rd mission was to Bingen, Germany. His words are chilling as he thinks about his mission and his hometown: *“A long thin line of smoke. It had just about gone out of sight when I saw the bombs land in and about a small town. Even from our altitude, the explosions could be seen very clearly. The whole town became covered with smoke. The ground was covered with snow that make the strikes very clear. Those people really know that war is hell. The chances are just about everyone in that town was killed. – Just like wiping out Hebron.”*

Lloyd Gray flew a total of 35 missions in World War II. On his last mission to Sieger, Germany on January 29, 1945, his co-pilot, Charles Keller noted in his personal diary: *“Well, Lloyd finished up today – for which, Hooray! I’m really glad for that guy – they don’t come any better – and I rate him among the best pilots I’ve ever flown with. He controls that monster bird absolutely!!!”*

Well done, Gray Eagle.

The Hebron Historical Society thanks Lloyd Gray for sharing his personal diaries, which have now been digitally scanned and preserved for future generations.