



Lt. Col. Harry H. Crosby
U.S. Army Air Forces

The week after Pearl Harbor
I enlisted in the Army Air Corps.
They were taking almost everyone.
I went to California for pilot
training. I couldn't fly the PT-17,
the Stearman. I washed out in
twelve hours and six minutes.
I was commissioned as a navigator
at Mather Field, Sacramento,
California, on October 10, 1942.



Most navigators in the Army
Air Forces started as pilot
cadets who "washed out" of
pilot training, often in PT-17s,
such as the one seen here. Good
math skills were considered
essential for those who made
the transition to navigator.

In early 1941 the Army Air Corps had only 44 trained navigators, mostly from a civilian contract school. By war's end, the Army Air Forces had graduated over 50,000 navigators from its own schools. The penalty for this rapid growth during the first years of war was a lack of competent instructors and new navigators deployed with questionable skills.

United States Army



Air Corps Training Center

Seabee County, W. Virginia



US National Archives and Records Administration

I didn't want to worry [my wife], but I confessed my lack of confidence about my competence as a navigator. I worried most about getting lost over water. "I hope we go to the ETO [European Theater of Operations]," I said. "Flying the Atlantic would be bad enough, but the Pacific would be worse."



Lt. Harry Crosby shortly before he deployed to England for combat in B-17 bombers with the 100th Bomb Group of the Eighth Air Force.

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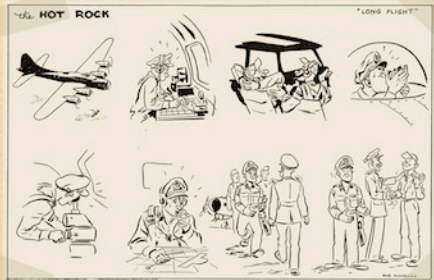
Dear Father,

The day is here. Tomorrow I leave for the war. I don't know what to think about it. I'm rather scared—that's a pretty big ocean to cross and a pretty big war when I get there. Yet, it's all a gamble. People drop dead on street corners.

So all I can do is hope and pray. I do so wish that I can get back by Christmas.... Good luck and try to help Mother be happy and brave.

Your son,
Harry

From a good pilot all I expected was a good truck driver. I wanted him to shut up, drive the plane, and stay out of things as the navigator and the bombardier took care of the mission.



Log of Navigation

As Harry Crosby entered combat, he quickly gained experience and confidence. Navigators commonly felt that pilots and commanders did not fully appreciate their efforts. Their job was complex and not readily understood by others. It seemed to them that their importance was not valued until something went wrong. "Hot rock" was period slang for "hotshot."

The Army Air Forces was stressing celestial navigation and crews were able to make the Atlantic crossing better than I did, but in our supply shop, octants began to pile up as new navigators realized they could not be used on missions and they got in the way in the barracks.

In Germany and France the Germans changed their transmitters irregularly, and we could never depend on a radio fix. During much of our flying we were over the clouds. ... With pilots having to jiggle their airspeed and headings to keep in formation, the navigator could not dead reckon.



Log of Navigation

Crosby, like most air navigators, saw celestial navigation as the high point of their art. But, in the European theater, most navigators relied mainly on dead reckoning and radio navigation.

Wins Flying Cross



First Lt. Harry H. Crosby, stationed with the United States army air forces in England, has been awarded the distinguished flying cross, according to word received by his parents, Guy Crosby and Mrs. Eva Crosby, both of Rockford.

Stationed at Wendover field, Utah, before being sent overseas last May 30, Crosby was promoted from second to first lieutenant Aug. 15. His wife, Jean, lives in Chicago.

Robert Crosby, Rockford, Ill.

Former Students—

Serving the Nation

—Former Iowa Citizens

AWARDED DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS



FIRST LIEUT. Harry Crosby, who has been awarded a distinguished flying cross for receiving the longest raid of the war up to the present time, is pictured with his wife, the former Jean Robinson, both of former students of the university.

A distinguished flying cross has been awarded to First Lieut. Harry Crosby, university of Iowa, for having navigated a successful mission to Transjordan, May 30. The mission was, up to that time, the longest and most daring made by a flying force.

First Lieutenant Crosby and his wife, the former Jean Robinson, are pictured at the home of Mrs. Kinsey Hunt, 221 Madison street, one of the former students of the university.

Robert Crosby, Rockford, Ill.

Less than two months after arriving in England, Harry Crosby had his first major test as a lead navigator on the Eighth Air Force's most daring mission to date. The target was a German naval installation. It was regarded as a major success, and Lt. Crosby received the Distinguished Flying Cross for his efforts.

For extraordinary achievement, while serving as Navigator of a B-17 airplane on a bombing mission over Continental Europe, 24 July 1943. Lieutenant Crosby's outstanding performance as lead Navigator on one of the longest raids thus far conducted by the Eighth Air Force made possible the bombing of a vital objective under difficult conditions. In spite of adverse weather conditions, all planes reached the target and the mission was accomplished without loss. The courage and skill displayed by Lieutenant Crosby on this occasion reflect the highest credit upon himself and the Armed Forces of the United States.

Harry Crosby's Distinguished Flying Cross citation

"Ahah," I said. "Here is a nice big city." I twirled my E-6B computer, set in the wind, and got a heading to a point south of the city.

We floated over the I.P. [initial point]. I heard the bomb bay doors rumbling open. Now to see the name of the city we were about to blow off the face of the earth. I had to record it in my log. Bonn, Germany. That's where Beethoven went to school. I hit my [microphone] button.

"All positions from navigator. I have another target. We can't bomb Bonn."

"Command to navigator. Why not?"

"That is where Beethoven went to school." Sixty-three Flying Fortresses floated over Bonn, some of them with their bomb bay doors open. But no bombs fell.

The view from Crosby's formation. The smoke trails are from target-marking bombs.



← Here, Crosby describes how a bit of trivia he knew about his favorite composer led him to divert a target of opportunity strike on Bonn, Germany, when his primary target was obscured. By happenstance, Bonn was spared from heavy damage afterward. Its intact condition after the war made it the logical choice as the capital of West Germany.



Rebecca Crosby Hutchinson



Rebecca Crosby Hutchinson

On October 8, 1943, the 100th Bomb Group targeted the heavily defended German industrial city of Bremen. The amazing tale of survival of Crosby and his crew drew media attention (including this illustration from "Yank" magazine). Here, he inspects the remnants of his navigator's compartment after his B-17 "Just a-Snappin'" crash-landed.

Leading a large formation of B-17s, we were hit hard over the target, spun out of control and saved from crashing by the superb efforts of our pilot and command pilot. With two engines knocked out, we were forced to head home alone at low altitude, our plane riddled by over 1,200 shell holes by actual count, one crewman mortally wounded and five severely injured.

When we were attacked repeatedly by Luftwaffe fighters along the way, our gunners shot down ten of them. Unable to ditch in the North Sea because of our wounded or to make it to our own airfield, [we] crash-landed at a "dummy" airfield on the English coast.

After the harrowing losses of 1943, Crosby and his fellow aircrew found less opposition in 1944 and 1945. However, navigational challenges increased as missions moved deeper into central Europe.

"Another milk run [easy mission]. We bombed an airfield and marshalling yard in Béziers. We did a good job. Little flak and no fighters."



James Crosby, Tusclitman



While returning from a "shuttle" mission to the Soviet Union on July 5, 1944, the 100th Bomb Group attacked targets in France. Crosby used this map during the mission.

