

World War II Experience

United States Air Force
1943-1945 Pacific Combat Area

FRENISI

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Frenisi, a big battle-worn Liberator (B24) is the grandest old veteran of them all.

With the marks of 100 strike missions against the Japanese showing in her battered, bullet-scarred carcass, Frenisi had the greatest combat record of any airplane of her type in the South Pacific Theater.

Although she nearly broke her gallant record coming home from her 92nd mission with only two of her four engines turning over, Frenisi didn't know when to quit. She was re-powered with four bright, new Pratt and Whitney engines and went back to the war.

To those of us who flew her and to the ground crew on the line who tinkered, petted and sometimes wired her into shape and who tuned up her engines to a song of horsepower, she was more than a collection of steel and dura- aluminum and chaotic noise.

To us she was a personality as interesting and likeable as the girl next door and as determined and crotchety as the old battle-ax who used to chase us out of her cherry tree.

Frenisi's story is the story of the fight back through the Solomon's and into Western New Guinea within striking distance of the Philippines that begun on beleaguered Guadalcanal when the tide of the Japanese invasion was broken. Through heat that blistered her paint and torrential rain, through thunderheads that strained every bulkhead and spar, through the sub-zero temperatures of high altitude, the blackness of stormy nights and over agonizingly long distances, Frenisi had carried her bomb load of destruction to the enemy.

She was always a fighting airplane. She'd look down her nose at sea searches - as often as not her engines wouldn't check out 100% but she never missed a flight when she was scheduled as number 323. She liked combat, bombs dropping, ack-ack bursting about her

and her 50 caliber guns would rattle defiance at the Jap Zeros. The records showed she only turned back four times out of 100 scheduled missions as a result of her own mechanical troubles.

FRENISI BORN...

Frenisi was born in the huge Consolidated Aircraft Factory at San Diego, California and midwived by a tractor that pulled her to the flight line on February 10, 1943. She was an unknown but lusty young virgin in her ugly coat of camouflage paint and only a number, 42-40323 to identify her among her sisters. She was a B-24D and the old-timers will tell you the "D" series was the "top of the line." nicknamed "Boxcar."

As she roared down the runway, she was just a noisy awkward boxcar on three wheels, but as she lunged into the air and soared over the sprawling factory she had assumed the effortless beauty of all flying things accentuated by the long slender wings and the forward thrust, cylindrical snouts of engines. She was experiencing for the first time the dynamic grace and stern discipline that were to be her destiny.

On February 13, 1943, she was delivered to the U.S. Air Corps at Tucson Air Base and after a few hours of shakedown and test flights, she was accepted. A few weeks of aimless shuttling around the country, Kansas City, St. Paul, Topeka ended on April 1st, 1943. She arrived at Long Beach, California assigned to the 6th Ferrying Group for delivery overseas and combat.

Did she know her moments of glory were approaching when they checked and rechecked her guns and turrets, installed life rafts and emergency packs, rations and tuned up her radio compass?

OVERSEAS AND COMBAT...

On April 3rd, she lurched to a stop at Hamilton Field, California where a transit ground crew to whom this was old stuff rechecked her engines, emergency equipment, and filled the main and auxiliary tanks to over flowing with 100-octane gasoline.

In the half-light of early morning of April 4, 1943, she droned over the Golden Gate Bridge, earmarked for the South Pacific. She stopped at Hickam Field, Hawaii long enough for installation of a new nose turret and a retractable ball turret in her belly. She was one of the first of the South Pacific Liberators to have a ball turret. Also in Hawaii, she picked up Major Dana Billings as pilot and R.W. Eickemeyer as flight engineer and top turret gunner.

Then onward to the Christmas Islands, American Samoa, Fiji, New Caledonia, and she was learning the loneliness of blue water stretching on all sides to the horizon, broken only by white puffs of cumulus and towering thunderheads. She arrived on Guadalcanal on May 6th. Here she found a home and a foster-father.

Master Sergeant G.E. Green was crew chief, regular Air Corp...with mechanical wisdom in his hands and a passion for a song. Sergeant Green had been singing a popular song since

before he left the states. When he didn't sing it, he whistled it, and when he didn't whistle, he hummed it.

He christened his new toy with the name of his passion Frenisi, with two "I's" instead of two "E's". Beside the name appeared a voluptuous Mexican wench, clothed only in a sombrero, a serape and a pair of high-heeled boots.

COMBAT...

Frenisi's first mission on May 31, 1943 might have been prophetic. She was prowling with a sister plane on the east coast of heavily defended Bougainville and had dropped four of her eight 500 pound bombs when she spotted a Jap coastal steamer loaded with human cargo. Her remaining four bombs straddled the ship without inflicting fatal damage. But Frenisi had tasted enemy blood and knew for the first time the hysterical rage of the killer. Again and again, she charged at fifty feet above the water. Her guns spitting hatred at the loathsome thing until it spouted flames, eventually ran aground and exploded.

A short time later she came upon a cargo vessel and with her sister plane, she attacked and left it blazing too.

Still sleek and proud in her unscratched paint and newly-won fame, Frenisi quickly became the flagship of the fleet, the leader of the squadron, and the line of yellow bombs painted on her side to mark her missions began to lengthen.

Targets in the Solomons: Kahili, Kara, Poporrang, Shortland Island, Buka, Bonis, Sohana Island, Ballale, Vila, Munda, ---she hit them all. She led a formation to blast out of their foxholes a horde of Japs who had pinned down American troops on New Georgia just northeast of the Munda airstrip.

One day over Shortland Harbor with Major Henry G. McNeese at the controls and slow imperturbable Lt. M.L. Nelson, lost in action a few months later, tooling the knobs of the bombsight, spotted the sinuous whit wake of a destroyer of the Shigure class in violent evasive action.

Frenisi's bomb bay doors slid open and her ten five hundred pound demolition bombs slipped from their places in the racks. Slowly, inexorably their path of flight converged with the twisting course of the destroyer. There were three splashes in the water, two explosions on the destroyer's deck, and five more splashes on the far side. The ship's motion stopped, a column of black smoke was rising from admidship, it began to list and crewmembers were taking to the lifeboats, as Frenisi turned homeward.

On August 30th, she had the worst scare of her career. Caught over Kahili with Captain Charles W. Body, of Lillington, North Carolina at the controls she was slashed and stung by forty intercepting Zeros. When Frenisi returned and landed at the "Canal" they counted 48 holes in her aching skin. But nine days later she was flying over Kahili again.

Frenisi has belonged to the crews of five pilots, Major McNeese, Captain Byrd, Lt. A.J. Battenfield, Lt. W.P. Moller, Belleville, Illinois, Lt. R.B. Miller, Richmond California. She was flown by dozens of pilots, Col. Glen Birchard, Lt. Col. E.A. Jurkens, Lt. Col. N.S. Benson, Major Dana Billings, Major Roland O. (Lucky) Lumby, Major C.P. Bialka, and a host of Captains and Lieutenants. Her bombsight log was signed by some of the finest bombardiers in the South Pacific, Major Karl Weilbacher, Captain G.A. Bensinger, Lt. M.L. Nelson, Lt. J.S. Krummel, and Lt. T.L. Mesenbourg.

Most of the men who took her into combat, returned and went home. Some never made it home. But of the hundreds who entrusted their lives to her, Frenisi never lost a man. Only one man won the Purple Heart, but he always blushed when asked about it. The wound was a scratch that barley broke the skin.

Frenisi had forty-three strikes when Lt. C.B. Barnard, Navigator, (writer of this article) was assigned to the plane. Her crew chief was Master Sgt. K.E. Patzlaff and Technical Sergeant R.W. Eickemeyer who also was Flight Engineer from the start of South Pacific service for Frenisi. He has been awarded the South Pacific Ribbon with five oak leaf clusters and seven campaign ribbons. Frenisi at 43 missions was considered an old plane as heavy bombers go. Her heaters would no longer warm the nose of the flight deck. She had her own special assortments of rattles, and her skin was scarred by hundreds of dents, scratches and patches.

She reached the crisis of her career at forty-eight missions. Her engines, the original installed in the factory, were worn by 428 hours of operation much of it grinding labor of high altitude flying. The squadron-engineering officer, Capt. Joseph Vaccaro, was faced with two choices; retire Frenisi from combat or install four new engines, a dubious extravagance in view of her age. The ground crew and Chief Pilot Lt. Moeller saved her; one by guaranteeing the crew would keep her in shape for at least forty more missions and the Lt. asserted she was the best plane in the squadron and it is the only one he would fly.

The ground crew drew the assignment to install four new engines and Frenisi returned to the war. She polished off Kahili with a side trip to lonely Nauru, 600 miles from nowhere in the middle of the Pacific, for diversion. She went to Rabaul lugging a full load of eight 1000 pounders time after time until that great bases five airstrips were destroyed. The shipping was chased out of the harbor and the city was leveled.

She was the best plane in the squadron. With lower power settings and burning less gasoline, she could show her heels to any of the new sisters. She had a superb contempt for the ground and would show it by using incredibly short stretches of runway for takeoff.

They are beginning to count the rows of yellow bombs on her side now and suggesting that Frenisi might be due to retire. But that was not in the cards as Frenisi was looking for new worlds to conquer. One moonlit night in April 1944 over Truk Atoll, she unceremoniously dumped her load of magnesium incendiaries into the center of installations and fuel tanks on Dublon Island. Then she beat every other ship in the group home.

She was moved to a new home base in the Admiralties Island and divided her time between Truk, Satawan, Woleai, and Biak Island, near the western tip of New Guinea. She dropped a load of bombs on the coastal defenses at Biak on D-Day and then circled to watch the waiting lines of barges chug ashore to discharge their swarm of American foot soldiers.

Frenisi nearly met her Waterloo on her last trip to Satawan. Lt. O.L. Adair, Holly, Michigan was the pilot. It was his second mission and Frenisi's ninety-second. Her second set of engines was wearing thin at this point with more than 420 flight time hours. Mechanical trouble started in the right in board engine, at about one hour from primary target area. Adair feathered the engine and began sweating out the other three engines. Returning to home base, the left outboard engine quit.

"We were in a cloud when the engine quit and we were scared. I told the crew to start throwing loose things out. Ammunition was first to go. Then we came out of a cloud and I could see home base." With only 65% power of her two remaining engines, Frenisi was indicating 160 miles per hour and losing less than 100 feet per minute. The crew was not through throwing ammunition out and Adair told them to stop, as they would make home base OK. Adair said, "She's the best plane I have ever flown and when she gets the new engines, I would like to fly it on a regular basis."

Again the fabled ground crew installed the second set of engines and Frenisi returned to combat. At 100 missions, a record for heavy bombers, Frenisi was retired and was to return to sell bonds in the states. The plane was landing in New Zealand on the way home and the nose wheel retracted on landing. The nose section was damaged and the plane was never repaired and was eventually placed in the recycle pile.

Frenisi's Record

1 Destroyer
2 Freighters
4 Zeros
6 Purple Hearts
2 Fish Missions (missed target)
98 Missions
1000 Flight hours