



Milton's Climb

By Walter J. Boyne

In 1933, T. R. Milton enlisted as an Army private. Ten years later, the future four-star general was leading daring bombing raids against some of the toughest targets in Germany.

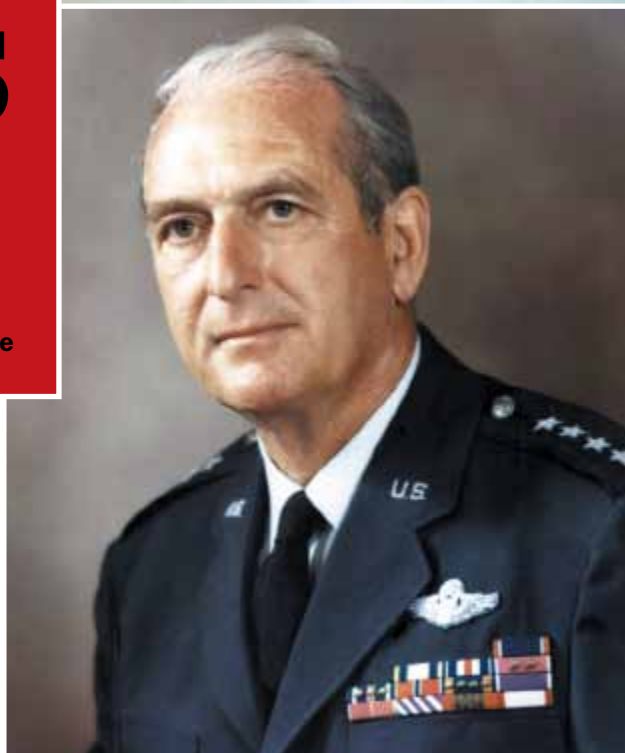


Photo courtesy Theodore R. Milton Jr.

On Aug. 12, 1943, VIII Bomber Command launched a fleet of 330 B-17Fs against the synthetic oil refineries and manufacturing facilities around Gelsenkirchen, Germany, escorted by 329 P-47 fighters.

The weather was as bad as usual over Great Britain as the B-17s launched at 45-second intervals from their home stations. The mission was dangerous from the moment brakes were released, for an engine failure on takeoff could send an overloaded B-17 crashing to the ground.

Just after liftoff, the heavily laden bombers began a left-hand climb to join

up in formation, disappearing one by one into the lowering clouds. Their ascent led them to a point where they could orbit on a "Buncher," a low-powered radio transmitter with a 15-mile range, specifically designed to permit formations to assemble. All 10 men aboard each bomber knew that 16 other groups, 329 more B-17s, were making the same climb through the same clouds. All hoped there would be no midair collisions on that upward path.

Formed up, the B-17Fs continued their long flight. Only a few score miles away, the Luftwaffe was watching and listening. The Germans had already tracked the

Top: B-17s from the 91st Bomb Group fly in formation. Above: Milton's official photograph on receiving his fourth star. He was awarded a Silver Star for his leadership on a B-17 bombing mission over Bochum, Germany.

bombers on radar plotting boards and would soon mark the position of the P-47 escorts, which took off after the bombers.

The Germans would soon face a surprise, however: The P-47s used belly tanks to extend their range. Still, the German fighters were serviced and ready, their pilots waiting for the signal to take off.

The Luftwaffe flak stations were alert, manned, and supplied with vast stores of ammunition for anti-aircraft guns.

On board the B-17F *Ain't it Gruesome*, the pilot, Capt. John B. Carraway, had two distinguished guests. One was Maj. Clark Gable, who would fly five operational missions while obtaining the film to produce a movie called "Combat America." This was Gable's fourth mission, and he flew wedged in behind the top gunner so he could obtain footage of attacking fighters. The other VIP was Maj. Theodore R. Milton, the 351st Bomb Group's operations officer.

As they neared the target it was apparent weather ruled Gelsenkirchen out, and Milton directed the force to bomb Bochum as a target of opportunity. German fighters were now up in force, making pass after pass through the long stream of B-17s. Before the day was over they and AAA would shoot down 25 bombers, a terrible 7.6 percent of the 330 dispatched.

Ain't it Gruesome was badly shot up, with one 20 mm shell taking the heel off Gable's flying boot, then going through the top of the fuselage without exploding.

Yet follow-up reconnaissance showed that the bombing was successful, and Milton's leadership was recognized with a Silver Star.

The citation for Milton, by then a lieutenant colonel, stated, "In spite of fierce enemy opposition and a heavy overcast, a target of vital importance to the enemy's air effort was virtually destroyed. The excellent results obtained can be attributed to the gallantry and superb leadership displayed by Colonel Milton."

An Army Brat

Theodore Ross Milton flew lead in many of the most hazardous and costly bombing missions of World War II. The qualities he needed in combat, combined



Milton in discussions with a member of the Turkish Air Force. His diplomatic skills served him well both as the US representative to the NATO Military Committee and afterward in private life.

with a gregarious yet genteel personality, enabled him to succeed brilliantly in every subsequent Air Force assignment.

Milton was a service brat, born the son of an Army colonel in 1915 at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. His father, Alexander Mortimer Milton, graduated in the same 1903 West Point class as Douglas MacArthur and played on the baseball team with him. Alexander Milton went on to enjoy a career in the cavalry, with his love of horses being passed on to his sons. Milton's younger brother John also graduated from West Point and rose to the rank of colonel in the infantry.

When Milton was 12, his family was stationed at Fort Riley, Kan., then the US Army Cavalry School. One day, he went bike riding with his friend Sidney V. "Budge" Bingham Jr. The two boys rode over to an airplane on the Army airstrip. The pilot was a family friend,

none other than future General of the Air Force Henry H. "Hap" Arnold.

Both boys said yes when Hap asked them if they wanted a ride. To Milton, it was a life-changing experience—long before he landed he knew he had to become an aviator.

In 1934, Milton enlisted in the regular Army as a private at the age of 19. Two years later, he won an appointment to West Point.

There he was a bit of a rebel, receiving guard duty punishment for wearing slippers in to dinner and skipping an occasional mandatory football game. In later life he looked back at West Point with great fondness, regretting only that he had not been a better student. The same qualities that ultimately guided him through West Point and led him to become a great Air Force leader also established him as a concerned family man. While a cadet he met Grace Elizabeth Bailey, to whom he would be married for 69 years.

Milton entered flying training on graduation from West Point in 1940, winning his pilot's wings in 1941.

His flying career offered great challenges, good fortune, and inspiring mentors. He also had the blessing of seasoning, piling up many flying hours before he entered combat. At Langley Field, Va., he flew the Consolidated Liberator in anti-submarine patrols, and after Pearl Harbor, he did similar work out of McChord Field, Wash.

He wanted a combat assignment, however, and in the spring of 1943 was assigned to duty as the operations officer of the 351st Bomb Group. Once again



C-74s, including this one, were used to drop supplies to a beleaguered West Berlin during the historic Berlin Airlift, in which Milton served as chief of staff to Maj. Gen. William Tunner.



Milton receives the 1985 Thomas D. White National Defense Award at the Air Force Academy, for significant contribution to the national defense of the United States.

a key mentor appeared, Col. Curtis E. LeMay, who had previously checked him out in a B-24.

The 351st had been organized in the fall of 1942 and its first assignment was to Polebrook in Northamptonshire, England. This base, and the forces it would dispatch for the rest of the war, illustrates Eighth Air Force's growth in power. Comparable units were being stationed at most of the more than 70 air bases turned over to the US by Great Britain. Almost 8,000 personnel served to support the four squadrons of the 351st—the 508th, 509th, 510th, and 511th. Each squadron mustered 72 B-17s, and they would plunge into combat over German-occupied Europe on almost every day the weather permitted.

Before the war ended, the 351st flew more than 9,000 sorties in 311 missions, lost 125 aircraft, and suffered almost 1,000 casualties.

In the process the bomb group dropped more than 20,000 tons of bombs, mostly 500- and 1,000-pounders, but also many incendiaries.

The 351st entered combat in May 1943, when a 25-mission tour was specified for aircrew members. It was also a time when the casualty rate made completion of a tour statistically improbable.

Milton did so well in the 351st that he was promoted to be deputy commander of the 91st Bomb Group as of Sept. 13, 1943. Already made famous by the exploits of *Memphis Belle*, the 91st was a tough, ready-for-business unit that gave Milton scope for his talents. It had pioneered bomber combat tactics and doctrine and then fought through

the costly era when escort fighters lacked the necessary range. Once the Luftwaffe was batted out of the sky, the 91st carried on in the final air campaign against Germany.

Leading From the Front

The intensity of its engagements can be judged by the missions it flew in the last four months of 1943, just after Milton came on board.

In September, the 91st flew eight times, in October were seven missions, in November it flew eight times, and in December came 10 more missions. The numbers seem innocuous enough until you realize that each one required a massive planning process, thousands of maintenance man-hours, endless fueling and arming, tension-filled briefings, hazardous instrument climb-outs, relentless flak, incessant Luftwaffe attacks, a nerve-racking straight and level bomb run, the horror of seeing a comrade blown out of the sky, and then the long trip home in a flak-battered aircraft with wounded aboard.

To do this once was brave; to do it as many as 10 times a month verged on superhuman, yet it was the norm for the 91st Bomb Group—and most of Eighth Air Force. In the 91st, Milton led from the front and by example, as on the bloody Oct. 14, 1943, raid on Schweinfurt.

His most famous mission came Jan. 11, 1944, when an attack on Oschersleben encountered the heaviest Luftwaffe opposition since the Schweinfurt raid. The historian of the 1st Combat Bomb Wing—the 91st's parent unit—wrote

that Oschersleben “came to be known as ‘Milton’s Kampf,’” because almost every time Milton flew, circumstances dictated that he would wind up in the lead position.

In the Oschersleben raid, Milton led the wing, flying as copilot to Capt. Leroy B. Everett. They had virtually no fighter escort, and an hour before reaching the target, the Luftwaffe reacted in force, attacking time and again.

Milton's aircraft was severely damaged, with an engine shot out and both Milton and Everett wounded by enemy cannon fire. Milton refused aid and pressed on, despite the loss of 13 aircraft.

After bombs away, Milton led the wing back to England where bad weather forced the returning aircraft to land at diversion airfields. Despite severe wounds, he insisted on remaining airborne until the last aircraft in his group had landed.

His son, Theodore Ross Milton Jr., relates that while his father rarely talked about his experiences, Milton did remember with gratitude that his recuperation was speeded by a friend who smuggled a bottle of scotch to him at the hospital.

On Oct. 24, 1944, Milton assumed command of the 384th Bomb Group, leading combat missions until April 14, 1945.

In addition to the Distinguished Service Cross and Silver Star, Milton earned a Distinguished Flying Cross with three oak leaf clusters, both for his leadership and execution of bombing missions over Germany. He was awarded the Bronze Star Medal, the Purple Heart, and the Air Medal five times. There were foreign distinctions as well, including the British Distinguished Flying Cross and the French Croix de Guerre.

In the post World War II years, Milton rose from one important leadership position to another. His success in these jobs would be reflected in the series of promotions, carrying him all the way to four-star rank.

In the view of his family members and others who knew him best, Milton gained the most satisfaction not from promotions or awards, but from two other elements in his career.

The first of these was the evident esteem in which his colleagues—superiors, peers, and subordinates—held him. The second was the knowledge he had proved himself in a wide variety of duties, many far beyond anything



Milton plants a tree in Israel in 1986.

and a concomitant appointment as commander, 41st Air Division, 5th Air Force, Japan. This nicely rounded his experience, adding a tactical fighter-bomber command role to his previous transport and bomber duties.

Four years later, Milton was promoted to major general and sent to Clark Air Base in the Philippines as commander of 13th Air Force. The rapidly moving events in Southeast Asia, particularly Vietnam, made this a much more important role than it would have been just a few years before.

He moved east to Hawaii for his next tour, serving as deputy chief of staff, plans and operations, for US Pacific Command.

he might have thought of as a cadet or even while in combat.

Among the first of these was his assignment to serve as Maj. Gen. William H. Tunner's chief of staff for the Combined Airlift Task Force—known to history as the Berlin Airlift. Tunner, a master at his business, was not always easy to work with, and Milton “ran interference” for him with the other principal players in the operation. The two men worked well together, but much later in life, a misunderstanding led to a falling out between the two men, which Milton always regretted. Milton had written an article about the airlift, and something in it so infuriated Tunner that he never spoke to Milton again. The falling out mystified him, especially because he could never determine exactly why the article had so offended Tunner.

The Berlin experience ensured a tour at the Military Air Transport Service as director of operations. It was natural in the postwar period that his career would take a more conventional turn, as Milton attended the Air War College then served as executive assistant to Secretary of the Air Force James H. Douglas Jr.

Milton eventually tired of duty in Washington and welcomed his promotion to brigadier general in October 1957

A Flag at Half-staff

In the following years Milton fine-tuned the diplomatic and managerial techniques that had served him well in the past. At Tactical Air Command, he became Gen. Gabriel P. Disoway's chief of staff in 1965.

In February 1967, Milton was promoted to lieutenant general, becoming the Air Force inspector general. He held that position for only half a year, until August when he received what he later considered his “least favorite” assignment, that of comptroller of the Air Force.

Some 20 months later, Milton received a new assignment, and one much more to his liking: deputy chairman of NATO's Military Committee in Brussels, Belgium.

Then, on Aug. 1, 1971, he assumed duties as the US representative to the NATO Military Committee and was promoted to the rank of general.

All of Milton's combat experience and his considerable diplomatic skills were valuable in his new position. He was in a position to advise NATO's pres-

tigious Advisory Group for Aerospace Research and Development (AGARD). In this position, Milton called attention to requirements for improved equipment, and particularly to the need for protecting the lives of aircrew members. The first need was for new minimum standards for approach and landing, which would reflect the advances in instrumentation that had occurred in the last two decades. He also called for a drastic advance in the accuracy of bombs dropped by fighter-bombers through increased training and the acquisition of updated equipment. Noting the numerical superiority of the Warsaw Pact forces over NATO, he urged that newer, more technologically advanced aircraft be purchased to offset the odds. He also continuously advocated the importance of crew survivability.

Milton's recommendations were not always immediately accepted, but in the long term, his views were adopted.

At NATO Milton enjoyed working with his foreign counterparts and formed lasting friendships with many of his opposite numbers. One of them was Luftwaffe Gen. Johannes Steinhoff, a 176-victory ace in World War II and a man who may well have taken a shot at Milton's B-17 during the war. Another close friend was Nigel Henderson, the British chairman of the NATO Military Committee. Both Milton and Henderson sounded an early alarm about the dependence of NATO on Middle Eastern oil.

Milton retired from the Air Force in 1974, but stayed busy lecturing and writing articles, many of them for *Air Force Magazine*.

He maintained his athletic prowess until his later years and his warm wit until the very end. On his death on Aug. 24, 2010, the Secretary of the Air Force authorized that the US flag be flown at half-staff from reveille to retreat on the date of his interment, Jan. 21, 2011, in Arlington National Cemetery.

Milton was one of the few to have risen from the enlisted ranks to become a full general. Making his case unique was that he did it by moving from KP and potato-peeling status as a private in the pre-World War II US Army to four-star rank in the independent Air Force. ■

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