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# Richard Tresemer's B-26 *Marauder*-Part 3

By Barry R. Fetzer
ECAHF Historian

This is the third and final of a three-column series writing about my Dad's first cousin (my first cousin once-removed) Richard Tresemer who flew the B-26 Marauder bomber during WWII. In the last (fall 2021) edition of this newsletter I focused on the B-26 Marauder itself and this column will continue that theme focusing on a specific mission of the B-26 at the end of WWII.

Perhaps the Marauder's greatest mission was reported by Daniel Ford in the May 30, 2019 edition of Air & Space magazine (https://www.airspacemag.com/military-aviation/mission-utah-beach-180972310/) in an article entitled, The Only Bombers to Hit their Marks on D-Day—on June 6, 1944, 300 Martin B-26 Marauders struck the Cherbourg peninsula, low-level and on time.

If Richard Tresemer was plowed back to be a B-26 instructor as I surmised was possible in the first column of this series, he may have acquired vital flight experience as an instructor that helped him survive combat, including combat during the Marauder D-Day mission described below. With six percent of all the B-26's ever manufactured participating in this 300-some aircraft mission, a lot of experienced pilots would have been required to conduct it and could have included Richard.

But even if Richard wasn't a participant in this particular mission, the story written by Daniel Ford is worth retelling here. Ford writes, "The details have dimmed with time, so it is impossible to know what altitude the Marauder crews were told to fly over Utah Beach on the northern coast of France. Cornelius Ryan of the London *Daily Telegraph* was sitting in the prefabricated metal hut where the officers of the 386th Bomb Group were briefed. 'You may have to bomb as high as 12,000 feet or lower than 1,000 feet,' he quoted the group commander as saying. 'The cloud height will determine this.'"

"'A low whistle penetrated the silence in the room,' Ryan's account went on. 'These men knew that the attack might be suicidal if they bombed below 1,000 feet.'"

"The enlisted men got a separate and no doubt cursory briefing. Sergeant Roger Lovelace, top-turret gunner in one of the group's Marauders, believed that the altitude he heard was hundreds of feet, not thousands. 'We were to bomb individually from 500 feet,' he recalled in an oral history account from the Eisenhower Center at the University of New Orleans. 'Did he say 500 feet? Boy, that shook us some.'"

"In fact, the B-26 Marauder had been built to fly just the sort of mission it was handed on D-Day. In 1939 Peyton Magruder of the Glenn L. Martin Company in Baltimore, Maryland, sketched a medium bomber that the US Army could use to destroy bridges, rail depots, and ships. It suggested a flying torpedo: slender fuselage, clear plastic nose, tail drawn to a point. The wings were short and set high on the fuselage, and each had a Pratt & Whitney radial engine slung beneath it in a streamlined nacelle. The vertical stabilizer was huge. Altogether, the B-26 was as fearsome-looking as it was beautiful and the Army, gambling that the airplane could be taken into service without testing or modification, ordered 201 straight off the drawing board for low-altitude missions."

"In November 1940 the Martin plant in Baltimore delivered to the Army its first B-26, which an obliging American press described as 'Martin's Miracle…the fastest bomber in the world' and as 'maneuverable as a pursuit' or fighter airplane. By December 1941, when Japan

attacked US forces on Hawaii, Wake Island, and the Philippines, a second factory was turning out Marauders in Omaha, Nebraska."

"By then, 'Martin's Miracle' had become known as the 'Widow Maker'. Airmen jested the B-26 needed all of Texas to take off and came in to land like a cold flatiron. The problem was the ratio of the Marauder's weight to the area of its small wings, which meant that the airplane required a relatively high airspeed for both takeoffs and landings. The new hydraulics were also trouble-prone, as were the huge four-blade, variable-pitch Curtiss propellers. In one 30-day period, the lads in Jim Wilson's unit—the 386th Bomb Group based at MacDill Field in Tampa, Florida—crashed 15 Marauders, and its overall accident record prompted the Army to consider terminating B-26 production and using another aircraft."

"Wilson recalled that none of his group knew that the B-26 was a difficult airplane to fly. 'We were young and ignorant and didn't know anything,' he said. If its stubby wings obliged Wilson to land the Marauder at 130 mph, why that was okay with him. 'That took a lot of the judgment out of it,' he said. 'You could come right in under a little power and chop the throttle and you were on the runway.' He loved every minute of it. 'When we first checked out in them,' Wilson said, "we'd go up and play in those big cumulus clouds that build up over Florida every summer afternoon, pretending we were fighters. It was great.'"

"Yes, you could almost pretend that the Marauder was a fighter. 'Medium bomber' might suggest the dimensions of a Boeing 737, but a B-26 cockpit had the elbow room of a Honda Civic, with fewer creature comforts, and the instrumentation was less sophisticated than what is found in a light airplane today. (It did have armor-plated seats, and containers of cotton so the crewmen could plug their ears in combat.) The copilot had a yoke and pedals but no instruments of his own. The bombardier crouched ahead of the cockpit in a goldfish bowl so small he couldn't wear a parachute and his knee brushed the Plexiglas nose when he peered into his bombsight."

"Behind the cockpit were the navigation station and radio panel. The bombardier usually doubled as navigator, commuting from one task to the other by crawling over the copilot. The radio was operated by the top-turret gunner, who crawled through two bulkheads and the bomb bays in order to reach his panel. Everywhere there were rivets, cables, tubes, valves, toggles, and hand-lettered signs, suggesting a small-town machine shop more than the electronics center of a World War II aircraft."

"In the middle of the fuselage was the bomb bay and its payload: two one-ton bombs or as many as 16 250-pounders. Behind the bomb bay were three enlisted gunners, who handled the top-turret, waist, and tail positions. Like the bombardier's compartment, the turrets were so cramped that the gunners seldom wore parachutes, though in combat some of them armored their bottoms with flak vests and scraps of steel, so many layers that sometimes the airplane's center of gravity shifted aft."

In-flight refueling had not been developed operationally yet. Daniel Ford continued, "In May 1943, the 386th set out for Britain by way of Maine, Labrador, Greenland, and Iceland, with a rubber tank in the bomb bay to supplement their fuel supply. 'We flew the Atlantic—all us young birdmen,' said Wilson. 'Remember, we were just off the farm, with a couple hundred hours, and we were ready to go overseas…I was 24, the oldest [in the squadron] except for the commander and a couple other guys.' The ground crews sailed from Hoboken, New Jersey on the *Queen Elizabeth*, a luxury liner turned troopship, that was so cramped the men had to take turns on the five-high bunks, sleeping on mattresses one night and a steel deck the next."

"The 386th found a home at Colchester and later at Great Dunmow, some 50 miles northeast of London. The men slept in a Nissen hut, essentially a steel culvert cut in half

lengthwise with the ends bricked up. An identical hut served as their mess hall, and another as a briefing room."

Their first briefing concerned the 322nd Bomb Group, which had reached Britain ahead of them. On May 17, a squadron from the 322nd set out to destroy a generating plant in Ijmuiden, Holland. Making landfall south of the target, the Marauders roared across dikes, windmills, and German anti-aircraft guns at 250 feet. The lead pilot lost a duel with a 20mm Flak 38 and spun into the ground. Two Marauders collided after one was crippled by flak, and two more were shot down over Haarlem. The survivors were caught by German fighters over the English Channel, and they, too, were shot down. Ten of the mission's 11 airplanes were lost, and 50 crewmen were killed or captured, including Colonel Robert Stillman, the group commander."

"A committee headed by Senator Harry Truman investigated the B-26 program, and in a wonderful piece of bafflegab concluded that, 'the plane is unsafe when operated by any pilots except those specifically trained for its operation.' Since six B-26 Marauder groups were already in Britain or scheduled to arrive, the end result was to take the Marauder out of combat for a few months until the Army found a safer job for it."

"The pilots practiced flak-dodging tactics, and the bombardiers were given Norden M-7 bombsights, the same sophisticated aiming device used by high-flying heavy bombers over Germany. Henceforth they would bomb from 12,000 feet—as high as the Marauder could fly without a new oxygen system. The British-based Marauders were soon reassigned targets in France, Belgium, and Holland, with Royal Air Force Spitfires to protect them out and back. Flying at 12,000 feet—high enough to dodge the worst of the flak, low enough to enable reasonable accuracy—they bombed submarine pens, bridges, railroad yards, factories, coastal batteries, and the launch sites of the world's first jet surface-to-surface missile, the German V-1 flying bomb. On its new mission, losses were under one percent, compared to the five percent attrition suffered by the heavy bombers. 'I came back from Paris once with one engine shot out,' said Wilson, 'and when we got down, we found that a cylinder had been shot out [on the other engine], so we got all the way back from Paris on one crippled engine. It was an incredible airplane.'"

"The B-26 crews began to anticipate their promised week of leave after 25 missions and a trip home if they survived 50. 'I remember the first guy in our squadron who reached 50,' said Wilson. 'He came in, buzzing the field, shooting off flares and one thing or another.... No deal! D-Day was in the minds of the powers that be, so we just stayed.'"

**B-26 over Utah Beach (Courtesy: National Archives)**

**“THE CHALLENGE OF D-DAY** was to put a mass of men and machines on a narrow stretch of coast, pitting them against an enemy with all the time in the world to dig in. Five beaches were selected. From east to west, they were code-named Sword (assigned to the British Third Division), Juno (Canadian Third), Gold (British 50th), Omaha (US First and 29th), and Utah (US Fourth). Parachute and glider troops would secure the eastern and western flanks, like bookends on a bloody shelf that extended 50 miles.”

**On an August 1944 bomb run, flak assaults B-26s, killing the bombardier and injuring a gunner in the Marauder at left. (The bomber made it home.) Technical Sergeant Fay Steele, a combat cameraman, took the photo from another aircraft in the formation. (Courtesy: National Archives)**

**Marauders strike a road and rail junction to keep German reinforcements from reaching the battlefront at Normandy. (Courtesy: National Archives)**

“‘We were briefed that morning about three o’clock,’ Jim Wilson said. ‘First of course the group commander told us what was happening, that the paratroopers had already landed. This was the first we’d heard about it. Everyone cheered. Oh man!’”

"'When we took off,' said Wilson, 'it was in the rain and we had maximum effort, which was 54 airplanes, and it was dark, and 54 airplanes ended up in pretty good formation before daylight.' (The Ninth Air Force history says the count was 53.)"

"Not every group fared so well. Pilots were taking off at 20-second intervals in what for many was their first night flight, and they were groping into formation with the help of navigation lights, flares, and good-luck charms. 'The weather was ghastly—low clouds, drizzle, and fog,' said then-Lieutenant Charles Middleton, a bombardier in the 344th. 'We missed the main formation and chased the group halfway across the Channel,'' he said in the oral history, 'and as the sky brightened, we caught up with them and took a position that looked empty.'"

"Eight Marauder groups were airborne—424 airplanes in theory, though some of the bombers were assigned to targets other than Utah Beach. Others aborted on takeoff, two collided near London, a third exploded in midair, and a fourth ditched in the Channel. Others went astray and either turned back, tacked onto another formation, or continued as a "box" of one. Perhaps 290 Marauders actually reached Utah Beach."

"'When we flew over [the fleet],' Wilson said, 'it was the most incredible sight I've ever seen in my life…We were still flying a very tight formation, so you couldn't keep gazing out, but our gunners were whooping and hollering. Just thousands and thousands of ships! What I saw that sticks in my mind was the USS *Tuscaloosa* delivering a broadside barrage and seeing the flames leap out from those guns, and that whole cruiser rock back, and a roller going out behind the ship.'"

Again, providing further confirmation of Richard's combat flying in Europe (information I did not have in writing the first column of this series on Richard Tresemer), his son remembered that his Dad spoke of "missions where the flak was constantly pinging and piercing his plane and being in one of maybe fifty bombers waiting to take-off for a mission, tanks filled to the top, full bomb load, the aircraft all way overweight. If your engines weren't operating at 100%, you wouldn't lift off. He talked of taking off through the smoke and flames of those aircraft beyond the end of the runway that didn't get off the ground."

"**COMBAT IS BORNE BY INDIVIDUALS—**the members of one aircrew, one rifle company", Daniel Ford continued. "For the German soldiers dug into the sandy bluff known as La Grande Dune, the shock point would be a stone bunker designated *Widerstandsnest 5* that had been built into what amounted to a long sandy seawall between the Bay of Seine and a marsh on the east side of the Cherbourg peninsula. Seventy-five boys and old men under the command of German Lieutenant Arthur Jahnke were armed with rifles and an assortment of machine guns, flame-throwers, and self-propelled mines. In addition, their arsenal included a few 50mm guns from French armored cars, two 75mm cannon, and one of the much-feared "German 88" anti-aircraft guns."

"All through the night of June 5-6, Jahnke and his men were kept awake by the sound of aircraft, explosions, and small-arms fire from what they believed was a diversionary raid. 'Surely [the Americans] wouldn't walk smack into a fortress,' Jahnke remembered one of his men saying. And the tide was going out, meaning that a dawn invasion force would have to cross 800 yards of wet sand in front of fortified bunkers. No less an authority than Field Marshal Erwin Rommel had assured Jahnke that the attack would come on the high tide, when landing craft could drop their ramps against the barbed wire. (In fact, the Americans wanted a low-tide morning, so that combat engineers could destroy the mines and 'dragon's teeth'—steel stakes—dug into the gray sand.)"

"Then the Marauders came. As German author Paul Karl Schmidt reconstructed the scene in *Invasion—They're Coming!* a 'wave of twin-engined bombers was coming in from the

sea in impeccable fly-past formation [from east to west]'. Ford continued, 'Going to cross the coast north of us,' Jahnke thought aloud. But he had hardly finished speaking when to his horror the first wave wheeled [south] and, flying down the coast, made straight for their strongpoint."

"Jahnke was almost certainly looking at the 344th Bomb Group, which was flying in a formation of three boxes that each contained three stacks of B-26s and totaled 50 airplanes. Every Marauder had two 18-cylinder, 2,000-horsepower Pratt & Whitney engines. Even a single airplane thundered like Niagara Falls, and here were a hundred engines beating out 200,000 horsepower—a noise so stupendous it seemed to emerge from the water and the sand as much as from the air."

"'The bomb bays opened,' Schmidt's account continued, 'and almost at once the bombs came tumbling out, dropping with their curious wobbling motion.' An explosion buried Jahnke in sand but he dug himself out. So did most of his men, though their guns were badly hit. The 88-mm cannon fired only one round before it died, though that shell may have brought down the one Marauder from the 344th Bomb Group that exploded over Utah Beach."

"'Not only did we have heavy and accurate flak,' said top-turret gunner Raymond Sanders in the oral history, 'but we also had light flak and many machine gun tracers coming up at us from the ground. We could even make out the machine gun nests.... And then I saw the plane that was flying just behind us and to our left go down in flames.'"

"The next formation, the 387th Bomb Group, was even lower. 'We kept going down, kept going down,' said Al Corry. As lead bombardier, Corry wouldn't let the pilot level out until they were at 1,250 feet and below cloud cover. (A US Ninth Air Force summary says that the bombs were dropped from altitudes of 3,500 to 7,500 feet, and pilot and historian John Moench, who knows as much as anyone about the Marauder, accepts that assessment. Yet Corry must have known what altitude he was bombing from, and other pilots and bombardiers speak of altitudes below 3,500 feet. The truth may be found somewhere between the vivid memories and the official record.) To the Germans, it seemed that the high-winged bombers were skimming the waves. 'They're only a few feet above the water,' marveled one German soldier. Then the naval bombardment began, and for all practical purposes the German resistance at Utah Beach ended. Jahnke's men were killed, wounded, buried in sand, deafened, or dazed by shock."

"Bringing up the rear, the 386th Bomb Group had an easier time of it. 'They were more interested in what was coming ashore than [in] us,' Jim Wilson said of the Germans. 'The landing barges were circling—all those water bugs circling—and as we came over every one of them broke for the beach. It was an incredible, incredible sight. One of the tail gunners said that as we cleared the target area, the barges hit the beach, so it was just like that'—he said with a snap of his fingers."

"Indeed, Utah Beach had been a snap. Out of some 290 Marauders, only one had been shot down over the beach. They dropped 550 tons of bombs, which, along with the naval bombardment, exploded the German land mines, silenced their cannon, pulverized their dragon's teeth, and created so many foxholes that on D-Day morning the US Fourth Division lost only 12 men—less than the number killed in a practice landing in Britain. It was a miracle of warfare, and at least some of the credit goes to the Martin B-26 Marauder, bombing at low level for the first time in more than a year."

"Twelve miles east, by contrast, Omaha Beach was a shambles, with 3,000 men drowned, killed, injured, or missing in an assault so confused that the second wave was almost diverted to the British beaches, which would have meant abandoning Utah Beach and the

American airborne troops as well. Again, many factors were at work, but some of the blame falls on the heavy bombers. These high-altitude precision machines—1,083 B-17s and B-24s—never saw the defenses they were supposed to destroy. They dropped 2,944 tons of bombs through the clouds, and even the official Air Force history concedes that the bombs exploded as far as three miles inland, and that only 'shorts' actually hit the beach."

"After D-Day, the Marauders for the most part returned to their customary altitude of 12,000 feet. The low-level mission once envisioned for them would henceforth be filled by 'swing-role' fighters, notably the big, rugged P-47 Thunderbolt. Fighters were cheaper, faster, and more maneuverable, and in the jet age they would even be able to carry a bomb load far greater than that of a World War II heavy bomber."

If interested in the P-47's exploits during WWII, here's link to a good story of this iconic fighter-bomber aircraft: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FomJ6SZYkYU.

Ford continued in his writing, "As it turned out, then, the US Army had taken the B-26 into service, and the Glenn L. Martin Company had built 5,157 of them, for a low-level mission that proved feasible for 20 minutes—6:05 to 6:25 a.m., June 6, 1944—over La Grande Dune, which history would know as Utah Beach."

Finally, from Wikipedia, "The B-26 flew its last combat missions against the German garrison at the Île d'Oléron on May 1, 1945."

I'd like to think Richard Tresemer was involved in the massive (and successful) low-level D-Day air assault described above. Given the number of Marauders in the air and the number of pilots (and back-up pilots) that would have been required to execute this mission, it is possible he was. We may never know for sure.

One thing we do know is that Richard continued his service in Europe at the end of WWII and we know this from a story his son retold for me that his Dad, Richard, told him. Richard's son called it the "Great Train Ride".

Richard's son wrote, "When hundreds of thousands of Army soldiers were being sent by train to the coastal ports for transport home there weren't enough Army officers to supervise. But my Dad was an officer. He was Shanghaied to oversee one trainload of thousands of happy, rowdy, and massively drunk soldiers coming from Germany. It didn't work out so well for the train. Not a single window survived the first hop. But the German rail officials were resolute. The train and soldiers were held over while all the windows were replaced. The next morning, with new supplies of booze, the soldiers broke out all the windows again."

Richard must have had his hands full with train cars filled with rowdy, drunk, celebratory American soldiers. But, attempting to control rowdy soldiers probably paled in comparison to how full his hands would have been handling the "cold flatiron" Marauder. I, for one, am grateful for those hands and the role they played—in whichever way they played—in helping the allies prevail in WWII.

In the next (spring 2022) issue of the ECAHF Newsletter I'll take a breather from writing about aviators and, instead, tell the story of my cousins Helene and Dick Cook (US Marine combat engineer in the Pacific). Why might this be a good story for the Eastern Carolina Aviation Heritage Foundation Newsletter? They lived in New Bern at the beginning of WWII. You might have even stepped into their 78-year-old footsteps here in eastern NC.

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