

FRIENDS JOURNAL



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Shot Down

by STEVE SNYDER

Howard Snyder entered the Army in April 1941 and was stationed at Ft. Lewis, Washington, with the 41st Infantry Division. At the time, the U.S. military was woefully weak at less than one million soldiers, and had only just begun to build toward its wartime peak of over 8.2 million troops.

By the beginning of 1942 Snyder was married, had a baby on the way and was worried how he was going to support his new family. He didn't think he could do it very well on a private's pay in the Army so he decided to volunteer for the Army Air Forces. The pay was better,

especially if he could make it through pilot training and become an officer.

In June 1942 he began preflight training at Santa Ana, California, and then went through the three stages of pilot training. His primary pilot training was at Hancock College of Aeronautics in Santa Maria, California, where he flew a Stearman PT-13 biplane (PT for primary trainer) and soloed on October 22, 1942. Basic pilot training was at Lemoore Army Air Field, California, and Marana Army Air Field, Arizona, where he flew a single wing Vultee Valiant BT-13 (BT for basic trainer).

After graduating from basic pilot training, pilots were separated going into advanced pilot training. They were

▲ *Susan Ruth* crew from l to r: front row – Howard Snyder, pilot; George Eike, co-pilot; Robert Benninger, navigator; Richard Daniels, bombardier; back row – Roy Holbert, flight engineer; Louis Colwart, ball turret gunner; Ross Kahler, radio operator; John Pindroch, right waist gunner; Joe Musial, left waist gunner; Bill Slenker, tail gunner.



assigned to either single-engine planes (fighters) or twin-engine planes (bombers or transports). Howard was assigned to twin-engine advanced pilot training at Douglas Army Air Field, Arizona, where he flew both Curtis-Wright AT-9s and Cessna AT-17s (AT for advanced trainer). On April 12, 1943, as part of Class 43-D, he graduated and received his pilot's wings and commission as a 2nd Lieutenant.

After graduating, he went to transitional pilot training at Pyote Army Air Field, Texas, (nicknamed "Rattlesnake Bomber Base" because of the large number of rattlesnake dens) where he learned how to fly a four-engine Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress bomber and was selected to be a first pilot. Following this, Howard began operational unit combat training or phase training beginning at Pyote and then moving to Dalhart Army Air Base, Texas. Here he was assigned a crew, and they learned to operate as a team. Once they were deemed ready, the crew went on active duty and was assigned to the Eighth Air Force in the European Theater of Operations. On September 27, 1943, Snyder's crew departed Dalhart to Scott Field, Illinois, then on to Dow Army Airfield, Bangor, Maine, and to Gander, Newfoundland, before flying their new B-17 across the Atlantic to Prestwick, Scotland.

On October 21, 1943, Howard and his crew reported to the 306th Bombardment Group based at Thurleigh, in Bedfordshire, England, about 60 miles north of London. The Eighth Air Force was made up of three air divisions. The 306th was in the 1st Air Division which along with the Third Air Division flew B-17s. The Second Air Division flew Consolidated B-24 Liberators.

The 306th's nickname was "The Reich Wreckers," and as the first bomb group to hit a target in Germany (Wilhelmshaven on January 27, 1943) its slogan was "First Over Germany." The 306th was also the longest continuously serving bomb group in the Eighth Air Force (from September 1942 to December 1946) as it participated in the Casey Jones Project, aerial photo mapping Western Europe and northern Africa after the war. The 1949 movie classic *Twelve O'clock High*



▲ Howard and Ruth Snyder on their wedding day.

starring Gregory Peck was based on a true story about the 306th Bomb Group. The fictitious 918th Bomb Group portrayed in the movie was derived from multiplying the 306 by three. Another distinction of the 306th was that its flight surgeon, Dr. Thurman Shuller, was responsible for convincing the commander of Eighth Bomber Command, General Ira Eaker, to implement a mission tour limit in April 1943. Shuller wanted a limit of 20, but Eaker decided on 25. After Jimmy Doolittle took over command of the Eighth on January 6, 1944, he later increased it to 30 and then to 35.

Snyder named his B-17 *Susan Ruth* after his daughter who was now one year old. The rest of the ten-man crew were fellow officers copilot George Eike, navigator Robert Benninger, and bombardier Richard Daniels along with six enlisted men, also referred to as non-commissioned officers or NCOs. They were mainly gunners and consisted of flight engineer/top turret gunner Roy Holbert, radio operator Ross Kahler, ball turret gunner Louis Colwart, right waist gunner John Pindroch, left waist gunner Joe Musial, and tail gunner Bill Slenker.

The crew's first combat mission (except for co-pilot George Eike who was assigned to another crew) was on November 3, 1943, to Wilhelmshaven. It was the first time that the Eighth Air Force flew 500 bombers on a mission.

Flying combat was perilous from the time the planes took off to the time they came back to land. Taking off in congested air space was the first problem to be overcome. Although the number varied during the war, at its peak there were forty bomb groups stationed in England in and around an area called East Anglia which was about the size of Vermont. These bases were only five to ten miles apart and on the day of a mission, hundreds of bombers would all be taking off at the same time. There wasn't any air traffic control radar back then so everything was based on sight. With the weather in England usually overcast, pilots couldn't see anything until they broke through the cloud layer. As a result, mid-air collisions were not uncommon.



Then the bombers had to form up. Individual planes formed up into three-plane elements; elements formed up into squadrons; squadrons formed up into bomb groups; bomb groups formed up into combat wings; and finally combat wings formed up into air divisions. All this took one to two hours before the bombers could even begin the mission and start out across the English Channel.

Flying at altitudes above 20,000 feet meant the crews were fighting in an extreme environment. The bombers were not pressurized, so above 10,000 feet the crew had to go on oxygen to avoid the effects of hypoxia that would severely limit their effectiveness, and at altitudes above 20,000 feet could ultimately result in death. It was extremely cold as well, with temperatures reaching 40 to 60 degrees below zero. As a result, frostbite was a huge problem. Many airmen suffered severe frostbite injuries and were hospitalized for lengthy periods of time. *Susan Ruth* waist gunner John Pindroch was hospitalized for several months due to frostbite.

The next problem the bombers faced was enemy fighters. The Germans had radar stations set up along the continental coast of Europe and knew when the bomber formations would be arriving. When they did, the German air force, the Luftwaffe, would be there to meet them.

At the beginning of the war, Eighth Bomber Command thought the heavily armed bombers, flying in tight formations, could defend themselves from enemy fighters. They also thought that they flew too fast and too high to even be reached. The bomber didn't need fighter escort support, they claimed. They flew in what was called a combat box formation, and the belief was that the interlocking fire power of the 12-13 .50-caliber machine guns per plane in a formation with dozens of planes would make them invincible. Unfortunately, Bomber Command was badly mistaken. These formations could not defend themselves and took devastating losses, especially in 1943.

Even with the 25-mission limit, it was statistically impossible for an airman to complete his tour early in the war. The average number of missions flown before being shot down was only six. At the losses they were taking, 100 percent of the aircraft and crews would have to be replaced every three months. Even when fighter escorts were finally provided, problems with the Lockheed P-38 Lightnings and Republic P-47 Thunderbolts limited their effectiveness to adequately escort the formations to targets deep in Germany.

The losses culminated in October of 1943, called Black Week, when on four raids into Germany (Bremen, Marienberg, Munster, and Schweinfurt), 148 planes were shot down; almost 1,500 men lost. However, the worst day was October 14, Black Thursday, when 291 bombers were sent to hit the ball bearing factories at Schweinfurt. On that one day, 60 planes went down — 600 men lost. Another 17 planes were so badly damaged, they had to be scrapped. The 306th Bomb Group lost 10 out of 15 planes that went on the mission.

After Black Week, the Eighth Air Force realized that there was no way such losses could be sustained, and they seriously considered discontinuing day-light bombing. It wasn't until external fuel tanks were added on the P-47s and the arrival of the first North American P-51 Mustang-equipped fighter group in November, 1943 that the bomber formations finally began to have adequate fighter support all the way to and from increasingly distant targets. The P-51s were extremely effective and were responsible for virtually wiping out the Luftwaffe in the spring of 1944. On June 6, D-Day, there was hardly a German fighter to be seen over the beaches of Normandy.

Another obstacle the bombers faced throughout the war was German anti-aircraft fire or Flak, which was an abbreviation for the German word, *Fliegerabwehrkanone*, literally "flier defense cannon." Germany's main heavy anti-aircraft gun, the Flak 36 88 mm cannon, was a deadly weapon that could fire up to 20 shells per minute. The shells could be calibrated so that they would explode at the same altitude the bomber formations were flying. The shells were filled with different shapes and sizes of razor-sharp metal (called shrapnel) that would burst out hundreds of feet and easily rip through the aluminum skin of the bombers, skin so thin that you could take a screwdriver and poke a hole right through it.

From a distance the exploding shells looked like innocent black puffs, but as the planes got closer, the puffs got bigger and the explosions got louder. The concussion of the shells exploding nearby would violently rock the ships. If hit directly, a bomber would just disintegrate and disappear. If a wing was hit, the bomber would drop to earth like a stone. Heading into that killing field in the sky, an airman's adrenaline would pump furiously as any moment might be his last. Even with below freezing temperatures, Snyder said he would be sweating profusely, and his clothes would be wringing wet.



Flying combat was a brutal undertaking and extremely dangerous; 26,000 men died while serving in the Eighth Air Force which is more than the entire Marine Corps lost fighting in the Pacific. Another 28,000 men became prisoners of war after their planes were knocked out of the sky.

On February 8, 1944, twenty B-17s from the 306th Bomb Group flew low group in the 40th Combat Wing on a mission to Frankfurt, Germany. The B-17 *Susan Ruth*, AC #42-31499 was flying "in the hole" in the lead squadron [as the lead plane in the second three-plane element, behind and below the lead plane with other B-17s to the left and right and slightly behind]. On the way in, no enemy fighters were encountered although the formation did encounter accurate antiaircraft tracking fire with seven aircraft being seriously damaged. The bomb run was made at approximately 11:30 a.m. There was 7/10ths cloud cover, though ground was visible through breaks in the clouds, so air-to-ground radar equipped Pathfinder aircraft dropped flares to mark the aim point for the other bombers.

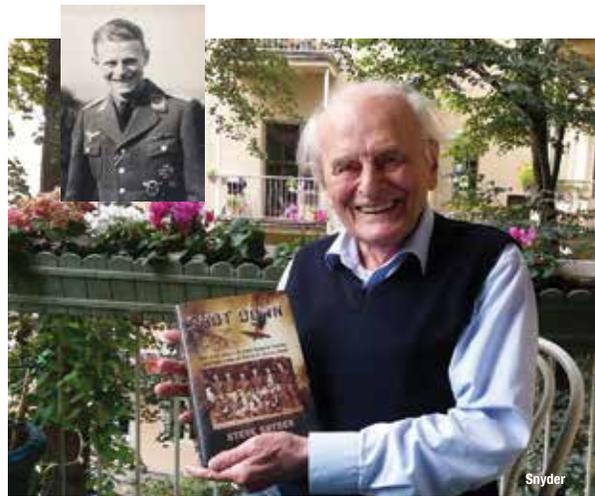
One of the ships damaged by flak was the *Susan Ruth* whose bomb bay doors had been hit, and the crew couldn't get them closed. That caused a drag on the plane; it lost air speed, and began to lag behind the formation heading back to England.

About an hour after the bomb run, enemy fighters finally appeared. P-38, P-47, and P-51 fighter support was good except for a gap between 12:35 and 12:45 when they left the formation to engage in dog fights. Left unguarded and lagging behind the formation, the *Susan Ruth* was singled out over Charleville, France by two German Focke-Wulf FW190 fighters who popped out of the clouds from below and came in for the kill firing their 20 mm cannons. Radio operator Kahler and ball turret gunner Colwart were killed in the plane, and the other eight airmen suffered shrapnel wounds, some serious. The survivors were forced to bail out.

Both FW 190s were shot down as well. One, piloted by Siegfried Marek crashed at Borlers, Belgium, and he was killed. The other was piloted by Lt. Hans Berger who was able to bail out, landing in the village of Beauwelz, Belgium. He was picked up by a German patrol and made it back to his Jagdgeschwader 1 (fighter wing) air base at Dortmund, Germany. Berger was credited with eight kills during the war (seven B-17s and one Spitfire) but was also shot down three times himself. After the war he became a translator, working for the U.S. Army

occupation forces for a while, before eventually starting his own translation school. He is now 95 years old and lives in Munich, Germany.

All the *Susan Ruth* crew members who bailed out came down in northern France, except Snyder, who was the last one to bail out. He and the *Susan Ruth* landed in Macquenoise, Belgium. The most seriously wounded crew members were waist gunner Musial (whose left foot had almost been blown off) and bombardier Daniels (whose upper right arm was almost torn off). They were picked up by the Germans right after they came down and became prisoners of war. What was left of Musial's



▲ Hans Berger, pilot of one of the Focke-Wulf FW190s that shot down the *Susan Ruth*, was himself shot down in the incident. He is pictured in a wartime photo, and in a 2014 photo by the author.

foot was amputated. Daniels' arm was saved, but he lost the use of it. Both were eventually repatriated back to the U.S. aboard the Swedish cruise ship the SS Gripsholm sailing into New York Harbor on February 21, 1945.

Flight engineer/top turret gunner Holbert was also captured by the Germans and spent the remainder of the war as a POW. He first went to Stalag Luft VI (near what is now Šilutė, Lithuania) and then was part of the notorious "Heydekrug Run" during the evacuation to Stalag Luft IV. [POWs who had not had food or water for days while being evacuated from Stalag Luft VI ahead of the advancing Russians were shackled in pairs and then forced to run roughly two miles from the train station to the camp at Stalag Luft IV (near present day Tychowo, Poland) while being attacked by dogs and bayoneted.]



He was also part of the infamous 86-day, 600-mile “Black March” evacuation of Stalag Luft IV. [In early February, 1945, as the Russian Army approached Stalag Luft IV it was also abandoned by the Germans. Roughly 6,000 POWs in groups of 250-300 were force marched on starvation rations across northern Germany, arriving in Hannover on March 30. They were put on trains to Stalag IIB (near Hammerstein, in southwest Germany), but on April 6 the approach of Allied troops prompted the Germans to again force march the POWs back to the north.] Holbert was finally liberated by the U.S. Army 104th Infantry Division on April 26, 1945, at Bitterfeld, in northeastern Germany after 444 days as a prisoner of war.

Co-pilot Eike and navigator Benninger landed near each other and were taken by members of the French Resistance across the border into Belgium to “Camp de Riezes” which the Resistance had set up to house escaped prisoners of war, men wanted by the Gestapo, wounded resistance fighters, and downed Allied airmen. While there, Eike and Benninger were joined by five other downed U.S. airmen from the 306th Bomb Group’s B-17 *Rationed Passion*, AC #42-30782. They were navigator Ivan Gaze, radio operator Charles Nichols, waist gunner John Gemborski, tail gunner Warren Cole, and flight

engineer Orian Owens. They had been shot down a month earlier over the Netherlands on the January 11th raid to Halberstadt, Germany.

On February 25th, the camp was raided by the Germans, and the U.S. airmen had to flee for their lives. A short while after that, they were joined by three more U.S. flyers. One was another *Susan Ruth* crew member, waist gunner Pindroch, who had been hiding at the farmhouse of Georges and Nelly Deshorme in Chimay. Another was Billy Huish from the 91st Bomb Group B-17 *Skunkface*, AC #42-29656, which was shot down February 20th on a raid to Leipzig, Germany. The third flyer, Vincent Reese, had been a waist gunner on the B-17 *Women’s Home Companion*, AC #42-39795, of the 303rd Bomb Group which was shot down on the December 30, 1943 raid to Ludwigshaven.

The airmen were aided by the families of Florent Simon and Fernand Fontaine, and eventually built a hut in the Champagne Woods outside of Chimay where they hid until they could make their way through escape routes back to England. However, Gaze and Cole of *Rationed Passion* grew impatient and decided to leave on their own. It paid off as they were successful in making it back to England that June.

While the other eight men continued hiding at the hut, a Belgian collaborator informed the Germans about them, and the hut was attacked on April 22. All eight airmen were captured, taken to the school house in Chimay for interrogation, then driven back out into the Champagne Woods and executed. Joseph Simon and Henri Fontaine, the sons of Florent and Fernand, were also arrested, sent to concentration camps, and never heard from again.



◀ Clockwise from top left: Howard Snyder Fighting with the Maquis; Howard Snyder during Primary Training at Santa Maria, CA; Howard Snyder with Belgian Helpers; and Howard Snyder at Ft Lewis, WA;



After bailing out, *Susan Ruth* tail gunner Slenker was picked up by members of the French Resistance. He was injured and needed medical attention so they took him to Dr. Trigaux's medical clinic in Chimay for treatment. Although the clinic was controlled by the Germans, Slenker was snuck in the back door to receive care and then taken to the home of Josephine Collet and her two daughters in Chimay where he stayed for seven months until Belgium was liberated by the First and Third Armies in September.

Pilot Snyder came down a couple miles from the plane. His parachute got hung up in some tress, and he was dangling 20 feet above the ground and couldn't get down. Fortunately for him, a couple of young Belgian farmers, Raymond Durvin and Henri Fraikin, came to his rescue before the Germans got there. With German patrols combing the area, it was too dangerous to try to move him during the day so they told him to hide and they'd come back that night to get him. After dark they took him to Raymond's home where he stayed one night because it was too dangerous for him to stay any longer with the Germans searching the area.

After that, Snyder was moved from place to place. How long he stayed depended on how brave the people were who lived there, and how dangerous the Belgian Underground thought it was for him to stay there; it might be one night or six weeks. The people who helped downed airmen were extraordinarily brave. Not only did they risk their own lives, but those of the family as well. If found out, they would be arrested, tortured, sent to prison camps, or executed. Several of the Belgians who helped members of the *Susan Ruth* crew met one of those fates.

When downed airmen evaded capture in the Nazi occupied countries of France, The Netherlands, and Belgium, the Underground would try to move them through escape routes down through France, over the Pyrenees, into Spain and then out through British controlled Gibraltar back to England. However, something always went wrong trying to get Snyder out.

It was very stressful for any downed airmen to stay in hiding from the Nazis, and it was certainly true for Snyder. His plane had been attacked, on fire, and he had to bail out. He came down in a foreign country, not knowing where he was. He didn't know what happened to his crew. He had no way of communicating with the U.S. military. The Germans were all around him. He was being helped by complete strangers he could not



▲ The Durvin home, where Howard Snyder was hidden, in a 1989 photo.

communicate with, anyone of whom could have been a German collaborator and betrayed him. At any moment, night or day, the German secret police, the Gestapo, could barge in and arrest him; either sending him to a prisoner of war camp or deciding to shoot him. In fact, he did have several close calls.

After some time, Snyder got tired of hiding and decided to join the French Resistance, called the Maquis. Besides being tired of being hunted, he heard that the Allies had invaded Normandy and he wanted to get back into the fight. Plus, he had received a year's infantry training at Ft. Lewis, Washington so he knew how to fight on the ground.

The Maquis were made up of small, independent groups of guerrilla fighters located all across France. They were supplied by the British through air drops, and their mission was to harass and destroy German targets; disrupting communications, sabotaging railways, attacking German convoys, and assassinating German officers. They received instructions by coded radio messages through the BBC. The group Snyder joined was comprised of about 20 men, led by a French lieutenant who had escaped from a German prisoner of war camp. There were some Belgians, Frenchmen and a few Algerians whom Snyder said were particularly fierce fighters.

Finally, on September 2, 1944, seven months after the B-17 *Susan Ruth* was shot down, word came that troops of U.S. General George S. Patton's Third Army were in the nearby village of Trélon, France. Walking into the town square, Howard Snyder went up to a major and identified himself. After being interrogated, Snyder went through Paris to the 306th Bomb Group at Thurleigh, England and then returned to the States.

Like most World War II veterans, Howard Snyder didn't talk a lot about the war, but that changed in 1989 when a



▲ Left: The memorial to the *Susan Ruth* in Macquenoise, Belgium was dedicated in 1989. Right: The four surviving crew members – Joe Musial, Bill Slenker, Roy Holbert and Howard Snyder — were able to attend.

memorial was built to honor the crew of the *Susan Ruth* at Macquenoise, Belgium a few hundred yards from where the plane came down. The four living crew members (Howard Snyder, Joe Musial, Bill Slenker, and Roy Holbert, along with their wives) attended the dedication ceremonies where Howard was reunited with many of the people who hid him while he evaded capture. Seeing them again and visiting homes and farmhouses where he stayed brought back all the memories, and he finally began to talk about his war experiences.

Howard Snyder passed away in 2007 at 91. The last crew member to die was Roy Holbert in 2010.

At the end of World War II, there were 16 million veterans, but today there are only 3 percent still with us. World War II had a profound effect on the world. 60 million people died. Millions more were wounded. Millions more were displaced and left homeless. The war changed the course of the United States and the world forever. The brave, young men who fought and died for freedom are “The Greatest Generation.” Their sacrifice must never be forgotten. It is our duty to remember.

You can read more about the crew of *Susan Ruth* and their time after they were shot down in the book *SHOT DOWN: The true story of pilot Howard Snyder and the crew of the B-17 Susan Ruth*, available

for purchase from the Air Force Museum Store at <http://store.airforcemuseum.com/books-media/biography/shot-down-006416.html>. 🌟



Steve Snyder, Howard Snyder's son, graduated from UCLA with a bachelor's degree in economics and has lived in Seal Beach, California since 1972. After 36 years in national sales and sales management, he retired in 2009. Soon after retirement, Steve began his quest to learn more about the World War II experiences of his father, and after 4 1/2 years of dedicated research completed his book, Shot Down, which has won 25 book awards. Steve is the immediate past president of the 306th Bomb Group Historical Association. <http://SteveSnyderAuthor.com>

