

Partly cloudy
and warm
tonight

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Complete weather, 2A

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B-17s and wartime Dade revisited

• Stuart Newman, a Miami-area public relations consultant, was a navigator with the 381st Bomb Group in the Eighth Air Force from October 1944 until April 1945 and completed 35 missions over Germany. After returning to the United States, Newman served for several months as public information officer at the old Biltmore Hotel in Coral Gables, which was being used as an Air Force hospital. During that period, he says, current Dade County Mayor Steve Clark worked as a payroll clerk at the Biltmore, and restaurateur and hotelier Art Bruns headed the officers' club. Newman wrote this article for The Miami News.

STUART NEWMAN

Special to The Miami News

The throaty rumble of the vintage four-engined bomber brought back nostalgic memories of the same-dreaming heard thousands of times on World War II airfields four decades ago.

Together, with almost 7,000 other one-time Air Force fliers who retained their devotion to the B-17 Flying Fortress for more than 40 years, I felt a lump in my throat when the restored B-17 named "Sentimental Journey," taxied down the Boeing Field Tarmac in Seattle late last month.

Flyovers by "Sentimental Journey" — and a sister B-17 — highlighted the 50th anniversary party for the B-17 organized by Boeing and various Air Force group associations from World War II years. The reunion brought together thousands of crewmen — most of whom had not seen each other since 1945 or earlier.

A number of other South Floridians joined the sentimental journey to Seattle to celebrate the anniversary of the most renowned combat aircraft of an Air Force that impacted heavily on Greater Miami during World War II.

During the war years, Miami Beach and surrounding communities played a major role in Air Force training and wages. Hundreds of thousands of original Air Corps — later Air Force — personnel received basic training here. Clark Gable, who graduated from the Miami Beach Officers' Training School, was perhaps the most famous.

Others of us received basic training while housed in Miami Beach hotels, before advancing to further flight or aircraft maintenance schooling, often at bases elsewhere in Florida. The B-17 additionally was the focus of South Florida wartime aviation activities, with hundreds of Fortresses refueling in Miami and Marathon before flying to Europe via Trinidad, South America and Africa.

A major final training base for B-17 crews was located at Tampa's Drew Field, while other bomber and fighter training bases dotted the Sunshine State.

Thousands of South Florida families had sons, husbands and brothers assigned to Flying Fortress air crews or ground support units throughout Great Britain, the Mediterranean and the South Pacific.

Many of these veterans gathered recently in Seattle for the B-17 reunion, with lunch and a wine-and-cheese soiree hosted by Boeing. Featured speaker was Gen. Curtis LeMay, an Air Force division commander who flew on some of the war's most famous raids over Germany. He was joined by five former B-17 fliers — winners of the Congressional Medal of Honor, the nation's highest war-time decoration.

I had met LeMay after the Japanese surrender, at Coral Gables' Biltmore Hotel where I was assigned as public information officer following Eighth Air Force combat duty. The Biltmore then was an Air Force convalescent and rehabilitation center. LeMay agreed to a press conference which made national headlines from the feisty general's response to a question regarding the Navy's role in the Pacific, from then Miami News aviation writer Milt Slatin.

When LeMay spontaneously delivered an unflattering assessment of the Navy's efforts in the Pacific, I hastily commented, "What the General means is that the Navy's role has been considerably exaggerated."

Gazing at me, LeMay restated his remarks, adding, "That's exactly what I mean, Lieutenant," and blazing headlines resulted. Forty years had passed, but LeMay's comments at Seattle lost nothing in directness.

But, four decades later, the most poignant moments were generated by back-pummeling and embraces with former buddies last seen on war-time air bases — in some cases in German prison-of-war camps.

My own heart-warming experiences at Seattle



Stuart Newman recently, above, and as a lieutenant in 1945, right. Air Cadets trained on Miami Beach, below.



came from reunions with two of my original crew members and with the pilot and bombardier of a lead Fortress, of which I was navigator and which was downed by German anti-aircraft shells while on an early 1945 mission to Cologne, France.

This mission — my 20th — was especially memorable because, after a crash landing in a Belgian farmer's field, a detachment of British troops, led by a namesake — Sgt. Newman — escorted us to safety and an eventual return to England by the Royal Air Force.

At Seattle, a B-17 vet from Idaho remarked how lucky we were those of us at the reunion.

"I think of all the others who didn't come back," he said. "It seems just as many didn't return as are here today."

Air Force records indicate that, of 12,117 B-17s produced, more than 5,000 were lost on missions. While some of the nose or crew members of each downed Fortress aircraft started our fortune in surviving, most did not.

The reunited fliers swapped reminiscences about some of the "hairy" missions over Germany, as well as "milk-runs" to lesser defended targets.

The anniversary party was a time to rejoice — and a time to remember fellow airmen who never made it back.

Perhaps the most appropriate comment came from a photographer in her mid-20s. A former bombardier buddy wanted a photo of the two of us next to "Sentimental Journey," but his camera jammed. He asked her for a few exposures, and she readily complied.

When he attempted to reimburse her for the expense, she replied simply,

"You fellows paid the bill before I was born."