



B-24 "Nose Art" photos brought home by Larry Sams. (above) photo that Larry Sams sent home to his parents in Salina, Kansas in 1945.

Larry Sams, a WW II Veteran



By Dan R. Manning
The 350 miles that my wife Betty and I drove from Fair Grove, Missouri to Salina, Kansas was the beginning of a long trip back in time. My uncle, Larry Sams had invited us to attend a vintage air show at the airport. It was originally called Smoky Hill, but had been re-named Schilling Air Force Base during the 1960s. Uncle Larry wanted us to see a B-24 Liberator like those he had flown in, almost 70 years earlier.

After graduating from Salina high school in May of 1943, Lawrence Sams Jr. worked for Firestone Tire Company. That August he turned 18. On August of 1943 he joined the Army Air Corps at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas. His basic training was at Amarillo, Texas.

Larry's intention was to become a pilot like his brothers. However,

when he was an aviation cadet at Tyn-dall Field, Panama City, Florida, they told him there were enough pilots, and that the war was nearly over. Not quite a true statement for the Kansas farm kid.

Instead of flying planes, he became an aerial gunner. Larry's training was for .50 caliber machine guns on B-17 Flying Fortresses, but his assignment was to a B-24 Liberator's 10-man flight crew, as a tail gunner with the 13th Air Force, 307th Bombardment Group, 424th Squadron, known as the "Long Rangers."

When Larry's brothers (commanders of B-29s) found out that he was flying in B-24s, they began to tease him. Liberators, known as "flying coffins," carried smaller bomb-loads than Super Fortresses. His brothers said, "You better go home—you're just dropping kindling."

Before the war was over, Larry's parents had hung four stars in their window, indicating that he, his sister, and two brothers were serving in the armed forces, and doing their part to help keep America free.

After lots of island stopovers to re-fuel, Larry's plane took

24 hours to fly from Santa Ana, California to Morotai Island in the South Pacific ocean. That 695 square mile dot that Larry Sams would call home for seven months, was part of the Netherland East Indies. He took off and landed from there 39 times over that period on day and night missions.

When they neared bomb targets, smaller planes that had taken off from aircraft carriers would cover, guide and guard the B-24s during air attacks at the enemy. Larry remembers when they blew up Balikpapan Oil Refinery

in Borneo in May and June of 1945. At another time, he recalls seeing from the air one thousand ships sailing toward Leyte for the Philippine Invasion.

On days when Larry flew on bombing missions, the captain and crew ate breakfast before going over details with the commanding officer. Then they would climb aboard one of three or four different B-24s, whichever one they had been assigned to.

After settling into positions they synchronized watches and the plane's four engines were started one at a time, before it taxied out to the runway. The crew included: Lt. Frank Mikos (pilot), Lt. John Palmer (co-pilot), Tom Ucker

ise that if the plane was hit, and before they bailed out, to pull him from his cramped location. He was determined to escape with them before the plane went down in the ocean.

After take-off, the plane would fly in formation as part of a larger group. They were normally behind the lead plane and on its right side. Lt. Mikos, the 28-year-old pilot who had flown before the war, really knew what he was doing, according to Larry. But, it was navigator Tom Ucker who got them safely to the target and back every time without getting lost.

Like the other crew members, Larry performed a number of safety procedures before each flight. He, in fact, lost a really good friend, who was accidentally killed by failing to operate a particular safety switch and who broke his neck.

Larry remembers eating spam sandwiches with juicy onions on them during flights. Smoking was permitted, and he was among those who lit-up on the way toward assigned bomb targets. Twelve hour round-trips were a long time to spend flying over the ocean, especially for the Kansas kid who had never

learned to swim. During survival training he had nearly jerked his head off when, against the instructor's warning, he opened the inflatable life preserver before hitting the water. Even during practice, he did not want to drown.

When the plane neared its target area, small Japanese fighters would fly in and shoot at them. Guarding their aircraft's rear, Larry shot back with his twin-mounted .50 cal. machine guns. Flak came up from enemy guns and frequently hit the plane. He said it sounded like sand being thrown at



Larry Sams (Btm 2nd from the right) and other members of his B-24 Flight crew in 1945.

(navigator), William Menough (bombardier) who was later replaced, George Larkin (engineer), Harry Talbot (radio operator), Ted Rennick (armorers), Paul Stepp (nose gunner), Don Smith (upper gunner and ass't engineer) and Larry Sams (tail gunner).

Larry's gear was a flight suit, helmet with a radio headset attached, flak vest, May West life preserver, and parachute harness. It was difficult for him to maneuver through the aircraft on his way back to the tail gunner's position. He made everyone who helped him prom-



them.

Several times an engine or two would quit, but they always made it back to the island air strip. After bombs were dropped, the B-24s would scatter for the return trip. When they landed on Morotai, a man at operations would give each crew member a shot of whiskey. Instead of drinking it right away, Larry says the crew poured theirs in a personal bottle until there was enough for a "party."

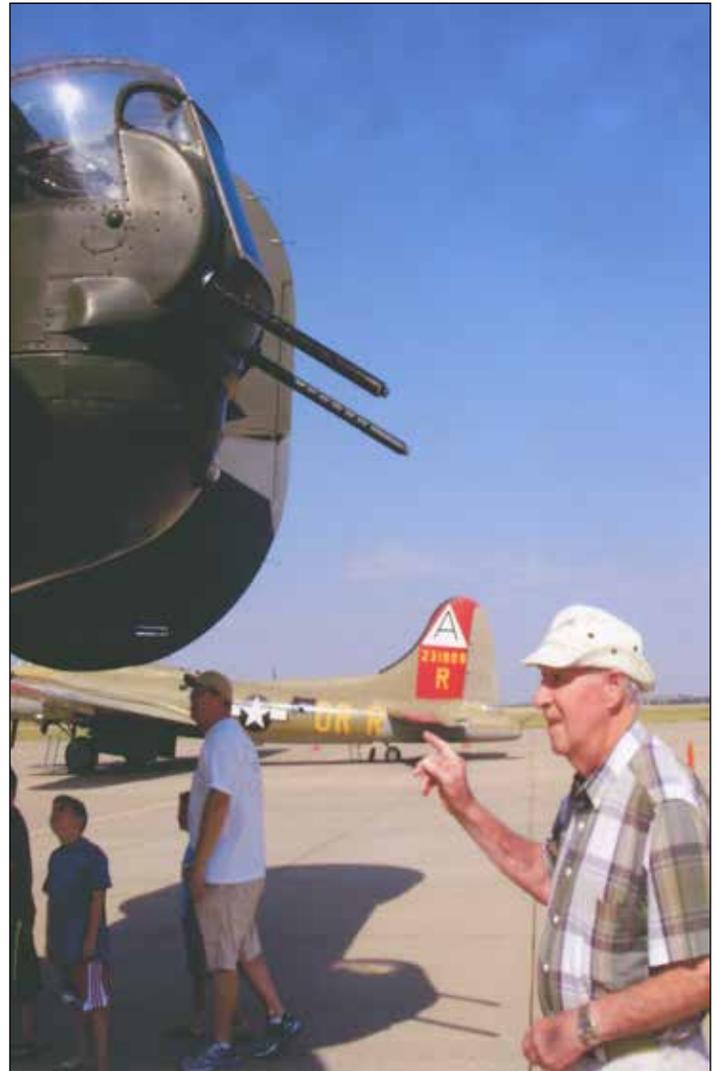
Larry's final mission was a month before atomic bombs were dropped by B-29s on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, Japan in August of 1945. He did not say, but that was no doubt one of those "party-times."

Note: This story's author was 1 day less than a year old at that time. In 1965 and 66 I was stationed in the US Navy at NAS Sangley Pt. in Manila Bay. When I told my Uncle Larry about visiting Corregidor Island, he claimed that some of the craters had been made by bombs dropped out of his plane.

Life on Morotai Island for Larry was normally just waiting out the war in between flights over enemy territory. However, one night after lights were out and everyone was asleep, some kind of large animal crashed through their tent and hit the post where their mess kits were hanging. They flew all over the place and scared everyone. While Larry was walking along at another time, a falling coconut hit the side of his head and nearly broke his shoulder. He cleaned his machine guns on days off to make sure they were in good operating condition for the next flight in three or four days. He remembers it was always hot because they were just two degrees north of the equator. When the sun wasn't shining there also were lots of rainy days.

On the way overseas in 1944, Larry and other crew members began collecting different types of money in Hawaii from other service personnel. At that time everyone exchanged autographs on currency that were called "short-snorter." Traditionally, when someone challenged someone to show his signature and they couldn't, they had to buy the drinks. Larry still has several examples of foreign money with signatures of old acquaintances on them. Once, Queen Wilhelmina gave her and the crew coins as keepsakes.

A month before the war officially ended and missions ceased, Larry began



At the tail guns of a B-24 Liberator, Larry Sams shows the writer where his work was performed during WWII. This photo was taken in 2012 at a show at the Salina Airport.

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Larry Sams, Tail gunner in flight gear when he was stationed on Morotai Island in the South Pacific during 1945.

looking forward to returning home. It had taken 24 hours for him to arrive in New Guinea nine months earlier, but it took 30 days for him to get back to Kansas. The worst thing that happened was when they started out in a C-47 Goony Bird toward Manila and two of its engines quit running. They limped back to Morotai Island, and it took two days of repairs before they could start again toward the USA.

Larry had begun his service as a private. At the end he had been promoted to staff sergeant, and was making \$96 a month, plus \$48 flight pay and another \$10 for overseas duty. As he remembers, "that was a lot of money back then!"

After he came home, Larry needed something warm to wear at work. He scraped off the custom-paint job of a B-24, his unit numbers and other insignia from his A-2 military flight jacket, and wore it. He saw one like it appraised at \$2,000 on Antiques Road Show, and wished he had saved his. But it was worn to shreds and had been tossed in the trash.

Larry did save his uniform as well as a special ball cap, that was custom-made by a buddy at the island. He said that guy did lots of "nose-art" on the planes, too, and probably left the service as a millionaire. On the back of his faded 1945 ball cap are stencils of bombs to signify thirty-nine flight missions that he and his B-24 Liberator crew flew against the Japanese enemy. Not forgotten, he still considers them missions accomplished.

In 2010 my uncle, Larry Sams rode with fellow veterans on an Honor Flight from Salina, Kansas to Washington, D.C. He was somewhat embarrassed when everyone clapped as they got off the plane in Maryland, to pay tribute to those who had fought for America in World War II.

Ninety-one-year-old Lawrence Sams will admit to being a crew member on a B-24 in the South Pacific during World War Two. But, he has no idea what that means to me and others

who live in the greatest country on earth as free citizens. Thank you, Uncle Larry!

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