

# The lonely terror of a turret gunner

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** In recognition of the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, The Lawrence Township Memorial Committee, in cooperation with The Ledger, will feature a column each week during the anniversary year profiling a Lawrence resident.

During the Second World War there were very few places as lonely and isolated as the thin plexiglas and metal bubble protruding from underneath the bombers of the Air Corps. The lower ball turret was designed to protect the plane's vulnerable underbelly from enemy aircraft as it penetrated deep into the foe's territory to deliver a payload of bombs.

Suspended in space and cut off from physical contact with other crew members, the aerial gunner who occupied the turret had an eagle's eye view of everything below and to infinity where land and sky merged in a haze.

Dick Seabridge entered the Sperry ball turret of his B-24 Liberator bomber for a total of 51 combat missions in the skies over Hitler's Festung Europa from September, 1944, to the end of the war in Europe.

Richard S. Seabridge was born on

March 10, 1925, in Lawrence Township. He attended public schools, graduating from Trenton Central High School in 1943. Shortly after his graduation he was inducted into the US Army and assigned to the Army Air Corps. Upon completion of basic training and armament and gunnery schools, he was assigned to a 10-man B-24 crew as the lower ball turret gunner.

At Chatham Field, Georgia, the crew trained together in practice bombing, gunnery and navigation for eventual overseas duty. It was during this three-month period that his crew formed a close-knit relationship, each knowing that his survival depended on the alertness and proficiency of his fellow crew members.

"Our 10-man crew," Dick recalls, "consisted of the pilot, co-pilot, navigator, bombadier, upper turret gunner, lower turret gunner, nose gunner and two waistgunners. We flew every other day at Chatham Field, and had ground training as well.

"Night flying was the worst, and we lost quite a few crews in accidents in that phase of our training. By the end of August, 1944, we completed our overseas training and were sent to

## VETERAN PROFILE

### Nicholas Loveless

Mitchel Field, New York, to pick up a new B-24.

"Early in September we left the States and flew to Newfoundland, from there to the Azores, and on to Morocco and Tunisia. At Tunis we were relieved of our new B-24 and flown to Pantanella Field near Foggia, Italy, and assigned to the 781st Squadron of the 465th Bomb Group in the Fifteenth Air Force."

Rome had fallen to the Allies in June, 1944, and the American Fifth and the British Eighth armies had pushed their way northward on the Italian peninsula below Bologna. On the western front the Allies were approaching the German homeland. The mission of the Fifteenth Air Force B-17s and B-24s was to strike strategic targets in German-occupied countries and inside Germany itself.

"Our B-24s were faster and carried a heavier bomb load than the B-17s," Dick continues, "and our range was longer. I weighed over 180 pounds at the time and it was a tight squeeze in the ball turret wearing heavy flying equipment, so tight that I couldn't wear a parachute and had to leave it in the waist compartment.

"When we went on a mission I would enter the turret when we got close to the enemy lines and there was a possibility of fighter attacks. The waist gunners would lower the turret and I would stay there until we reached the target and came back across our own lines again, which could be as much as six hours. There were two .50 calibre machine guns in the turret with me, one on each side.



**Richard Seabridge**  
...November, 1944

The turret could rotate in any direction for 380 degrees. Even though I wore an electrically heated flying suit and heavy gear, the temperatures dropped as low as 50 to 65 degrees below zero and it got unbearably cold at times."

The 465th Bomb Group was assigned targets all over German-occupied Europe. Dick flew with his Squadron to Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland and many places inside Germany and Austria. The Brenner Pass in northern Italy was also on the long list of targets.

Even though the Allies gained air superiority in the latter part of the war, there was always the reality of fighter attacks and the German anti-aircraft gunners were noted for their marksmanship with 88mm and 105mm guns.

Flying in close formation, the bombers had defensive firepower that was a deterrent to enemy fighters, but a straggler was fair game to the Luftwaffe, and it was here that the aerial gunners were put to the test.

"On Nov. 20, 1944," Dick continues, "we lost our squadron commander, Colonel Lokker, on a raid to Blechhammer, Germany, as he was leading the Wing over the target. His B-24 took a direct hit in the wing between the fuselage and engine, the wing broke off and the plane rolled over and went down in flames.

"Someone got pictures of it when it happened, and it later appeared in magazines and books on the war in the air.

"On another mission our squadron lost three planes over the target. Vienna was probably the most heavily defended target of all, and there was always plenty of opposition there. On one mission to Blechhammer, our plane took a hit going into the target and we lost an engine. The formation left us and we made the bomb run alone behind the rest. After we left the target, we lost a second engine and then began having trouble with the third one.

"We jettisoned everything we could to make the plane lighter, and made it

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## Veteran

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to Luchera Airdrome, a fighter strip in northern Italy, where we made an emergency landing using our parachutes to slow the plane down.'

Dick and his crew had many close encounters before they completed their required 50 missions in April, 1945.

Their B-24 had been holed by flak on many of those missions, and yet the crew made it through with no serious injuries. On one occasion, a piece of flak penetrated Dick's flying suit but stopped short of injuring him. The war in Europe had been over for a month when Dick and the crew left Italy and returned to the U.S.

Dick is the younger brother of William Seabridge, the former Lawrence Township chief of police, who also is an Air Corps veteran.

Dick was discharged as a staff sergeant from the Air Corps late in 1945 after having served 31 months. His awards included the Air Medal with four oak leaf clusters, Africa-Italy-Middle East Campaign Medal with eight stars, Victory Medal, American Campaign Medal, and the Unit Presidential Citation with one oak leaf cluster.

In 1946 he was employed by Public Service Electric Company as a lineman, and retired from their service department in 1980.

He is a life member of VFW Post 3022 of Lawrence and over the years has been active in hunting, fishing and WWII research. His main interest for 60 years has been in pigeons. He has raised champion racing pigeons for almost all of his lifetime, and has written and published articles on them.



Richard Seabridge of President Avenue in Lawrence is front and center in this photo, taken with his crew on April 1, 1945, in Italy.

As one of the founders of the Flying Tipplers of America, he has served as president of the national organization for 17 years, and has become a recognized authority on the birds. He still maintains contacts with other enthusiasts throughout the United States, Japan, South America and Europe.

In 1946, Dick and Joyce Shive of Hamilton Township were married and settled in their present home at 703 President Ave. They are the parents of five children.

Dick still maintains contact with one other member of his former WWII B-24 crew, and although his old squadron holds reunions periodically, Dick's other interests have not permitted him to attend. He no longer races pigeons, but still has an active interest in them and has gained a wealth of knowledge about them, as

evidenced by well over 100 awards decorating his home that he has received over the years.

The Veterans Memorial Committee is asking veterans from World War II and other conflicts to provide a photograph in uniform, along with their name, present address, branch of service and unit, where and when they served, their principal assignment and summary of their service. Their individual experiences or unusual stories are also welcomed. All photographs will be returned. Families of deceased veterans are also encouraged to submit articles. All materials should be sent to The Lawrence Township Veterans Memorial Committee, P.O. Box 55966 Trenton, N.J. 08638. Inquires may be made by calling 882-9108.



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