

# **Floyd Henderson**

## **Pilot A-20/A-26 671st BG**

### **BRIEF BIO:**

Floyd Henderson was born on May 28, 1918 in Loup City, Nebraska. He was drafted into the Army in Omaha, Nebraska, in January 1942. He completed Basic Infantry Training at Camp Roberts, California, and applied for Air Corps flying training. He went through Primary training at Hemet, California, in PR-19's; Basic Training at Lancaster, California, in BT-13's; and Advanced Training at Yuma, Arizona, in VC78's and AT-6's. He received his wings and 2ndLt bars on July 28, 1943 at Mather Field, California. His major field of WWII operations was in the European theater, flying the A-20 and later the A-26. He flew a total of 65 combat missions and participated in D-day and in the Battle of the Bulge. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and a number of Air Medals, ending the war as a 1st Lt.

After that war he stayed for a while in the Air Force Reserves. He was about to transition into P-80 jets, at Hamilton Field, California, when he lost an eye in an accident. He retired with the rank of Captain.

On December 9, 1941, just before being drafted, Floyd married Ann. Despite many separations and much bouncing around bases and the country, they ended up having nine children, Clarke, Jackie, Loren, Gayle, Maura, Robert, Mary, Tommy, and John. Tommy was lost in a motorcycle accident.

### **HIS STORY:**

I was born May 28 1918 in Loup City, Nebraska and stayed there until I was 19 years old. For several years, I bounced around trying to decide whether I wanted a college education or a job. I was classified 1A in the draft and things looked bad in Europe because of Hitler's activities. In November 1941, I learned from my local draft board that I might get called up in about six months. About a month after Pearl Harbor, I received my call-up papers and I rushed to marry my fiancée, Ann.

I was drafted into the infantry and sent to Camp Roberts near Paso Robles, CA. My wife came with me and got a job in Paso Robles so we got to get together most weekends during my several weeks of boot camp followed by basic

infantry training. While there, I applied for the Air Corps for flying training and quickly passed the physical and aptitude tests.

Eventually, I was transferred to aircrew ground school at Santa Ana for a month. Then I moved to Hemet, CA in January 1943 and spent three months amassing 60 hours of primary pilot training in Fairchild PT-19s. On completion, I was transferred to Yuma, AZ on May 13 and did my advanced training on Cessna C-78s and a few flights in AT-6s. I received my wings and 2nd Lieutenant bars on July 28. My flight hours then totaled 220.

Transition training was carried out on North American B-25s at Mather field, CA during August and September. The emphasis was on instrument flying, culminating in making a landing "under the hood". I did many solo cross-country flights which brought my total flying time to 345 hours. In November, I was assigned to a replacement training unit, based at Florence, SC, where I transitioned into A-20 Havocs, completing the course in February 1944. Happily, during all this training, Anne was able to find accommodation near by and we lived off base.

I sailed for England in February 1944 aboard the RMS Queen Mary. On arrival, I spent a couple of weeks orientation training at a Combat Crew Replacement Center in Northern Ireland. Next, I was assigned to combat duty with the 671st Bomb Squadron, 416th Bomb Group, 9th U.S. Army Air Corps which was based at Wethersfield in Essex, located about 60 miles northeast of London.

The squadron was equipped with Douglas A-20s; most were the A-20G model, which had a solid nose fitted with six 50 caliber guns. The crew consisted of myself as pilot and two gunners, Sgts. Richard Griswold and Phillippe



Coulombe, who manned the dorsal and ventral gun positions in addition to their other duties. A few aircraft, called A-20Js, were fitted with glazed noses and a bombardier's position carrying a crew of four. These acted as bombing leaders and navigators for each group of aircraft. When the lead bomber dropped, the others salvoed at the same time. The adjacent picture shows the cockpit of the A-20 (courtesy Boeing Archives).

Our bomb load was normally 2,000 pounds carried internally. Later, newer versions were able to carry an additional 500 pound bomb under each wing. The type of bombs carried varied with the type of mission. Most raids were carried out from a medium height around 12,000 feet, though sometimes weather conditions or special missions



dictated much lower altitudes. Throughout my tour, little enemy fighter opposition was experienced, though that cannot be said for the flak, which was often intense and accurate.

My first combat mission was on May 19 1944, a short trip to attack a large gun position on the coast of Normandy. Due to hazy weather, the mission was not rated a success, but at least it was a gentle baptism to combat flying.

The next mission, the following day, was almost my last. It was supposed to be a raid on an airfield at Beauvais, but faulty lead navigation led us to bomb an airfield at Montidier where we ran into a tremendous flak barrage. Two A-20s from our sister squadron were shot down, though most of their crews escaped by parachute. My aircraft received 33 flak holes, one piece of shrapnel cutting a piece out of my parachute, which I was wearing on my back, and scored a groove in my seat. Another piece hit the fuel selector valve at my side and a very large piece hit the emergency radio, thus saving a gunner's life. Many other squadron aircraft received substantial damage though they all made it back to England.

For this mission, I was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC). An excerpt from the citation reads:- "While serving as a pilot of an A-20 type aircraft, Lt. Henderson attacked an important airfield in enemy occupied France. Despite intense anti-aircraft fire, Lt. Henderson maintained his position and dispatched his bombs in an excellent pattern on the air field. Battle damage sustained to his aircraft was such that Lt. Henderson was compelled to abandon formation and return to base without escort. Observing another badly damaged

aircraft, he elected to escort him to friendly territory. Although his fuel was dangerously low, Lt. Henderson maintained his own aircraft and led the course to friendly territory without further incident."

By the end of May, I'd flown seven more missions, including two on one day. All were into France, concentrating on marshaling yards, airfields and "Noball" targets. Noball was the code name given to the launching ramps for V1 pilotless bombers which had just begun their campaign against London and were considered primary targets as they were creating so much death and destruction in the British capital.

D-Day, June 6 1944, saw us crossing the invasion beaches at 2,000 feet, enroute to bomb a critical crossroads located about 60 miles inland. We were part of a 54-plane formation and all returned awed at the sight we had witnessed. I added eight more trips by the end of the month and another seven in July. Atrocious weather precluded us flying more missions during this period. August flying was intense; I racked up nine more missions between August 4 and August 17 alone, then the squadron took a well-earned break.

On resumption of operations, we concentrated on bombing Brest, which had been cut off by Allied troops, but on September 16, we switched our attention to targets in Belgium as a prelude to the airborne invasion of Holland. Though it was our shortest mission ever, the flak was terrible. Fortunately, we were in the second box and suffered little damage, but the squadron ahead of us was badly mauled, losing two aircraft.

We moved to France on September 23 and settled at Base A-55 at Melun, an airfield 25 miles southeast of Paris. A former Luftwaffe base, it had been bombed flat by B-17s a few weeks earlier. The huge base accommodated four squadrons and was littered with destroyed German aircraft. Our squadron patched up a few lesser damaged buildings to set up operations etc, but our accommodations were tents.

I flew my first mission from here on September 28, however, we didn't bomb as the visibility was poor and the target, a German Panzer concentration, located in some woods, was extremely close to American forward troop locations. The following day, we attacked marshaling yards in Julich, Germany. The enemy were now concentrating their flak units around key transportation centers, so intense flak downed three A-20s from our squadron of twelve aircraft. Due to the move, I only flew seven missions in September.

Shortly after we arrived at A-55, it was announced that we would re-equip with the new Douglas A-26B Invader. This was a much improved aircraft, still packing six 50 caliber guns in the nose but able to carry 5,500 pounds of bombs over a greater range. It was quicker and could climb much faster than the A-20. Again, lead ships, called A-26Cs, were equipped with a glazed nose and bombardier's position.



Although it was usually flown by one pilot there was room for two. The picture below shows the left side (solo) cockpit (courtesy Boeing Archives). One other difference was that only one gunner was required. Sadly, both of my original gunners were reassigned; they had been with me on every mission in the A-20s.

Each flight was taken off operations in rotation to take the conversion courses. During my flight training, while flying solo, I was reported as Missing In Action! I just had taken off on October 22 when a fog bank enveloped the field. I lost communication with the tower and was uncertain of my actual position. I dropped to low level to try to identify some landmarks, but a near collision with a tower soon pushed me back to a higher altitude.



After being unable to find the coastline to orient myself, I headed west and landed at a base near London. Unable to get my A-26 serviced there, I repositioned to a C-47 base while the weather improved. By mid-afternoon of the October 24, my efforts to contact the squadron had failed and I was reported as MIA. Just a few hours later, I finally managed to get airborne and return to base...to the surprise of all my squadron mates. About this time, I was promoted to 1st Lieutenant.

Continued bad weather precluded any missions being flown until early in November, but we did manage to ferry our old A-20Gs to England and return with shiny new A-26s on November 3.

We were the first Bomb Group in Europe to be fully equipped with the new type. I didn't resume operational flying until December 5 when we bombed the town of Erkelents, just ahead of advancing American and British



armies. Weather continued to plague us and we flew missions at a much reduced pace into the new year. However, on February 8, 1945, I flew on the 416th BG's 200th mission, the first flown entirely by A-26s. The Group's first mission had been flown on March 3 1944. Two days later, we relocated to base A-69 at Laon-Athies, about 65 miles northwest of Paris. Conditions there were very similar to our previous home.

My last mission, my 68th, was on March 20 1945, when we bombed Westerberg with no opposition. On return, I indulged in the traditional end of tour low level buzzing of the airfield. I was offered promotion to Major and a flight leader's position if I would extend my stay, but I elected to return to the USA to my wife and the son that I had never seen. He had been born six months after I had arrived in the UK.

I joined the Air Force Reserves and did my duty periods at Hamilton AFB. We were living in Fort Bragg, CA at the time. Unfortunately, I received an eye injury just two weeks before I was scheduled to transition to jets in the Lockheed T-33 or F-80. Subsequently, I was promoted to Captain and given an honorable discharge just prior to the Korean War breaking out.

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