



# WOMPATUCK NEWS

## Annex Profile in Courage

By Jim Rose, Wompatuck News Editor and Historian

As 2025 commemorates the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II, I thought it appropriate to tell the story of Annex veteran Tom Beary.

The majority of the ammunition depot workers were veterans of World War II and the Korean War. I interviewed fifteen for the Library of Congress Veterans History Project.



**Tom Beary**

Many of the veteran's combat experiences are fascinating, sad, off-the-wall and patriotically inspiring. Beary's is one of them. He had

many brushes with death, during and after the war.

Tom Beary was born November 19, 1924 in Whitman, Massachusetts and was one of twelve children. "Growing up during the Depression was a challenge," said Beary. "My father had to feed a wife and all us kids. We were lucky to have enough food on the table every day."

When World War II started, Beary volunteered for the Army Air Force's pilot program. Unfortunately, he washed out of flight school for poor eye sight and became a radio operator/gunner instead.

After training on the B-24 bomber, he was sent to Ridgewell, England in 1944. For his first mission, bomber command switched him to the B-17

and assigned him to the 532 squadron of the 381<sup>st</sup> Bombardment Group, Eighth Air Force.

"We had a crew of nine," said Beary. "We usually flew at 28,000 to 30,000 feet and carried twelve 500-pound bombs. Our missions lasted from seven to eleven hours. Our B-17 was nick-named "Flak Magnet."



**Flak Magnet crew with Beary pictured on the bottom right.**

Beary's first close call came in 1945 while making a landing approach in England. Two B-17s collided in front of his plane. The ensuing fireball left no survivors. His plane landed safely without damage.

In combat, every mission meant flying through deadly exploding 88-millimeter flak. He said it sounded like someone throwing pebbles on a tin roof. Several times his engine was knocked out.

"I always knew when a tough mission was coming up," said Beary. "At the mess hall we were usually

served powdered eggs. When a dangerous mission was assigned, we got served fresh eggs."

His closest call with death came when he left his radio operator seat to throw chaff out the bomb bay doors (chaff are metal strips to confuse enemy radar). Flak was exceptionally heavy that day. As he returned to his station, he found a jagged, gaping hole in the airplane where his seat was. He picked up the anti-aircraft shrapnel on the floor and later had it framed. It was still hanging on his living room wall along with his air medals when I interviewed him in 2004.

Another close call came when their plane was attacked by an ME-262 jet. Far outgunned (four 30-mm cannons) and too fast to shoot at (150 mph faster than our planes), Beary thought he was a sitting duck. He fired at it anyways from his waist gun position to no avail. Fortunately, four Army Air Force P-51 fighters chased it away. P-51s are more maneuverable than the ME-262. The jet shot down an astounding 542 allied aircraft during the war.

One of his buddies was not so lucky. After destroying an attacking German fighter from his ball turret position, his B-17 was shot-up badly by a Luftwaffe pursuit squadron. He had to bail out. As he parachuted slowly to earth, the offending German

pilot zoomed by and dumped his chute, knocking the air out of it. The German did it again. He did this just to be a wise guy and see him drop 100 feet. The third time the pilot came by real slow and saluted him. He saluted back...both with grins on their faces. Call it chivalry and good humor while fighting a deadly duel. However, Beary's friend ended up in a POW camp the rest of the war.

With chivalry in mind, my uncle Lawrence Rose, who also flew for the Eighth Air Force as a gunner, said there was an unofficial accepted rule that when your plane was shot up and needed to force land to surrender, you lowered your landing gear as a signal to the other side. The Germans would then hold their fire and give the plane an escort to their airfield. On the other hand, he witnessed the destruction of the 445<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group flying behind his squadron. The Germans shot down 31 out of 35 B-24s. The bomb group's commander was Hollywood movie star Jimmy Stewart (working at headquarters in England at the time).

Beary flew 34 missions in combat over Germany including: Berlin, Dresden, Regensburg, Leipzig, Ulm, Essen and Cologne. His battle-scarred B-17 "Flak Magnet" was famous enough to be featured on our nation's postage stamps.



*Flak Magnet pictured on a U.S. stamp.*

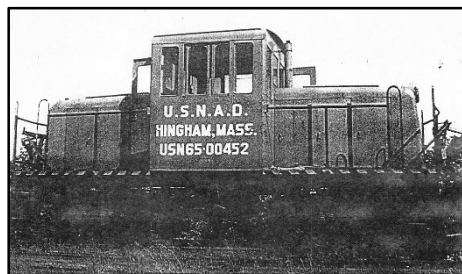
It also appears on the front cover of the book "The Mighty Eighth" by Gerald Astor.



*Flak Magnet pictured on a book cover.*

When VE Day finally arrived on May 8, 1945, Beary's Eighth Air Force posted some impressive statistics: 26,000 killed and 28,000 taken prisoner. They suffered more casualties than the Marines in the Pacific. The B-17 lost 4,735 planes in combat out of 12,732 produced.

After the war Beary worked at the Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot as Head Ordnanceman. His job was to refit three and five inch shells. His supervisor was Jim Rose (my dad) and Clarence "Rebel" Vaughan (my neighbor in Rockland). Beary received several awards for safety.



*Hingham ammunition depot locomotive.*

Beary also worked as a brakeman for the ammunition depot's trains. "When I think back to those depot trains, I think the funniest incident occurred at Hingham Mainside (Bare Cove Park) on the docks of the Back River," he said with a smile. "When we were loading one of the freight cars, the driver of the forklift wasn't watching where he was backing up

with his full load and drove himself off the dock into the water.

"We fished him out along with the equipment. The driver was fine but embarrassed. We workers got a good laugh out of it because he tended to be a loudmouth and know-it-all."

When the ammunition depot closed in 1962, Beary found employment at Natick Labs as a material classifier. He volunteered to work in Vietnam during the war. Unfortunately, Beary was exposed to agent orange. As a result, he suffered from a rash that lasted 30 years and chest pains that necessitated stents for his heart.



*Annex anti-personnel mine buildings.*

In 1967 Beary worked as an inspector for the Army at the Cohasset Annex, now the state park. The operation was called the "Gravel Mine Project." It produced personnel mines for the Vietnam War. He narrowly escaped death in December 1967 when a mine exploded at a plant his team was inspecting in Hanover. The explosion occurred an hour after he left the building. One person was killed and fifteen were injured.

### *Munitions Plant Explodes*

HANOVER -- At least one person was killed and 15 were injured today when an explosion and fire rocked the Atlantic Research plant on King Street which makes anti-personnel mines for use in Vietnam.

The explosion occurred at 8:45 a.m. in a one-story wood and steel frame building which officials said is used for mixing explosives for use in the mines.

*Newspaper clipping of Hanover tragedy*

Beary's last job was for the Department of Contract Supply in 1968 as a quality control inspector. Beary oversaw the production of gas masks, shells and tank treads.

Beary retired 1980 and died of heart failure in 2008 at the age of 83. He passed away in the same chair I interviewed him in and the same house he was born in.