

Jennings man, a B-17 gunner, shot down twice during World War II

By Doris Maricle / American Press

JENNINGS - Imagine rolling yourself into a ball, like an armadillo, and squeezing yourself into a space barely big enough to hold your contorted body. Now imagine that you will be stuck inside this little claustrophobic ball for eight hours at a time, breathing oxygen through a mask to stay alive and controlling two .50-caliber machine guns, all while flying over enemy-held territory at 29,000 feet, where the outside temperature is 60 degrees below zero.

Retired Staff Sgt. Ben Miller, 88, of Jennings, did this 33 times as an 18-year-old ball turret gunner on an Army Air Force B-17 Flying Fortress in the skies over Europe during World War II. Drafted at the age of 18 in 1943 from his home in Jennings, Miller was shipped off to Logan, Utah, as a cadet for pilot training.

Slated to be shipped to California to finish his pilot training, the program was cut and Miller was not able to solo and gain his pilot wings. He was transferred to gunnery school and was trained to shoot down enemy fighters with the .50-caliber machine guns that gave the Flying Fortress its name. The mounting casualties in the air war over Europe forced the Army Air Force to ship Miller to England to man the ball turret on a B-17.

He sailed from New York to England aboard the Queen Mary, along with actor Mickey Rooney. "I saw Mickey Rooney on the deck of the ship, but I never got to talk to him," Miller said.

The Atlantic crossing was dangerous in itself, with many soldiers never making it to England. "It took us nine days to cross because we had to zigzag to avoid the German submarines," he said. "I was flying combat missions for the 8th Air Force just a few days after landing in England," he said.

On Dec. 11, 1944, Miller flew in the bombing raid on a major railroad complex in Giessen, Germany. The railroad facility was a key strategic target because it handled the transportation of vast amounts of German army resources. The city also was the location for the subcamp of the Buchenwald concentration camp.

Enemy fire wasn't the only threat to Miller's survival. Stuffed into his tiny ball turret gun position in the belly of the B-17, Miller's oxygen mask froze up and cut

off his air supply at 29,000 feet. He had to scramble to take off his oxygen mask, disconnect his heated gloves and jacket from their electrical connections, and open the door to the turret so that he could climb back into the aircraft with his other crew members before passing out from hypoxia.

"I thought that was my last day on Earth, but I came through and here I am today," he said. His buddies on board were able to get an emergency oxygen tank to him.

Life in the ball turret on a B-17 was especially dangerous. Only small-statured men could fit into the cramped space. "I flew the first five missions without a parachute because they didn't have a chute small enough to fit with me inside that little frozen ball," he said with a smile.

Enemy fire caught up with Miller and his crew on Christmas Eve 1944. "The first time I was shot down, we were hit over Frankfurt, Germany, and ended up crash landing in Belgium." Miller said.



Benjamin Franklin "Ben" Miller

Miller had to climb out of his ball turret before they crash landed because he would have been crushed inside the bottom of the plane. "We had to scatter and make our way back to England on our own because the Germans were all around," Miller said.

The B-17 had a 10-man crew, and it was every man for himself to get out of enemy-held territory because 10 American soldiers in a group would attract the attention of the enemy.

Miller's luck continued as he was approached by a young boy as he made his escape from the crash site. "I couldn't understand a word he was saying, but I could tell he wanted me to follow him to his home," Miller said.

When they arrived at the boy's home, he showed Miller identification papers and a pistol given to him by the U.S. government that proved he was a member of the underground resistance and would help Miller get back to his base in England.

After spending Christmas with the boy's family, Miller rejoined an engineering outfit that had seized a castle previously occupied by the Germans. Miller stayed with the engineers for nine days before being transported back to his base in England.

He immediately returned to duty and began flying more bombing missions. On Valentine's Day 1945 while on a bombing raid to destroy the oil refinery and weapons factory at Chemnitz, Germany, he was shot down for the second time. "We got hit real bad," he said. "The flak (air-bursting anti-aircraft artillery) blasted us. Two of our engines were hit and caught fire. One of my buddies caught a load of shrapnel in his leg and was banged up real bad. The shrapnel that tore his leg up barely missed me.

"We landed with two of our engines on fire." Having landed on the allied side of the lines, Miller and his crew were back in England on flight status in no time.

When asked what was the scariest part of the missions, Miller replied, "The flak exploding and spraying us with shrapnel. The flak was so close and rough that by the time we hit Belgium our formations were all busted up and scattered. The booming noise as the shells exploded was unbearable."

With victory declared in Europe, Miller waited for his orders to ship him to the Pacific to fight the Japanese. Fortunately for him the war in the Pacific ended before he received his orders to go.

"Boy was I relieved when we got word of the Japanese surrender," he said.

Miller left England for Iceland, and then to Mississippi to await his next assignment before becoming an inactive reservist. He was later called up for the



Ben reviewing his WW II memories

Korean War but was never deployed. He ended his military service in 1952 as a vehicle technician at Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Miss.

Miller's wife of 59 years, Martha, was just a young girl while he was serving his country. "I was only 9 years old when he was over there fighting," she said. "All I remember

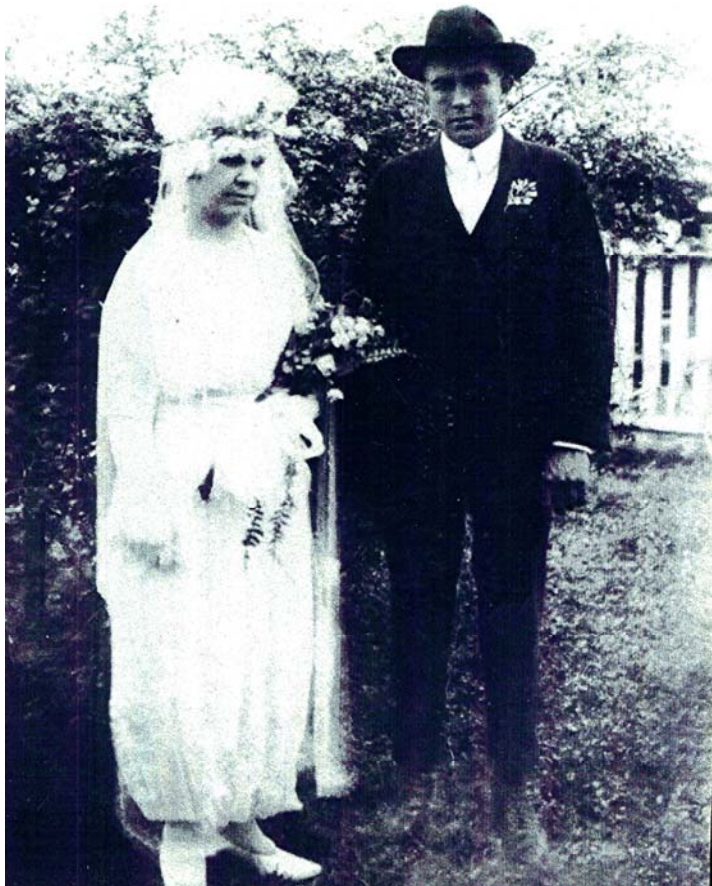
about the war was working at my daddy's gas station and pasting stamps in the stamp books."

Miller kept a diary of his days in combat. "I just wrote in it when I thought about it," he said. "There would be days I didn't pay any attention to it." The diary is among other keepsakes from his service including his medals, letters from home and old black and white photographs.

Ben Miller is a descendant of Jacob Miller and Anne Marie Thaison/Theigen and Jacob's son, Jean Miller and Marie Francoise Mayer.

Ben's parents are Bernard Miller and Anna Marie Clement. He married Martha Blackledge.

More on these families at www.FamilyAtLouisiana.com. Books of interest may be purchased at www.lulu.com.



Bernard "Ben" Miller & Anna Marie Clement
Parents of Benjamin "Ben" Franklin Miller