

Brigadier General Frank A. Armstrong, Jr.

Memories

by

W.C. Leasure, Major

**315th Bomb Wing Headquarters, Guam
(Staff Navigator and Tactical Plans Officer)**

For the 315th Bomb Wing:

Major Swann has done a remarkable job of writing the 315th Bomb Wing history with information available primarily from the Simpson Historical Archives at Maxwell Field. But there is an ingredient missing. Brigadier General Frank A. Armstrong, Jr. was the finest Air Corps senior combat commander in heavy bombardment of World War II. I have not seen his accomplishments catalogued anywhere. They need to be.

Of my personal knowledge, I would like to tell you what he did.

I first felt the hand of Colonel Armstrong in November, 1942. I was a combat crew navigator in the 324th Squadron, 91st Bomb Group, B-17's in England. Colonel Armstrong was the Group Liaison Officer of the 1st Combat Bomb wing of the 8th Air Force. The 91st was in the 1st Combat Bomb Wing.

Our 91st Group had suffered severe crew and personnel combat losses in November, 1942. On a raid over St. Nazaire, France, on November 23rd, our Group lost among others, three of our four Squadron Commanders, killed in action. My squadron Commander was one of the three shot down.

There was a severe morale problem in our Group. Then Colonel Armstrong entered the picture. He sent in as our Squadron Commander his right hand man, Major Claude A. Putnam. By the middle of January, 1943, we had survived the shock, aided to a great degree by their leadership.

A far larger problem had developed for Colonel Armstrong--the 306th Group--(the "TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH" story.) On January 4, 1943, Colonel Armstrong took command of the 306th Group. Its morale was in real serious trouble but with his methods and persuasion he got the decay stopped, and with the assistance of Major Putnam, who he had transferred from our Squadron to be the 306th Group operations officer, he had the 306th an airworthy combat group by the end of January, 1943.

The critics of the "daylight bombing" endeavor, both in the United States and Britain were nearly winning. General Eaker had his hands full defending his strategy, and was near to losing. General Eaker selected Colonel Armstrong to lead the first daylight raid over Germany. I must believe that Eaker felt that if anyone could pull it off, Armstrong could.

Our target of January 27, 1943, was the submarine pens at Vegesack on the Weser River, Germany. When we approached the primary target, it was overcast. I shall always remember seeing the 306th in front of us, as the lead group with Colonel Armstrong in the lead aircraft, with majestic arrogance, making a wide sweeping turn to the East, toward the heart of Germany, on the way to our secondary target, Wilhelmshaven.

In my view, that was the turning point of the daylight air war and it silenced the critics of General Eaker. Colonel Armstrong prevented the collapse of the 305th, restored its morale and led them on the first daylight raid over Germany--and saved the daylight bombing strategy.

The next week he was a Brigadier General and later assumed command of the 1st Combat Bomb Wing.

General Armstrong returned to the States in the late summer of 1943, and that Fall assumed command of the 46th Bomb Training Wing at Ardmore, Oklahoma. His primary mission there was to train crews and groups for the ETO. He was the perfect choice for that job. He knew what was needed in ETO combat and had the knack of being able to translate that knowledge into training that would work.

Serving as his Staff Navigator in his 46th and 315th Wings, and later his Tactical Plans officer on Guam in 1945, I saw first hand his abilities and importantly, the results he obtained with those abilities. He was a great organizer, tactician, motivater and doer. I got to know him quite well as I worked for him and flew with him--training, pleasure and combat.

General Frank's credits were many over the span of the World War II era:

- Led the first daylight raid over Roen-Sotteville, France, in August 1942.
- As liason officer between the Groups and the 1st Combat Bomb Wing, prevented the complete collapse of the 306th, the "TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH" story.
- Led the first daylight raid over Germany on January 27, 1943, and saved the daylight bombing strategy.
- Organized and led the 315th against Japan, in the Pacific Theater, with outstanding results, developing new and untried single plane long-range radar bombing tactics. Many of these tactics were adopted by the Strategic Air Command (SAC) and are being used today.
- Led the last and longest raid of World War II over Tsuchazaka, Japan, on August 14, 1945.

I am not certain what the historians and the Air Force annals will show, but what is contained here is of my personal knowledge, and as you will note, shows my admiration and respect for the man.