

This Day in History... July 28, 1935

First Flight of the B-17 Flying Fortress

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One of the most famous airplanes in American history, its story began in the early 1930s, a time when military aviation was still developing. The United States Army Air Corps (the predecessor of the US Air Force) saw the need for a long-range bomber that could fly high, carry heavy loads of bombs, and defend itself from enemy fighters. At that time, bombers were slow and didn't fly very far. The Army wanted something better—something that could strike deep into enemy territory without needing fighter escorts.

In 1934, the Army put out a request for a new multi-engine bomber. Boeing, a company based in Seattle, Washington, answered the challenge with a revolutionary design. Their plane was bigger, faster, and more powerful than anything that had come before. The prototype was called the Model 299. It had four engines, a sleek metal frame, and room for several machine guns to defend against attacks from all directions. The B-17 was Boeing's first plane to have a flight deck instead of an open cockpit and it was heavily armed with bombs and five .30-caliber machine guns.



While the USPS intended for the WWII 50th anniversary stamps to be generic, a collector pointed that the insignia of the 95th Bomb Group (Heavy) was included on the tail of the B-17 on this stamp. The group was the first 8th Air Force group to reach Berlin and the only one to win three Presidential Unit citations.



B-17 stamp from the Classic American Aircraft Sheet

On July 28, 1935, the Model 299 took off for its first flight from Boeing Field in Seattle. As Seattle Times reporter Richard Smith watched the four-engine plane packed with machine gun mounts pass by, he called it a "Flying Fortress." Boeing liked the name and trademarked it, designating the plane the B-17 Flying Fortress. Test pilot Les Tower and Boeing engineer Edmund "Eddie" Allen were at the controls. The flight was a success, proving that the plane could fly smoothly and powerfully. Even though the prototype crashed later that year during a test flight, the Army was still impressed and ordered more aircraft.

By the time the United States entered World War II in 1941, the B-17 had become one of the main heavy bombers of the US Army Air Forces. It played a vital role in the air war over Europe. B-17s were used in daylight bombing raids over Nazi-occupied countries and Germany itself. These missions were extremely dangerous. German fighter planes and anti-aircraft guns constantly tried to shoot them down. But the B-17 was tough—it could take a lot of damage and still fly home. Some crews called it their "lucky lady" because of how many lives it saved.

The most famous B-17 mission came on August 17, 1943, during the Schweinfurt-Regensburg raid. Hundreds of B-17s flew deep into Germany to attack important ball-bearing factories and aircraft production plants. These materials were key to the Nazi war machine. The mission caused a lot of damage but also came at a high cost. Dozens of bombers were shot down, and many airmen were killed or captured. This mission showed both the power

and the risks of flying the B-17 in hostile skies.

One legendary B-17 was the Memphis Belle, one of the first bombers to complete 25 successful missions over Europe. Its crew became national heroes, and the plane went on a tour across the United States to raise support for the war. A documentary film was made about the Memphis Belle during the war, and later, a Hollywood movie in 1990 helped preserve its legacy.

B-17s weren't just used in Europe. They also flew in the Pacific Theater, where they bombed Japanese targets and helped support American ground forces. The Japanese called them "four-engine fighters" because they could sustain significant damage but remain in the air. However, the B-17 was more effective in Europe, where long-range, high-altitude bombing played a bigger role in the strategy.

Famous aviators were also connected to the B-17. One was Brigadier General Paul W. Tibbets, who flew B-17s early in the war. Later, he became known for flying the Enola Gay, the B-29 Superfortress that dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Another notable figure was actor James Stewart, who flew combat missions as a B-17 pilot and squadron leader during World War II. He went on to become a brigadier general in the Air Force Reserve.

After World War II, the B-17's role changed. As jet technology advanced, the B-17 became outdated as a frontline bomber. However, it found new life in other roles. During the Cold War, B-17s were used for search and rescue missions, surveillance, and even as drone controllers. Some were sold to other countries or used in civilian aviation, such as firefighting and cargo transport. A few B-17s survive today in museums or as flying memorials.

In all, over 12,000 B-17s were built during the war. The Flying Fortress was a symbol of American air power in World War II that left a lasting legacy in aviation history. According to General Carl Spaatz, "Without the B-17 we may have lost the war."



Stewart once said, "In combat, the airplane [B-24] was no match for the B-17 as a formation bomber above 25,000 feet."

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