

SSGT Karl Dietz—Airplane Electrical Mechanic—Gunner



I was drafted while living in Lakewood, Ohio, in March of 1943. At that time, I had already married and was working in a shipyard as an electrician wiring boats. I gravitated to the Army Air Corps since I thought it would be a better match for me than the Infantry with the skills I possessed. Our basic training took place in Tent City, St. Petersburg, FL, where recruits quickly learned to live without the daily comforts of home, such as hot showers. After basic training, I attended Aircraft Mechanics School in Amarillo, Texas. I then volunteered for Gunnery School, and was sent to Kingman, Arizona. Training there included “Flexible Gunnery” training, which entailed guns that were mounted on a tripod with the working mechanism in one’s hand. We trained on B-17s, also known as the “Flying Fortress” for its ability to bring its men home despite extensive battle damage. After receiving Flight Engineer training, I was also sent to Electrical Specialist School, returning to Amarillo, Texas, for that. Some time later while in Lincoln, Nebraska, I was assigned to a crew as Left Gunner, then shortly after sent to Guam as part of a replacement crew. I flew ten missions in all. As Left Gunner, I had to keep tabs on two engines, as well as keep the Flight Engineer apprised of backfires. I would also assist with pre-flying the airplane: walking the wings to check the surface for rivets that needed fastening, helping gas the airplane (tanks were in wings), and checking the gas level with a yardstick. Additionally, I would assist with aircraft controls, rudder response, etc.

before takeoff. During flight, responsibilities included checking the indicator light, for example, wheels down and locked, and checking the feathered engines to make sure they were not “wind milling” (a propeller running wild, out-of-control). As Left Gunner, I was also responsible for looking for aircraft in the vicinity so as to avoid mid-air collisions.

One day, during a formation flying practice, a mid-air collision occurred. We were flying in tight formation, as per instructions. It was broad daylight, and visibility was good; there was no apparent reason for the collision. Our pilot made a last minute, violent maneuver to avoid collision, but the other plane sustained major damage, losing a piece of it’s wing. (After sustaining damage, sandbags would be placed on the damaged wing as weight to ensure it could fly again in case there was still unseen damage.)

On another memorable flight, a fuel line blew as the Flight Engineer was transferring fuel. The fellows up front quickly passed out from the fumes. I started to crawl through the tunnel to assist, but became dizzy from the gas fumes that I had to return for oxygen. By the time I had recovered, the situation in the front compartment had cleared up.

As the electrician on board, I was asked by the pilot whether to deploy flaps for landing. There were critical questions running through my mind: Where are the motors? Are they vapor proof? The location of the motors was of grave concern—would the plane blow up? Ultimately, we had a “hot landing”. There were fire ladies running alongside of us. Upon briefing, it was discovered that a change in the check valve had been made of which the pilot was never informed. The check valve was now inline, which had obstructed the gas flow in the direction he had wanted.

The B-29 had radial engines as opposed to horizontal, cylinder engines, so the oil gravitated to the lower cylinders. If a plane sat too long, we had to pull the propellers through to exhaust the oil in the lower cylinders, or a cylinder might easily blow. I recall that every engine had a fire extinguisher nearby.

During night flights, we were prohibited from firing first. We had been instructed just to track the “zeros” (Japanese fighter planes that were very fast, very maneuverable), but not fire.

During leisure time, while on Guam, for example, I spent playing chess, reading books, and playing volleyball. I wrote home often and enjoyed receiving care packages.

When the war was over, I took a Navy ship to Saipan and then a troop carrier boat home which took two weeks. A train took me to Atterbury, Indiana, where I was discharged three days later. Upon my arrival back home, I took some “fill-in” jobs. I liked working with my hands and wanted to be a toolmaker. I worked for a machine-tool company for eleven years—four years as an apprentice, seven years on the assembly floor—before accepting a job with NASA where I continued working as an experimental metal model maker in the Research and Development Department before retiring 25 years ago.

One of my most memorable wartime experiences occurred at the end of the war. My crew was one of 600 B-29s that flew over the USS Missouri in Tokyo Harbor during the signing of the Peace Treaty with Japan on September 2, 1945.

