

## World War II Veteran and Patriot at 102

### Twenty Missions as a B-17 "Flying Fortress" Gunner

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By Mike Scruggs

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Sergeant Sam Robertson, 1945  
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Staff

By Mike Scruggs  
At 144 Lombard Street in Clayton, North Carolina, less than a minute walk to Main Street, is a historical reminder of North Carolina's agricultural heritage. On the front of the warehouse-like building, completed in 1914, are painted two images of mule heads. The name on the building is "BM Robertson Mule Co." The business front also advertises "Farm Equipment." The owner, operator, and son of the founder of that business is Sam Robertson, who celebrated his 102<sup>nd</sup> birthday on September 25.

Clayton is now a prosperous and fast growing town of 23,000, but when Sam was born there in 1917 and grew up as a boy, the town's population was only about 1,500. Sam's father only had a third grade education, but his business was prosperous enough to send his three children to college. Sam graduated from Duke University with a BS degree in 1939, when the population of Clayton was still only about 1,500. Johnston County is still one of the top agricultural counties in the state, but it is also one of the fastest growing counties in the United States. Sam uses a walker to get around these days, but he was still driving his car to work on his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. His son, John, who is a Vietnam veteran, usually drops him off there now, when visitors are expected.

Sam didn't get into the Army Air Corp until 1944 and was hoping to be a pilot, navigator, or bombardier. They told him they already had enough pilots, navigators, and bombardiers, but they needed gunners. Whatever job needed to be done, Sam wanted to do it. After about six weeks training, he became a "belly" turret gunner on a B-17. Early in 1945, he was assigned to the 570<sup>th</sup> Squadron of the 390<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group of the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force flying out of Parham Air Base in England on bombing missions over Germany and France. He was quickly promoted to Staff Sergeant.

The B-17G was a four-engine long-range bomber that usually carried a 4,500 pound load of bombs into Germany. It could carry more at shorter distances. It was aptly called the "Flying Fortress," because it was bristling with 13 powerful .50 caliber machine guns as a defense against German fighter-interceptor planes. The B-17 bombing raids were a major factor in destroying Germany's ability to continue the war. However, over 40 percent of the 12,700 B-17's ever built were lost to enemy fighters and anti-aircraft fire. In 1943, B-17 Bomb Group formations attacking important German industrial and military targets were met by as many as 300 German fighter aircraft. Several of the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force's 41 Bomb Groups lost as many as 25 to 30 percent of their bombers in a single mission. By 1945, the German Air Force had been considerably reduced as a threat, with the exception of 60 Me-262 jet fighters that shot down 6 American bombers and 2 fighters in March. All 60, were later destroyed on the ground by Allied bombers.

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Sam Robertson, October 31, 2019, at BM Robertson Mule Co.

B-17s usually carried a crew of 10 men: pilot, co-pilot, navigator, bombardier, engineer, radio-operator, left and right waste gunners, tail gunner, and the ball turret or “belly” gunner. When enemy fighters engaged, the engineer manned a set of .50 calibers on the top turret, the navigator manned two “chin” guns, and the radio-operator manned one. The tail gunner and the ball turret gunner each manned a set of two.

Since German fighter pilots considered bombers most vulnerable when attacked from below, the ball turret gunner was critical and in the most dangerous and uncomfortable position. The ball turret gunner could turn his two guns horizontally in a full 360 degree circle and could rotate the guns vertically as much as 90 degrees (straight down). On the ground, however, the turret ball was only 15 inches off the ground. If the nearly 57-inch long guns were many degrees down, when landing,

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the turret ball would be ripped off. Normally the ball turret gunner only entered or exited the ball in flight, and the turret ball had to be in the correct position to enter or exit. Landing or taking off in the ball was considered very dangerous. The ball turret gunner was curled in a fetal position within the ball, which was not comfortable for long. The turret ball was operated by hydraulics and electric. If the hydraulic system was damaged by fighter or anti-aircraft fire, the ball turret gunner could be locked in a dangerous position until removed by ground crews on returning to base.

Although the German fighter defenses were greatly reduced by 1945, the anti-aircraft fire was sometimes intense. The first thing Sam's crew would do, when they landed was to see how much battle damage had been done. "Sometimes the holes were no bigger than a pencil, and some were as big as your head," Sam told me. Flying B-17 missions was so dangerous that a crew or individual only had to fly 25 missions before going home. Later they extended it to 30.

One mission was particularly harrowing for Sam. They had hit several targets in Germany and had been "torn to pieces" by anti-aircraft fire. One hit had damaged the hydraulic system for the ball turret and left Sam unable to exit or even to unbuckle his strap. It was also impossible to tell the vertical position of the guns. He said it was so terrifying that he cannot remember much of it. He does not even remember how ground crews had to cut him out of the ball turret with blow-torches. Sam doesn't like to be strapped into anything, and when North Carolina began requiring seat belts, he got his doctor to get a special waiver not to buckle his seat belt.



Turret Ball and guns of B-17 bomber

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Despite the traumatic experience of being trapped in the ball turret of a battle-damaged B-17, he went right on flying combat missions. He believes if an important job needs to get done, he needs to help however he can. That is a true patriot. You don't have to talk to Sam Robertson long to realize he is a man of faith and principle.

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The war in Europe ended with the German surrender on May 7, 1945. Sam flew on 18 combat missions and two humanitarian relief missions for a total of 20. By the end of the war, the Dutch people in German occupied Holland were starving. The Germans had bombed their dykes, and their fields were flooded. From May 1 to May 8, American and British bombers dropped food from their bomb bays, flying as low as 100 to 200 feet off the ground and always no more than 500 feet off the ground. These missions were called Operation Chowhound, and Sam flew Chowhound missions on May 2 and May 7. Just a few years ago, he met a Dutch immigrant woman, who was only 3-years-old at the time but remembered the miracle of food from American bombers that saved her life and others. She heard about Sam and came to meet him and thank him at the Jones Café in Clayton. He was very touched and appreciative, but told her, "I was only one of many that helped."



B-17 Bomber

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Sam was married when he went into the Army, and his daughter, Betty, was born in England.

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When the crew found out, they chipped in and bought her a \$25 War Bond. She still has it.

By Mike Scruggs

Sam is modest, but he is a hero to folks who have lived in Clayton long and remember his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. They say about half the town turned out to celebrate. Sam also has a subtle sense of humor, so you frequently have to be alert to the humor in what he is saying. There is a big celebration sign on the wall of his warehouse with photos and the words: Sam Robertson, MD. When I saw it, I told him I did not realize he was a doctor. "No," he said, with a big smile, "the MD stands for Mule Dealer." Sam is good-natured, personable, talkative, and makes you feel welcome. He likes to tell people about his experience in the war and about old times in Clayton. A small crowd is likely to gather and listen. There are many more great things to say about Sam Robertson.

November 11 is Veterans' Day, and Sam Robertson of Clayton, NC, is one of the most amazing.

The State of North Carolina has awarded him its highest honor: The Order of the Longleaf Pine.

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B. M. Robertson Mule Co. Clayton, NC, built in 1914.