

The North Carolina Historical Review

ISSN 0029-2494

DONNA KELLY
Editor in Chief

ANNE MILLER
Editor

Advisory Editorial Committee

MICHELE GILLESPIE

REGINALD F. HILDEBRAND

GAIL O'BRIEN

RICHARD D. STARNES

BRADFORD J. WOOD

North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources

LINDA A. CARLISLE
Secretary

Office of Archives and History

JEFFREY J. CROW
Deputy Secretary

Division of Historical Resources

DAVID L. S. BROOK
Director

North Carolina Historical Commission

JERRY C. CASHION (2013)
Chairman

MILLIE M. BARBEE (2015)
Vice-Chairman

MARY L. BRYAN (2011)

DAVID C. DENNARD (2015)

PAUL D. ESCOTT (2013)

VALERIE A. JOHNSON (2015)

B. PERRY MORRISON JR. (2011)

FREDDIE L. PARKER (2013)

BARBARA B. SNOWDEN (2013)

RICHARD D. STARNES (2011)

HARRY L. WATSON (2011)

EMERITI: KEMP P. BURPEAU, N. J. CRAWFORD, H. G. JONES, WILLIAM S. POWELL,
ALAN D. WATSON, MAX R. WILLIAMS

This journal was established in January 1924 as a medium of publication and discussion of history in North Carolina. It is issued to the general public by subscription only. The regular price is \$30.00 per year. Back numbers still in print, prior to 2010, are available for \$5.00 each. Order from <http://nc-historical-publications.stores.yahoo.net/backissuessale.html>. Persons desiring to quote from this publication may do so without special permission from the editors provided full credit is given to the North Carolina Historical Review. Articles in this Review are abstracted and indexed in Historical Abstracts and/or America: History and Life.

SUBSCRIBERS: The *Review* will be forwarded to new addresses only upon request of subscribers, who will be billed \$6.00 for costs of redirecting returned copies. Promptly notify the Historical Publications Section, Office of Archives and History, 4622 Mail Service Center, Raleigh, North Carolina 27699-4622, of address changes.

The *North Carolina Historical Review* USPS 392-820 (ISSN 0029-2494) is published quarterly for \$30.00 per year for individuals, \$45.00 per year for institutions and libraries, and \$60.00 for foreign subscriptions by the Historical Publications Section, Office of Archives and History, 4622 Mail Service Center, Raleigh, North Carolina 27699-4622; Web site: www.ncpublications.com. Periodicals postage paid at Raleigh, North Carolina, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *North Carolina Historical Review*, c/o Historical Publications Section, Office of Archives and History, 4622 Mail Service Center, Raleigh, North Carolina 27699-4622.

COVER: Republican William Woods Holden was elected governor of North Carolina in 1868, the same year that the Ku Klux Klan first appeared in the state. The Klan, which viewed white Republicans as traitors and African Americans as unfit to vote, committed hundreds of violent acts over the next four years, mainly in the North Carolina Piedmont. Holden's decision to send a militia to quell Klan violence led to his impeachment in 1871. For a discussion of these events, see Jim D. Brisson, "Civil Government Was Crumbling Around Me": The Kirk-Holden War of 1870," pp. 123-163. Photograph of Holden (1865) from the State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History, Raleigh; engraving of Ku Klux Klan members from *Harper's Weekly*, January 27, 1872. The caption reads: "Mississippi Ku-Klux members in the disguises in which they were captured."

“So Near Heaven and Surrounded by Hell”: The Character and 1942–1943 Military Career of World War II Pilot Frank A. Armstrong Jr.

DALE SAUTER

*There is no prelude to this story. There is none necessary. The story has no beginning nor end. It has been re-enacted thousands of times by American fighting men all over the world. It will continue in all its glory for ages. However, hearts will never be braver nor wills stronger than those encompassed in the breasts of “Fortress” Crews, who do combat five and six miles high over enemy territory—So near Heaven and surrounded by Hell.*¹

Lieutenant General Frank A. Armstrong Jr., a native of Hobgood, North Carolina, enjoyed a long and successful aviation career; however, he is best known for his service in World War II between 1942 and 1943. During this assignment he was stationed in Great Britain, commanding the 97th and 306th groups of the Eighth Air Force, and oversaw a total of ten missions into Axis territory. Though this was a very small part of his career, Armstrong’s activity during this period inspired the successful novel *Twelve O’Clock High*, followed with a critically acclaimed movie and later a television series. This article will focus primarily on this brief period of Armstrong’s career, exploring his character and how he came to be immortalized as Frank Savage in the 1948 novel *Twelve O’Clock High*.

1. “So Near Heaven and Surrounded by Hell,” 1 (hereinafter cited as “So Near Heaven”), undated memoir by Col. Frank A. Armstrong Jr., Box 1, Colonel Frank A. Armstrong Jr. Papers (hereinafter cited as Armstrong Papers), East Carolina Manuscript Collection, Special Collections Department, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina. In this memoir Armstrong describes his experiences as commander of the Eighth Bomber Squad, the first bomber unit to bomb Axis territory. The memoir includes details of the command’s organization, anecdotes, and accounts of his experiences as a B-17 bomber pilot. Armstrong and his sister donated his papers to the university in 1967, and several additions have been received in the years since. The collection also includes his service records, mission reports, flight records, speeches, and several scrapbooks featuring many photographs and clippings. Don Lennon, former director of the East Carolina Manuscript Collection, recalled that the first “significant” collection was the Armstrong Papers. Armstrong’s niece, who had previously worked at Joyner Library, arranged for Lennon to meet Armstrong. Lennon’s impression of the general was that he had a remarkable presence and “looked like an actor himself,” even as an older man. Lennon has said that he always regretted not having a tape recorder with him on that day.

Armstrong's memoirs reveal much about the origins and development of qualities that he exhibited throughout his successful military career—respect for both his superiors and the men he commanded, strong ties to his rural North Carolina roots, dedication to both his family and to his comrades in battle, and remarkable leadership abilities. Yet his writings demonstrate that the famed “war hero” was sometimes far from invincible and fearless.

Armstrong was born in the Martin County town of Hamilton, North Carolina, in 1902 to Frank Alton and Annie Elizabeth Hobbs Armstrong, and grew up in the nearby town of Hobgood in Halifax County. He received a bachelor of laws degree in 1923 and a bachelor of science degree in 1925, both from Wake Forest College. For the next three years Armstrong played minor league professional baseball in Sarasota, Florida.² According to Armstrong, he met his future wife, Vernelle Lloyd “Fluffy” Hudson, at “a house party in North Carolina.” Fluffy “blew my plans to high heaven. She was ‘not about to marry a man who wanted to do nothing more with a college education than play ball.’” So in February 1928, he enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps (still in its infancy) as a flying cadet. He received his flight training in San Antonio, Texas, at the bases Brooks Field and Kelly Field. By March 1929, Armstrong had received his wings and officer's commission and was assigned to Langley Field, near Hampton, Virginia. There, he married Fluffy on March 15, 1929. Their son, Frank Alton Armstrong III, was born a year later. Over the next two years, Armstrong served as flight instructor at March Field, Riverside, California, and at Randolph Field, in San Antonio, Texas.³

The U.S. Army Air Corps had come a long way from its humble origins during World War I, and by the late 1920s, it was continuing to grow in size and influence. When the United States declared war on Germany in 1917, the air power of the U.S. Army consisted of fewer than 1,200 men, 250 airplanes, and five service balloons under the aviation section of the U.S. Signal Corps. With the onset of World War I, air operations rapidly expanded, and by the Armistice on November 11, 1918, the U.S. Army claimed more than 190,000 men on aviation duty. At that time, 40 percent were serving in Europe under Gen. John J. Pershing as part of the Air Service of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF). During that period, the Air Service filled the role previously held by the cavalry. They did

2. “Wake the Sleeping Giant,” ca. 1960, ch. 1, p. 3, unpublished autobiography of Col. Frank A. Armstrong Jr. as told to William E. Hickenbotham, Box 1, Armstrong Papers. Included in the autobiography is a diary Armstrong kept during his tenure in Great Britain as a military observer (1941), which contains a lucid description of British life during the German Air Blitz. Some overlap exists between this account and his memoir, “So Near Heaven and Surrounded by Hell.” *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, s.v. “Armstrong, Frank Alton, Jr.”

3. “Wake the Sleeping Giant,” ch. 1, pp. 1–3; ch. 3, p. 7.



Gen. Frank Alton Armstrong Jr., born in Hamilton, North Carolina, and raised in the nearby town of Hobgood, enjoyed a long and successful aviation career. Best known for his service in World War II between 1942 and 1943, Armstrong was immortalized as World War II hero Frank Savage in the 1948 novel *Twelve O'Clock High*. Photograph of Armstrong (and all subsequent photographs in this article) from the Frank A. Armstrong Jr. Papers, East Carolina Manuscript Collection, Special Collections Department, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina.

this by providing aerial observers in balloons and airplanes behind their own lines, reporting on activity occurring in enemy territory.⁴

During that same year, President Woodrow Wilson used powers granted by Congress to remove U.S. Army aviation from the Signal Corps and establish the U.S. Army Air Service as a separate combatant arm. Wilson then created two agencies, the Bureau of Aircraft Production and the Department of Military Aeronautics, that operated under Secretary of War Newton Diehl Baker. In the mid-1920s, the aviation industry expanded further when Congress authorized contracts with private organizations to carry airmail, previously accommodated by the Post Office Department airmail service. The resulting profits from this business, along with the increased public fascination with Charles Lindbergh's transatlantic flight in 1927, helped lead to the rapid expansion of aviation in the

4. Maurer Maurer, *Aviation in the U.S. Army, 1919-1939* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, United States Air Force, 1987), xix.

United States. By the end of the decade, no fewer than forty-five airlines offered commercial flights.⁵

In light of the unstable international political climate and the increased buildup of foreign military forces during the late 1930s, the United States began taking stock of its defense capabilities to try to keep the country out of any possible foreign wars. Recognizing its weaknesses, the United States began modernizing its land, sea, and air defense systems. Under Gen. Douglas MacArthur serving as chief of staff, the General Headquarters (GHQ), the aerial component of Army field forces, was formed in 1935. From an organizational standpoint, the GHQ became the prototype of and laid the foundation for the U.S. Army Air Forces of World War II.⁶

In March 1934, Armstrong became part of a group of U.S. Army pilots based in Salt Lake City, Utah, who transported mail under the command of Capt. Ira Eaker.⁷ Nine months later, he was assigned as a pursuit pilot at Albrook Field, Panama Canal Zone. In 1936, Armstrong won the Distinguished Flying Cross for the successful landing of a disabled amphibious plane. He was transferred in March 1937 to the 13th Bombardment Squadron, Barksdale Field, near Bossier City, Louisiana, and served as commander there from November 1939 through November 1940.⁸

Armstrong's next assignment was to serve as a combat observer with the Royal Air Force in Great Britain from November 1940 through February 1941. He then became commander of the 90th Bombardment Squadron, Savannah, AAF, Georgia. In January 1942, while serving as assistant chief of operations at U.S. Army Air Forces headquarters in Washington, D.C., Armstrong was selected to go back to Great Britain and establish the VIII Bomber Command, Eighth Air Force, with General Eaker and five other officers. He was soon promoted to colonel.⁹

During the weeks following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Great Britain's prime minister, Winston Churchill, sought a quick and effective means to put pressure on Germany and Italy. As part of Churchill's initial plan to occupy French Northwest Africa, Gen. Henry H. Arnold formed the Eighth Air Force to participate in this operation. But the British suffered a supply shortage and were

5. *Ibid.*, xxiv.

6. *Ibid.*, 445-446.

7. Born in 1896, Eaker was one of the premiere aviation pioneers in the United States. During the two world wars, he was among those in the forefront of the battle to promote aviation as a major component of the United States' strategic arsenal. Though he accomplished much throughout his career, Eaker is best known for his role as commander of the air forces in the European theater during World War II. He was also a major promoter of precision daylight bombing, which proved successful in hindering Germany's industrial war production. See <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/iraeaker.htm>.

8. "Wake the Sleeping Giant," ch. 1, pp. 9-23.

9. *Ibid.*, ch. 1, p. 23; ch. 3, p. 1.

quickly defeated in the Libyan desert. As a result, the newly formed Eighth Air Force could now be sent to another theater. At the same time, American and British military and political leaders began discussing the need for a U.S. air force base in Great Britain and soon moved forward with those plans. Maj. Gen. Carl Spaatz asked Arnold for the opportunity to direct the air force in Britain, and Arnold agreed. Spaatz selected Gen. Ira C. Eaker to lead the Eighth Air Force bomber command.¹⁰

The military equipment used during World War II, such as radar technology, ballistic missiles, and improved tanks, was becoming more sophisticated, and for the first time in history, machines dominated the backdrop of battle and increasingly affected the outcome of war. Along with this expansion of military equipment came a network of factories needed for their production. These factors, combined with the increased capability of aircraft, which allowed one military to go behind the enemy's battle lines, made strategic bombing a natural necessity in full-scale wars. Each side found it necessary to bomb factories that produced the aircraft and other equipment that would give their enemies an advantage, such as going behind enemy lines. Otherwise, one side would be overwhelmed by the other side's "machine domination."¹¹

General Eaker had previously supervised Armstrong in the U.S. Army's program that utilized airplanes for the delivery of mail, and would play a major role in shaping Armstrong's career and his leadership abilities. Armstrong admired Eaker's habit of visiting his own men when he had the chance, and their mutual respect continued to grow throughout their careers. Eaker had a significant influence on Armstrong and the whole Eighth Air Force during the 1942–1943 bombing raids on the Axis powers, flown from air bases in Great Britain.¹² Of Eaker, Armstrong wrote:

The following three months I occupied a grandstand seat in the U.K. From my position I watched the VIII Bomber Command grow from twelve Fortresses on the first raid to hundreds. New groups arrived and I flew with them trying to show and tell them all we had learned on the initial raids. I saw them struggle, stagger and fall as we had done. We labored day and night as they regained their footing stronger than ever before. Through it all one man's compelling personality and guiding influence watched over us all the way—without which we would have been lost. I saw him gaunt of face, worried and tired, battling to the end for his own—Lieutenant General Ira Eaker.¹³

Thus, in 1942, Armstrong became one of six original officers of what would soon be transformed into the VIII Bomber Command, headed by General Eaker.

10. Bernard C. Nalty, John F. Shiner, and George M. Watson, *With Courage: The U.S. Army Forces in World War II* (Washington, D.C.: Air Force History and Museums Program, 1994), 128–129.

11. Roger A. Freeman, with Alan Crouchman and Vic Maslen, *Mighty Eighth War Diary* (New York: Jane's Publishing, 1981), 2.

12. "Wake the Sleeping Giant," ch. 1, p. 14.

13. "So Near Heaven," 75.

During that same time, Lt. Cornelius W. Cousland had assumed command of the newly formed 97th Bombardment Group (Heavy), activated on February 3, 1942. Cousland was an experienced B-17 pilot, and the 97th had the distinction of being the first heavy bombing group in Great Britain. But the command was also “undertrained,” and its slow progress would prove to be Cousland’s downfall.¹⁴

Many of the soldiers under Cousland’s command were relatively inexperienced as well. As of March 1942, 80 percent of the 97th squadron had less than six weeks of heavy bombing training, as many of the staff came in fresh from flight school. Physical conditions were not much better. The bulk of the operating airfields did not have roads, lighting, or buildings, and many of them made do with tents as shelter. On top of all of these conditions, there was also a shortage of planes.¹⁵

Aware of their short time frame, Eaker told Cousland that it was urgent that he get his squadron trained efficiently. Cousland had twenty days to conduct the training, but two days were lost due to bad weather. However, he utilized only seven of the remaining eighteen days for actual training. There were also rumors of Cousland’s staff “partying” at a local estate instead of doing their assigned jobs. Eaker attributed this failing to poor leadership skills and relieved Cousland of his command.¹⁶

In 1942, Eaker called Frank Armstrong into his office and notified him that he was to command the 97th. Armstrong described that encounter in his autobiography:

The General looked straight at me for at least thirty seconds, then said “I have a job for you. I have asked you to do many things for me, but this time I am putting a real load on you. Can you do it?”

He had neglected to tell me what he wanted me to do, but come what may, there was only one answer.

“I’ll do my best, Sir.”

The Old Man got up, walked around his desk until he stood squarely in front of me, and said “I’m in a pinch, Army. A commander threw a party last night for several local dignitaries, including some royalty. Sometime during the course of the evening, things got out of hand. . . . I’ve got to relieve the Colonel. . . . You are going to complete the training of his group, and fight them within sixteen days.” I thought I would die! I am not even certain whether I saluted as I left and ran down the hallway, yelling and whooping. As I bounded by his desk, the Chief of Staff jumped to his feet and asked “What in the Hell is wrong?”

I replied “I am going to combat!”¹⁷

14. Brent L. Gravatt and Francis H. Ayers Jr., “The Fireman: Twelve O’ Clock High Revisited,” *Aerospace Historian* 35 (September 1988): 204–205.

15. *Ibid.*, 205.

16. *Ibid.*

17. “Wake the Sleeping Giant,” ch. 3, pp. 9–10.

Armstrong officially took over command duties of the 97th on July 31, 1942. As expected, he found the squadron in "sad shape." Armstrong, who soon gained the nickname "Butcher," knew he would need to put the 97th through rigorous training to whip the squadron into shape in a short time. Under Armstrong's leadership, training activities completely turned around. At every available opportunity, he had the squadron in the air practicing what he considered "the big three: formation, flying, gunnery and bombing."¹⁸

This was quite a feat in itself, considering the short time the 97th actually had for training. In an interview with a fellow officer conducted in late November 1942, Armstrong states that his group had only sixteen days for training. According to Armstrong, any further training was against "the Hun," meaning his men were flying actual combat missions. And just as Cousland had experienced, bad weather sometimes interfered with training.¹⁹

Armstrong utilized his strong leadership abilities to motivate the men of the 97th. While his manner was stern, he also effectively used praise and encouragement. After initially taking over the 97th, Armstrong first gathered the whole squadron together to speak directly to them.²⁰ He later described the incident in his own words:

The next morning, the executive officer assembled the combat crews in the briefing room. The boys I had seen at the dance were present. They had been fun-loving youngsters there, but today they were serious-minded men—combat crews who had never seen combat. As I looked at them I wondered if they realized that they would make history in World War II and revolutionize high altitude day bombing. I was expected to make a speech, so I told them all of those things—that we were to open the aerial warfare for the United States; that the eyes of the world would be focused on them; that the outcome of the war depended upon their success or failure; that I did not come to them to die, but to fight and live; that I would go in at high level or low level, depending entirely upon the orders from Bomber Command; that I could go in alone, if necessary. Then I decided to gamble. I told them that if there was anyone present who wasn't willing to follow me, I would be thankful if he would stand up. Not a man in the house left his seat. Turning to leave, I was exhausted. As I reached the door, the crews stood as one man and their cheers followed me down the long corridor to my office. I thanked God for the victory that I knew would be ours.²¹

Paul Tibbets, also a 97th squadron commander (who would later gain fame for piloting the *Enola Gay* to Hiroshima for the dropping of the first atomic bomb), said of Armstrong, "Frank had a commanding presence. He looked like the boss. He looked like a guy that had no doubt but what he was doing the right thing. He told us this is what is going to be done and it will be done this way."²²

18. "The Fireman," 205.

19. Colonel Frank Armstrong, interview by Gen. George Stratemeyer, November 24, 1942, transcript, pp. 1–12, Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama.

20. "The Fireman," 205.

21. "Wake the Sleeping Giant," ch. 3, pp. 11–12.

22. "The Fireman," 205–206.



On July 31, 1942, Armstrong officially took over command duties of the 97th Bombardment Group (Heavy), activated on February 3, 1942. Bombing crews faced unusual and stressful conditions during their daily routine, and encountered multiple risks, including fighter planes and antiaircraft artillery. In addition, conditions inside the planes, particularly in high-altitude conditions, were extremely uncomfortable. Once reaching their target and dropping their bombs, crews had to fly back through this same dangerous maze of enemy aircraft. View of bombs as they drop from planes and fall toward a city.

The bombing crews faced unusual and stressful conditions during their daily routine, which included breakfast early in the morning, followed by a flight briefing. Next came an approximately five-hour-long bombing run to reach the bombing target, in which the crew encountered all kinds of risks, including fighter planes and antiaircraft artillery (flak). Once reaching their target and dropping their bombs, crews had to fly back through this same dangerous maze of enemy aircraft. If they made it back unharmed, crews then returned to the temporary safe haven of their base around dinnertime.²³

Moreover, conditions inside the planes (particularly in these high-altitude conditions) were extremely uncomfortable. Armstrong graphically described those conditions:

23. Kerry Anderson Crooks, "The U.S. Eighth Air Force and Its British World War II Hosts: A History of International Public Relations" (Ph.D. diss., University of Florida, 1999), 2-3.

When flying at low altitude very little equipment is required. High altitude flying is entirely different. Low attacks are made in shirt sleeves and summer helmets. There is no oxygen mask to adjust,—no electric suit to get into,—no guns to freeze. There are no long hours in the cockpit. . . . When bomber crews are operating five miles or more above the earth they are not actually in man's element. . . . Men cannot live at 25,000 feet without oxygen and heat.—a broken oxygen line is the immediate fore-runner of death unless an emergency bottle can be reached. I have known gunners to "bail out" over enemy territory at high altitude when their oxygen was shot away. Their decision was made quickly,—seconds are precious when there is absolutely nothing to breathe. Cold is fierce and deadly at 44 below. . . . In the heat of combat at high altitude when a gun jams, gunners have a tendency to eliminate their gloves for "just a second" in an effort to make an adjustment. Before the gunner realizes what he is doing and replaces his hands inside the heated gloves frost-bite has done its dirty work. Long, weary days in a hospital is the reward. Gunners are aware of the penalty they will surely pay if they do not keep warm. On the other hand I have seen youngsters, who would use their frozen hands as hammers to maul a jammed gun back to life.²⁴

The transition of leaving a U.S. base to enter a combat situation was stressful for these flyers, many of whom were fresh out of flight school. Their anxiety was exacerbated by the fact that approximately 5 percent of flyers were shot down on each mission, at the time a conservative estimate. Statistically speaking, each flyer could very well be killed after twenty missions. This was disheartening to the men, considering that at this time the average number of missions per flyer in the European theater of operations (ETO) was twenty-five.²⁵

The first mission of the 97th, which took place on July 4, 1942, under the command of Capt. Charles C. Kedelman, was flown over Holland and utilized borrowed A-20 planes from a Royal Air Force (RAF) unit. This first "official" mission (with Armstrong and Eaker both participating) was not regarded as a success, though it did prove that the American crews were courageous in their efforts.²⁶

The next mission of the 97th (now utilizing its own planes—twelve recently delivered B-17 bombers) began on August 17, 1942. Its target was the Rouen-Scottesville marshaling yards, in Axis-held French territory. The planes were accompanied by RAF Spitfires, which had already earned a good reputation from 1940 to 1941 during the air battle over Great Britain. A total of 36,900 pounds of general purpose bombs were dropped on the target from an altitude of 23,000 feet. Three of the Spitfires were lost, but all of the B-17s returned safely, and this mission was considered an overall success.²⁷

Although the squadron's return was documented quite well by the media, Armstrong still felt that few squadron members recognized the importance of

24. "So Near Heaven," 27–28.

25. Martin Bowman, *B-17 Combat Missions: Fighters, Flak, and Forts: First-Hand Accounts of Mighty 8th Operations Over Germany*, 2nd ed. (London: Metro Books, 2008), 22.

26. "Growth and Missions of the Eighth Air Force," in *USAAF: 50th Anniversary in Great Britain, 1942–1992* (London: The Winchester Group, 1992), 41.

27. *Ibid.*

their achievement. For, as Armstrong stated, although “bomb damage was minor, the psychological damage to the enemy could never be repaired.” He realized the significance of the fact that twelve relatively inexperienced squads had completed the first successful raid by American air force heavy bombers over Axis-held territory, a mission that created a much-needed lift to the morale of the Eighth Air Force.²⁸

That mission was also important for another reason: it was the first test of high-altitude bombing raids over enemy territory during daylight hours. From the beginning of the war, daylight raids carried out by British and German squadrons resulted in so many losses that both sides decided to execute only nighttime raids. However, the best U.S. Army Air Corps strategists argued that more precise bombing could be achieved in daylight hours.²⁹

The British were also impressed with the mission. Gen. Carl Spaatz observed that it “far exceeded in accuracy any previous high-altitude bombing in the European theatre by German or Allied aircraft.” The mission also finally settled the matter of the advantage of daylight bombing in Europe. In short, the bombing of Rouen demonstrated that utilizing a large number of aircraft from a high altitude could help the Allies reach their goal. Furthermore, with this method of multiple offensive bombing, the Allies could inflict significant damage to key German targets with minimal losses.³⁰

The timely arrival of a fleet of B-17 bombers also helped to increase the success of daylight bombing. B-17s, considered to be in the “big leagues” of military aircraft, were employed on this second mission of the 97th, in which both Armstrong and Eaker participated. The B-17, described as the “Flying Fortress,” featured four engines and thirteen 50-caliber machine guns, and could carry a bomb load of 6,000 pounds quickly into Axis territory.³¹

During Armstrong’s command, the 97th Squadron completed twelve missions in August and September; incredibly, only one aircraft was lost.³² Following the last mission, General Spaatz decided that the 97th would be sent to participate in a top secret mission, code-named TORCH—a planned invasion of North Africa. The week following the 97th’s order to North Africa, Armstrong received orders to return to the United States on temporary duty.³³

28. “Wake the Sleeping Giant,” ch. 4, pp. 8–47 (quotation, p. 11).

29. Lester F. Rentmeester, “Big Brothers and Little Friends: A Memoir of the Air War Against Germany,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 74 (Autumn 1990): 30.

30. David Allan McCormack, “The Military Career of Frank Armstrong, 1928–1961” (master’s thesis, East Carolina University, 1977), 28–29.

31. “Memoir of the Air War Against Germany,” 30.

32. “The Fireman,” 205–206.

33. McCormack, “Military Career of Frank Armstrong,” 40–42.

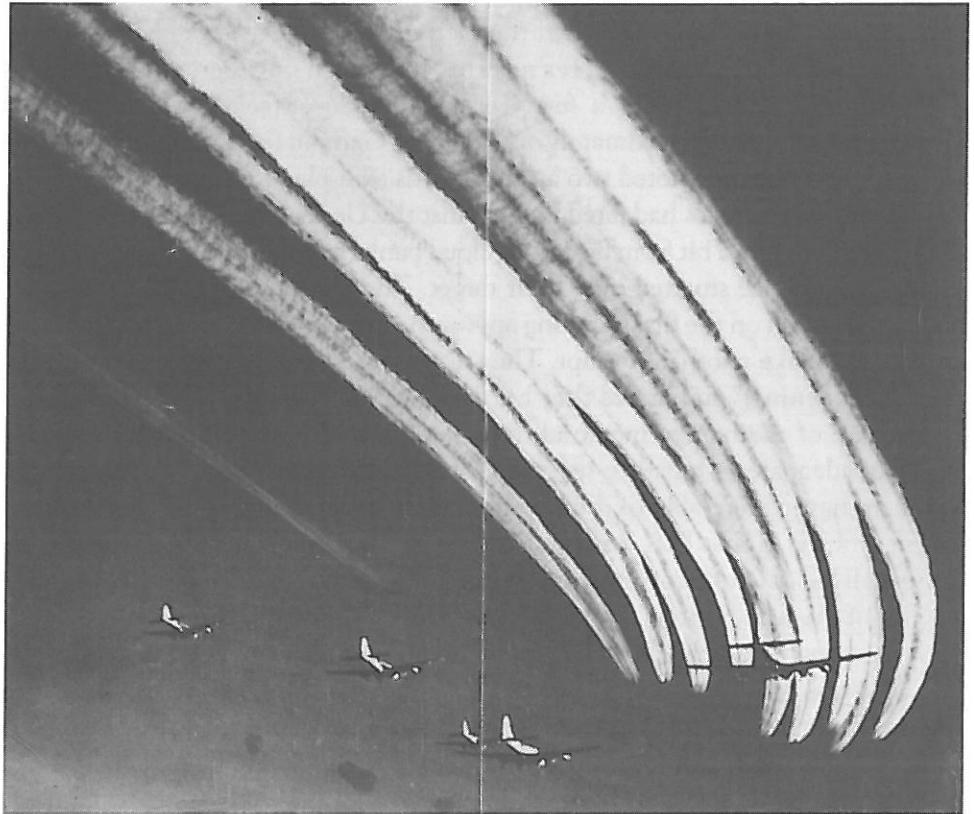


The second mission of the 97th, utilizing twelve B-17 bombers, began on August 17, 1942. Its target was the Rouen-Scottesville marshaling yards, in Axis-held French territory. Although three RAF Spitfires were lost in the raid, all of the B-17s returned safely, and the mission was considered an overall success. Photograph of Armstrong (standing, third from left) and airmen of the 97th Heavy Bomber Group at an air base in England, in front of the first B-17 bomber to fly a daylight raid over Axis-held territory.

However, by Christmas of 1942 Armstrong had finished his temporary duty in the United States and returned to Great Britain to await a new assignment. On New Year's Day, General Eaker gave Armstrong the news that he had been promoted to brigadier general. Eaker also told Armstrong he had "a small job" for him: to take over command of the 306th Heavy Bomb Group, a very experienced squadron that had flown many impressive missions. Rumors had already been circulating that the first daylight bombing raids over Germany proper would take place soon, and Armstrong was convinced that the 306th would be asked to carry out these raids.³⁴

Armstrong faced different circumstances when he took over command of the 306th than when he commanded the 97th. Though the 306th had been successful, he immediately replaced some of the higher officers below him. And while the men of the 306th were experienced, they had been in combat since

34. *Ibid.*, 42-43.



On January 1, 1943, Armstrong was promoted to brigadier general and took over command of the experienced and highly trained 306th Heavy Bomb Group. On January 27, his crews conducted the first bombing mission of the war over Germany proper, with their target the submarine pens at Wilhelmshaven. The raid involved both B-17 bombers from the first wing and B-24 Liberators from the second wing. Photograph of planes in formation, possibly B-29 or B-17 bombers.

October of the previous year and suffered from stress and low morale. However, unlike the men of the 97th, they were highly trained for their missions. With this situation, Armstrong believed that his men needed to be reminded of their past successes to drive them toward future victories. With the 306th, Armstrong's strategy proved to be "less directive and more supportive" than with the 97th.³⁵

Armstrong and the rest of the crew of the 306th were alerted on January 26, 1943, that the next morning they would conduct the first bombing mission of the war over Germany proper. Their target this time was submarine pens at Wilhelmshaven. This raid involved both B-17 bombers from the first wing and B-24 Liberators from the second wing. Things went smoothly during takeoff, and all aircraft began formation over the channel at a minimum altitude of five

35. "The Fireman," 207.

hundred feet. Soon, as they reached the German coast, they climbed to twenty-five thousand feet. Armstrong later reported that when one German fighter was shot down by a B-17, only a few German fighters attacked the formation. Although there were approximately one hundred German fighters involved in the battle, Armstrong only noted two attacks on his own plane.³⁶

The Allied air forces had fared well against the German air defense. However, they did suffer quite a bit from flak and a cloud bank (possibly an enemy-generated smokescreen) once situated over their target. The clouds were so bad that they prevented action on the first bombing approach, and the whole group had to circle around and make another attempt. They made the drop at what they considered the "only opening," and hoped they hit their target.³⁷

Because of the hampering conditions, results of the bombing were declared "fair, but adequate." Only fifty-seven out of a total of ninety-one bombers sent to Wilhelmshaven were able to drop bombs on their target. However, this mission was significant in that U.S. air forces had penetrated German territory, and with only small losses. Armstrong was awarded a general's star and also was given credit, as pilot of the lead Fortress, for being the first over German territory.³⁸

Armstrong participated in more raids, and his last mission, targeting Antwerp, left on April 5 and was considered successful. However, when he returned, the Eighth Bombing Command—which considered Armstrong's experience and leadership invaluable—ordered him to end his participation in flying missions and placed him in a safer, non-flying role. With a natural dedication to combat, Armstrong was disappointed to be removed from the action.³⁹

Soon after this raid, Armstrong returned to the United States, where he commanded Bombardment Training Wings at Dalhart, Texas; Colorado Springs; Ardmore, Oklahoma; and Grand Isle, Nebraska. Next, he was put in charge of the 315th Bomb Wing at Peterson Field, Colorado. However, Armstrong's return to the United States was short-lived. In mid-1945, he was stationed in the Pacific, where he again trained the 315th Bomb Wing.⁴⁰

Armstrong flew several missions over oil targets in Japan during the summer of 1945. He flew the longest and last very heavy bombing raid of the war, from Guam to Honshu, in August. In November 1945, Armstrong led the first nonstop flight in a Boeing B-29 bomber from Hokkaido, Japan, to Washington, D.C. For these

36. McCormack, "Military Career of Frank Armstrong," 44–46.

37. *Ibid.*, 47–48.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*, 50–52. While the mission was considered successful by the United States, warplanes bombed residential areas by mistake, rather than factories. The raid killed 936 civilians. See [http://www.nieuwsblad.be/Article/Detail.aspx?ref=dg&\\$P&articleID=ggvds84](http://www.nieuwsblad.be/Article/Detail.aspx?ref=dg&$P&articleID=ggvds84).

40. "Wake the Sleeping Giant," ch. 7, pp. 1–5.



Of the ninety-one bombers sent to Wilhelmshaven, only fifty-seven were able to drop bombs on their target. However, the mission was considered successful, and Armstrong was awarded a general's star. As pilot of the lead Fortress, he was also given credit for being the first over German territory. Armstrong is pictured here (far left) with the Army Air Forces crew that flew the first daylight bombing raid over Germany. Above the image of the officer pictured second from left, Armstrong wrote, "Death due to enemy action on very next raid—4-16-43." Photograph dated February 27, 1943.

two missions he was awarded an oak leaf cluster to the Distinguished Flying Cross. Armstrong had already achieved considerable recognition for having led the first and last heavy bombing raids of the war.⁴¹

In early 1946, Armstrong was appointed Pacific Air Command chief of staff for operations. Later that year, he again returned to the United States to take the position of senior air instructor at the Armed Forces Staff College in Norfolk, Virginia. Beginning in early 1949, Armstrong began heading the Alaskan Air Command, where he substantially increased air force defense in Alaska. Armstrong also helped pioneer nonstop flights from Alaska to Norway and from Norway to New York. Upon completion of his flight to Norway in late September

41. McCormack, "Military Career of Frank Armstrong," 63–76.



Soon after his final mission with the 306 Bomber Group, Armstrong returned to the United States, where he commanded Bombardment Training Wings at Dalhart, Texas; Colorado Springs; Ardmore, Oklahoma; and Grand Isle, Nebraska. Photograph of General Armstrong in his office at Grand Island Army Airfield in Nebraska.

1949, he received the highest honor awarded to a civilian, the Gold Medal of the Aero Club of Norway.⁴²

By early 1950, Armstrong had been promoted to major general. The following year he was put in charge of Sampson Air Force Base, near Seneca Lake, New York, and was commended for his work there, particularly in establishing a good relationship with the surrounding civilian population. In late 1951, Armstrong became commanding general of the 6th Air Division at MacDill Air Force Base, near Tampa, Florida, where he trained the air force's first B-47 Stratojet Wing. Later the following year, Armstrong was sent to Barksdale Air Force Base, near Bossier City, Louisiana, to command Strategic Air Command's Second Air Force, a position that he held for the next four years.⁴³

42. "Wake the Sleeping Giant," ch. 1, pp. 8-19.

43. *Ibid.*, ch. 9, p. 9; ch. 10, p. 16.

Armstrong's last assignment, in July 1956, was again as commander of the Alaskan Air Command. In September of that year he was promoted to lieutenant general, then became commander of the joint Alaskan Command, where he went on to fly many other missions. In many ways, Armstrong's last assignment was not a good fit for the general. He was accustomed to an operational "hands-on" type of command throughout his career, and was now assigned a "unified command" position in which he coordinated various military units (navy, army, and air force), rather than one specific assignment. The mission of his assignment in Alaska was to employ defensive tactics to protect Alaska from air attacks, but with the growing fear of a nuclear attack by the Soviet Union, Armstrong began to insist that a major offensive element be added to the command's mission. By the 1960s, his request for offensive action in Alaska during the Cold War had become a burden for the air force under President John F. Kennedy and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. Armstrong officially retired on July 31, 1962, claiming that he was forced to do so.⁴⁴

Despite his notable accomplishments, Armstrong is most often remembered as the inspiration for Beirne Lay and Sy Bartlett's popular novel (and later movie and television series) *Twelve O'Clock High*, published in 1948.⁴⁵ Lay and Bartlett were pre-war Twentieth Century-Fox studio screenwriters and would take up similar work after the war. They were also seasoned and combat-experienced Eighth Air Force officers who flew many bombing missions themselves. Both men encountered Armstrong on a daily basis and greatly admired him.⁴⁶ They drew their inspiration from a small window of time in his career, between 1942 and 1943, when he commanded the 97th and 306th groups of the Eighth Air Force on a total of ten missions.⁴⁷

Bartlett and Lay first discussed the idea for a novel about the Air Corps while they were stationed in Great Britain. The two men were separated during the latter part of the war but crossed paths again in 1946, when both returned to work at Twentieth Century-Fox as writers. There, they again discussed the idea for a novel and agreed to pursue the project.⁴⁸ The writing team decided to base their novel on the beginnings of the Eighth Air Force in Great Britain and would focus on the character of Frank Savage. While Savage was inspired by several other commanders, the authors agreed that the character would possess Armstrong's

44. *Ibid.*, ch. 11, p. 1; ch. 14, p. 2; McCormack, "Military Career of Frank Armstrong," 18, 125–128.

45. McCormack, "Military Career of Frank Armstrong," 18.

46. Undated news clipping, titled "Twelve O'Clock High," Photograph Album, 1942–1951, p. 84, Box 9, Armstrong Papers.

47. *Ibid.*

48. Chuck Dunning, "Twelve O'Clock High: Fact to Fiction," *Aviation History* 10 (September 1999): 5.

leadership skills and "rugged good looks." Lay suggested the book's title, a combat term meaning "a head-on attack from above."⁴⁹

Lay's experience from nine combat missions contributed to the novel's compelling realism. With Armstrong as technical adviser for the novel, the authors also included many other incidents and individuals from their wartime experience, including Gen. Ira Eaker and Col. Charles "Chip" Overacker, commander of the 306th before Armstrong later assumed command. Lay and Bartlett included details from actual missions they had flown, including the bombing of Wilhelmshaven.⁵⁰

Twelve O'Clock High was widely praised by critics. On May 3, 1948, the *Boston Herald* titled its review of the novel, "Gripping Story of 'Fightingest' Air General." *Time* magazine urged readers to look upon the novel as a document of real wartime activity.⁵¹ Prior to its release, Lay and Bartlett were already in the process of turning the book into a film. Bartlett contacted both Twentieth Century-Fox and Paramount about producing a film version of the novel. Both studios were interested, and Twentieth Century-Fox finally won the bidding war.⁵²

The film version of *Twelve O'Clock High* opened nationally in Hollywood on Christmas Day, 1949. It was rated an instant success by both critics and audiences and was also nominated for four Academy Awards. For many years the film was used by the U.S. Air Force as part of its Air Force Reserve Officers' Training Corps for a portion of its lecture on leadership and management. The class syllabus referred to *Twelve O'Clock High* as "a classic and accurate portrayal of the problems of leadership in a combat situation."⁵³ Armstrong himself commented on the film's realism:

At 8:30 p.m. the house lights dimmed and the movie began. Some dramatic license was necessary to strengthen the story line, but the aerial combat scenes were frightfully realistic.

The director, Henry King, flew nearly 16,000 miles in search of an area similar to our English airdrome. He found what he wanted at Eglin Air Force Base, Florida, and Ozark Air Force Base, Alabama. Washington allowed him to use one of Eglin's nine satellite fields as a shooting location. He transformed it into a duplicate of a wartime American base in Great Britain, complete with Nissen and Quonset huts.⁵⁴

In Armstrong's "Wake the Sleeping Giant" memoir, he included a sly (it seems) comment on the portrayal of himself by actor Gregory Peck: "Gregory Peck, who

49. *Ibid.*, 5-6.

50. Dunning, "Twelve O'Clock High," 8-9; McCormack, "Military Career of Frank Armstrong," 18.

51. News clipping, titled, "Gripping Story of 'Fightingest' Air General Twelve O'Clock High," *Boston Herald*, May 3, 1948; book review clipping, "The Bombers' Story," *Time*, May 3, 1948, Photograph Album, 1942-1951, p. 84, Box 9, Armstrong Papers.

52. Dunning, "Twelve O'Clock High," 9.

53. *Ibid.*

54. "Wake the Sleeping Giant," ch. 9, p. 2.

would be the first to agree that here-tofore he has been a personality rather than a polished actor, need no longer make apologies, for his portrayal of the youthful Air Force general is a superbly rounded, authentic and credible characterization."⁵⁵

Lay and Bartlett dedicated the book to Armstrong, a man they called a "fighting leader," but in both the novel and the film, Frank Savage eventually "breaks down" from the pressure of battle, an event not reflected in Armstrong's record.⁵⁶ Armstrong commented on this portrayal: "The only regret I was to experience in later years was the scene in which my celluloid counterpart 'cracked up' from mental strain. At least a hundred times people who did not serve with us in England asked how long it took me to recover from the breakdown. Those who were there have never ceased to jokingly tell me 'it's too bad you never quite got over your mental problem.'"⁵⁷

Armstrong's experience and observation during the early part of the German Blitz over Great Britain clearly shaped his commitment to combat. He was sent to Great Britain in October 1940 (approximately a month after the Blitz had begun), where he served as a combat observer until January 1941.⁵⁸ In his journal entries of December 23 and January 15, Armstrong described the effect of the Blitz and concluded with a prophetic statement:

Coventry is a wreck! In one raid, 30,000 buildings were damaged or destroyed, and 3,500 persons were killed. (The papers said "a few hundred.") Hell! There were 400 killed in one hotel! As fire gutted the business section, workmen dug long ditches in which to bury the dead. One of the oldest cathedrals in England was ruined. . . .

As I close this journal, I am stronger from experiences noted on its pages. I have learned that a man can endure far more suffering and hardship than he realizes. This may be the best lesson of all. After observing the Germans in action, I can't help but wonder if I might return someday—to fight,—not write.⁵⁹

Later, after he had indeed returned to Great Britain and had taken over as a commander in the Eighth Air Force, he wrote:

I watched England's young fighters display their wares high above the Dover coast. I marveled at the tell-tale vapor trail as they lattice-worked the sky. . . . An etching in the sky always reminding those of us far below that death and destruction was on the Wing.—That the Germans would not pass. That night I returned to my room, O sleep would not come to me. I began to relive the three months of 1940, I had spent in England during the Blitz. I vowed then that someday somehow, I would return. The night of December 8, 1940 paraded vividly before my minds eyes. Hell was on the Wing that night. The London sky dripped blood and screamed thunder. I was frightened,—Women gave utterances,—low groans, and covered their drawn faces in response to the ever increasing tempo of

55. *Ibid.*, ch. 9, p. 5.

56. "The Fireman," 204.

57. "Wake the Sleeping Giant," ch. 9, pp. 6–7.

58. *Ibid.*, ch. 2, pp. 1–23.

59. *Ibid.*, ch. 2, pp. 23, 29.

German bomb explosions. Strong men cursed and cried as they walked deep in the valley and shadow of death, searching for the maimed and the dead. Sweaty drops found their escape down the back of my ears,—I was exhausted. I knew then that I had returned to keep a vow made to myself in a war stricken city many months before.⁶⁰

While Armstrong was committed to combat, he was also loyal to his fellow soldiers and comrades. In a short essay titled "Air Discipline," published in an issue of *Air Force* not long after he had finished his command in Great Britain, Armstrong described in detail his combat experiences and theories on the importance of leadership and discipline when commanding a squadron. The article reveals that he recognized the fears and anxieties of "new" soldiers and worked hard to develop a trusting relationship with them.⁶¹

Armstrong was deeply respected and admired by the soldiers he commanded. It was widely reported that he believed every flyer was an equal, and that it was every man's duty to look out for his comrades. International newspapers reported that he also publicly congratulated all of the individuals involved in successful bombing raids, an action that earned him even greater respect from those who served under him. Newspapers in America and Europe also reported Armstrong's heroic effort to save the life of a waist gunner involved in the raid over Antwerp, Armstrong's last bombing mission in the European theater. When a shell exploded in the pilot compartment of the plane, it knocked out the waist gunner's oxygen system and hydraulic controls. In the heat of battle and amidst further attacks, Armstrong quickly grabbed a portable oxygen bottle and applied a tourniquet to the gunner's badly bleeding leg. Though Armstrong was dazed by a low supply of oxygen, he stayed with the gunner, Capt. Robert J. Salitnik of Alhambra, California, until the plane returned to base. There, he received blood transfusions that saved his life.⁶² Armstrong wrote of his bond with those under his command:

My Headquarters were situated near the flying line. Fortresses going out or returning from raids blew dust against the office window. The familiar sound of squeaking brakes seeped beneath the crack under the door. Often day dreams wrapped me in a shroud of fantastic desires. I could not convince my inner self that I was an "old man"—Too old for combat. That youngsters, with their courage and skill, had doomed me forever to watch from the sideline as they flew on to victory. Deep down in my heart I was proud of them—proud to be counted as a member of their clan.⁶³

It is not surprising that Armstrong felt such strong bonds with the men he commanded. He lived on the same base with combat crews; slept near and dined with them in the mess hall; and flew with them on combat missions.

60. "So Near Heaven," 31–32. "Read" is written sideways in the margin beside this entry.

61. Brig. Gen. Frank A. Armstrong, "Air Discipline," *Air Force* (November 1943): 5.

62. Undated news clipping, titled, "Armstrong Saves Wounded Navigator," Photograph Album, 1942–1951, p. 25, Box 9, Armstrong Papers.

63. "So Near Heaven," 104.



During the raid over Antwerp, a shell exploded in the pilot compartment of Armstrong's plane, wounding the waist gunner, Capt. Robert J. Salitnik, and knocking out his oxygen system and hydraulic controls. Armstrong assisted the gunner with a portable oxygen bottle and applied a tourniquet to his bleeding leg. He remained with Salitnik until the plane returned to base, where the gunner received blood transfusions that saved his life. Photograph of Staff Sgt. Charles Hill manning the waist gun position in a bomber.

Armstrong was also dedicated to his wife, Vernelle Lloyd Hudson, whom he affectionately referred to as "Fluffy," and son, Frank Alton Armstrong III. However, his family found it difficult to endure the separation that military life inevitably imposed. Armstrong described one incident in which he told his son and wife that Eaker had asked him to go to Great Britain and command the 97th:

"Fuz, I have a big surprise for you!" I said happily. "Your daddy is going to a combat zone!"

He looked up at me for a moment, then asked evenly, "Bombers or fighters?"

"Bombers!" I replied proudly. "Probably Flying Fortresses."

"Phooey!" he said with obvious disgust, and left me standing in the hall wondering at the irony of it all, as he continued on his way.

Before I could recover from this unexpected reaction, Fluffy entered from the kitchen. She had overheard the conversation.

"Is it true, Frank?" Her voice was unusually soft.

"It's true, all right! We leave in about ten days!"

Her eyes filled with tears. She embraced me, planted a moist, gentle kiss on my cheek, then walked quickly back into the kitchen and closed the door behind her.



During his military career Armstrong was frequently separated from his wife, Vernelle Lloyd Hudson, whom he referred to as "Fluffy," and son, Frank Alton Armstrong III, whom he called "Fuz." He is shown here with Fluffy, his son, Frank, and their granddaughter, Lloyd. Fluffy died in 1962, and Frank was killed in action in Laos in 1967.

It wasn't until that moment I realized how selfishly I had acted. My eyes had been focused on the present; hers were looking into the future at the lonely, anxious days ahead. I could have kicked myself!⁶⁴

64. "Wake the Sleeping Giant," ch. 3, pp. 2-3.

Armstrong's only son was killed in action in Laos in 1967 while flying a combat mission as a member of the 1st Air Commando Squadron. Fluffy Armstrong died in February 1962. Armstrong later married Mrs. Peggy Jenison Lippe.⁶⁵

Armstrong was proud of being a native North Carolinian and returned to his home state whenever he had the opportunity, visiting relatives and giving speeches near his hometown of Hamilton. It was widely reported that he made several appearances during wartime, soon after he had finished his job as commander of the 306th. He also made at least one wartime appearance at Wake Forest College as featured speaker of the university's class invocation. Armstrong directed his speech particularly to the young men in the audience, many of whom would soon be serving their country as well. He emphasized the importance of working as a team and hoped his comments would instill confidence and pride.⁶⁶

Armstrong sometimes used his childhood memories to help him endure the terrible reality of war:

Slowly we picked our way around water-filled holes in the track leading to the runway. The few minutes that required afforded me ample time to review many years of my life. Queer thoughts of remote happenings, dormant many years, raced through my mind. I remembered hurrying home from church on Sunday to turn the handle of an old ice cream freezer, for my mother. My initial payment was the dasher, with its paddles covered with an abundant coating of vanilla cream. The summer breeze that blew through the colonnade of our home in North Carolina came back to me through the cabin window of the Fortress. A soldier's dog crossed the flying field ahead of the airplane. I remembered the day I brought my pet fox-terrier home in my shirt, shielding her from the cold as I walked across a huge cotton field. A freight train killed her a few years later. All the neighborhood kids came to the "funeral." We buried her in the shade of a large bush in our back yard. I cried.⁶⁷

Itimous Thaddeus "Tim" Valentine Jr., Armstrong's nephew and a retired U.S. congressman from Nash County, North Carolina, recalled, "My uncle left an impression as a kind of a 'man's man.' He enjoyed hunting, fishing, a good game of poker and an occasional drink." That description was echoed by his bomber colleagues: "He drank. He smoked. He liked a good clean dirty story."⁶⁸ Valentine recalled an occasion when Armstrong's mother—a strict teetotaler—was going to visit him in Panama. Upon arrival she found Armstrong's residence unlocked. He was not home, but after taking a look around she discovered his wet bar and

65. Dunning, "Twelve O'Clock High," 131; *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, s.v. "Armstrong, Frank Alton, Jr."

66. Undated loose news clipping titled, "Col. Armstrong Relates Stories About Air Raids," Photograph Album, 1942–1951, Box 9, Armstrong Papers.

67. "Wake the Sleeping Giant," ch. 4, pp. 4–5.

68. News clipping, titled, "Gripping Story of 'Fightingest' Air General Twelve O'Clock High," *Boston Herald*, May 3, 1948, Photograph Album, 1942–1951, p. 84, Box 9, Armstrong Papers.

proceeded to throw out all of his liquor. Mrs. Armstrong then headed back home without even trying to find her son.⁶⁹

Valentine remembered a day in 1942 when he was walking down the street of his hometown of Nashville, North Carolina. "I heard this hellacious roar," he said, "and here comes this B-24 flying down Main Street at 500 feet. It came swooshing down right over the trees. I could see the waist gunner in the window. Off it went, and no one had any idea who it was until a few days later we got a note from Uncle Frank, saying, 'How did you like my visit?'"⁷⁰

In a recent interview, Valentine spoke about his own life and that of his famous uncle. Both he and Armstrong grew up poor and experienced similar hardships: relatives died young, and there were not many opportunities to pursue in a small town. But he greatly admired Armstrong, though he was a little frightened of him and perceived him as a "fearless daredevil." Valentine admitted he was impressed when Armstrong came to visit, driving up in a "spanking" new automobile with a beautiful wife from Richmond.⁷¹

Armstrong's daredevil spirit and yearning for combat was "just something in the folks of this family," Valentine believed. Armstrong's sister and Valentine's mother, Hazel Armstrong Valentine, described their father as a passive man, though a very hard worker. She described her mother as a "smart, quick-witted, out-going person—ambitious for her children," and said of her parents that she "never saw two dissimilar people so equally yoked together." She went on to try to explain Armstrong's ambition and achievements: "Mamma and Papa, average, small-town people, had a submerged streak of something which might have emerged in a different time. It all came together under stress of war, developing the best qualities of both in Lieut. General Frank A. Armstrong."⁷²

Valentine confirmed that Armstrong was deeply devoted to his family, and related a humorous story that revealed Armstrong's mother's pride in her son. When *Twelve O' Clock High* premiered in Williamston, North Carolina (the nearest theater to Hobgood), Valentine noted that it was a "big deal" for Armstrong's family. He drove some family members to the theater, and while Armstrong's mother admitted that she generally enjoyed the film, she was unhappy that the film makers had depicted her son's character as "cracking up"

69. Itimous (Tim) Valentine Jr., telephone conversation with author, December 18, 2009, hereinafter cited as Valentine interview.

70. Dunning, "Twelve O' Clock High," 4.

71. Valentine interview.

72. Shelby Jean Nelson Hughes, ed., *Martin County Heritage* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: Hunter Publishing Co., 1980), 83.

during his time in combat. Immediately after the movie, Mrs. Armstrong wrote a letter to Gregory Peck, blaming him for this false portrayal.⁷³

Armstrong's parents were devout Baptists, and he reflected on his early church upbringing in his memoirs:

I walked from the depot along the main street of town. It seemed even smaller now, and I wondered if it had actually shrunk, or if travel had changed my sense of proportion. I decided it was the latter. I passed the Baptist Church and remembered the many Sunday School classes of years gone by. Mother was an active participant in many religious affairs. We attended the Baptist Sunday School in the morning and the Methodist Sunday School in the afternoon. I don't think I learned very much in either one, but since most of my friends also attended, to remain away would have been worse than going. In later years, I would regret not having been more attentive to the lessons.⁷⁴

Armstrong was also known for being slightly superstitious, and said that it was common among his comrades. His sister-in-law recalled that Armstrong on several occasions would cease to shave before a bombing mission, only to shave upon safe return when he would then begin the ritual over again in anticipation of the next mission. For good luck he also carried one of his son's baby shoes on missions.⁷⁵

Although Armstrong developed a reputation as a courageous leader with nerves of steel, his own writings reveal his fears and anxieties. In one recollection from his childhood, he writes about his first experience with death:

The railroad also gave me my first glimpse of a dead man. I was to see many more dead men during my lifetime, but I never forgot the first. He was a train robber who had been shot by a railroad detective, and had fallen beneath the wheels of a moving freight car. His body was chopped in two, and I watched as several men picked up the halves and placed them on a tarpaulin on the depot platform. It made me sick.⁷⁶

Sgt. Herb Rosen, in a military newspaper article written approximately two years after Armstrong's first raids over Europe, discovered another example of Armstrong's "humanness." When Rosen asked Armstrong what outstanding impression remained "especially vivid" from those raids, Armstrong replied, "There is just one thing that is especially vivid about them—I was scared as hell on all of them."⁷⁷ Armstrong also wrote of the stress he experienced in anticipation of a mission:

The next hour was agonizing. I had read of criminals sentenced to die reading the Bible, praying, preparing themselves for eternity—also of those, who after long days of suffering, were faced with

73. Valentine interview.

74. "Wake the Sleeping Giant," ch. 1, pp. 21–22.

75. News clipping, titled, "Hero of Berlin Air Raid Has Been Visitor Here," February 5, 1943, Photograph Album, 1942–1951, p. 2, Box 9, Armstrong Papers.

76. "Wake the Sleeping Giant," ch. 1, p. 21.

77. News clipping titled, "Brig. Gen. Armstrong Tells Base 'All' About B-29s," by Sgt. Herb Rosen, Photograph Album, 1942–1951, p. 52, Box 9, Armstrong Papers.

deliverance—a new lease on life. My emotions were torn between two similar trends of thought—one equally as intense as the other. Physical pain would have been a relief; I could have corrected that. The mental suffering could be eliminated by one thing only—take-off.⁷⁸

Armstrong's memoirs help reveal who the true fighting leader of *Twelve O'Clock High* fame really was and demonstrate that his character was far more complex than that of the man portrayed as the ice-water-veined commanding officer. Numerous influences led to the development of his leadership qualities, particularly his longtime relationship with Gen. Ira Eaker. From Eaker, Armstrong learned to respect not only those in authority, but also those under his own command, which in turn earned him the respect of his men. After witnessing the early period of the German Blitz on Great Britain, Armstrong was eager for active combat to help defeat the Axis in World War II. His charisma, strong leadership abilities, and dedication to his country and his beliefs led to his numerous military accomplishments.

Armstrong died at his home in Tampa, Florida, on August 20, 1969. Fittingly, in 2000, his home state honored him with an official highway historical marker, placed near his boyhood home in Hobgood. Armstrong's grandson was in attendance and gave a moving tribute to his grandfather at the ceremony. Armstrong's love and respect for his fellow soldiers are evident in this excerpt from his memoir: "This is not a story of one or a dozen heroes. All the youngsters I have met in the European Theatre are heroes, fighters, lovers of life and liberty. They willingly lay down their lives daily as their contribution to a new world that will be free—and that you may pursue happiness—forever."⁷⁹

Mr. Sauter is manuscript curator in the Special Collections Department of Joyner Library at East Carolina University.

78. "Wake the Sleeping Giant," ch. 4, p. 2.

79. Notes for a speech (n.d.) by General Armstrong's grandson, Frank A. Armstrong, read at the dedication ceremony for General Armstrong's birthplace, 2003, Box 17, Armstrong Papers; "So Near Heaven."