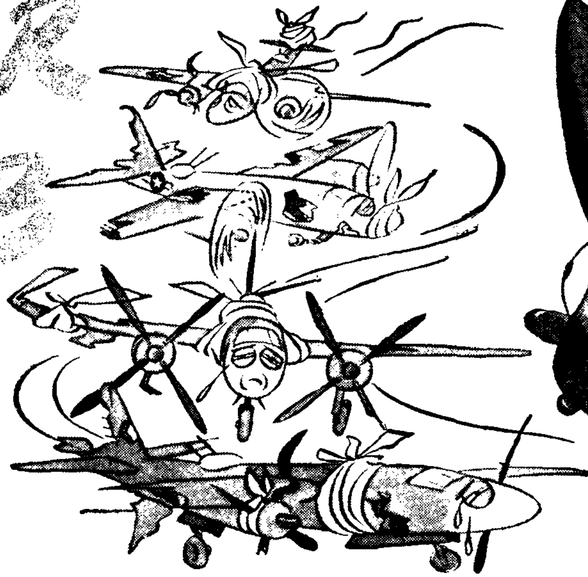
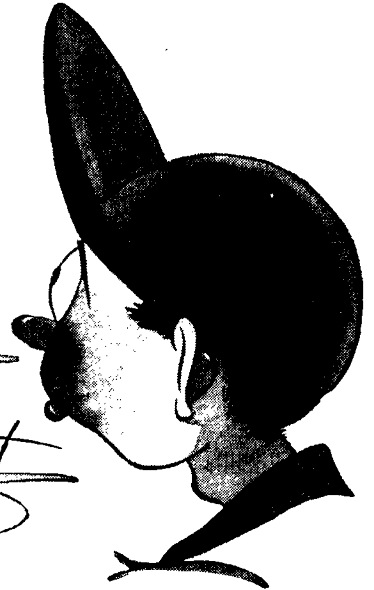
24-Hour Job

By Maj. Bernard W. Crandell

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Illustrated by James T. Rawls

He's always cussing the B-26 and praising the B-17, which is explainable only because a man is sometimes critical of a thing he loves most dearly.

He swears he isn't interested in the four Marauders that he and eleven other mechanics must maintain. Not the least bit attached to any of them, he insists, as he carefully watches eighteen specks in the sky approaching the airdrome. Crew chiefs may take a personal interest in their 26s, but a flight chief treats them like a big, cold hunk of machinery, he repeats as the Marauder formation swings around on the approach leg.

"Watch this one," he suddenly gasps. "Watch it now. It's Pistol Packin' Mama! She's coming in right there. You got to take a look at that ship. Damnedest picture on it you ever saw. Old 'Nap' is paintin' it on and it's an old gal leaning against a rail with a big gun in her hand. He hasn't painted her head on yet—hasn't had time since the last Amsterdam raid. Been patching the damn thing up . . . turret dome busted, hydraulic system shot out, conduit in engine hit, oil dilution line hit by same piece of flak, hits on two leading edges, holes in two pieces of cowling, hole underneath pilot but it didn't come through, holes in the fuselage. . . .

"Pistol Packin' Mama! What a ship! Damnedest picture you ever saw! Come and take a look at it!"

Master Sgt. Jack Loving, the Marauder flight chief who looks at his ships in that coldly impersonal manner, also has the reputation at his base in England for being the "bitchingest" man on the line.

"Which is an indication," observes the group air executive, "that he's doing some thinking and feels fairly happy over the state of repair and maintenance on his ships."

Loving is an ordinary man from Beauregard, Miss., with an important job. The job consists of keeping four B-26s, each capable of dumping 4,000 pounds of bombs twice daily on Hitler's western fortress, in shape for such destruction of the enemy. It's up to Loving and eleven other air mechs to insure 32,000 pounds of bombs daily for Nazi Europe.

Grooming $1,000,000 worth of bombing machinery is a responsible business for a 21-year-old from Beauregard. Responsible enough to make it understandable that he might have a worry or two and a fairly vivid way of expressing himself when his four Marauders, looking more like sieves than flying machines, droop pathetically on the hard stands only twelve hours before their next mission.

Those next twelve hours, and the preceding twelve just spent sweating them through the last mission, are called the "24-hour jobs." This means it takes 24 hours of work, most of it under the feeble rays of worn flashlights, all of it through the penetrating cold of the English winter, to patch holes, to mend hydraulic lines, to replace electrical conduits, to hope and fret over four battle-damaged airplanes. Loving is never sure that they'll be ready for the next mission, and his eternal pessimism often disgusts his squadron engineering officer who tries to figure how many bombers can go down the runway the next morning.

The "24-hour job" is a misnomer for a night of wrestling with 34,000 pounds of intricate machinery. Because even after the mechanics have won their 24-hour match with the machines, they still have another eight or ten hours to sweat them out from the mission, and perhaps a repeat performance of the night before.

"We spent thirty-hour stretches on the line during the first days of October when they were going out every day," Loving recalls sourly.

The only Marauder on the field that was properly named, Loving thinks, is Flak Happy, of his flight. They've had some lively times with Flak Happy on the ground as well as in the air.

"One night after Flak Happy came home with the leading edge shot up in three places, and an elevator and rudder smacked by flak, we had an air raid," he relates. "We had to get the ship back in condition so we stayed out there with our flashlights, helped considerably by the light of the flares the raiders were dropping. Flak Happy got off the next morning all right.

"On the last Amsterdam raid it came back full of holes. One piece of flak went in above the bombardier's head, cut the cables to the bomb racks and the line from the air speed indicator. There was only a small strand left of the right aileron control cable and one large hole where the top of the left wing tip should have been. That time the ship had to go to the hangar for four days while the service squadron did the sheet metal work on the wing tip. At the end of four days everything else was fixed, too, and Flak Happy with its left wing nothing but patches went back for more action."

Patching is a fairly simple job, according to Loving. If the flak doesn't damage a structural member, a piece of aluminum is riveted over the hole. And if the hole

Sergeant Loving is an ordinary man from Mississippi with an important job in England. His mechanics work around the clock to patch holes, mend hydraulic lines, replace conduits and get those battle-damaged bombers back in the air.

is a small one, a patch of cloth is slapped on. Although these patches are called "temporary," Loving says they're permanent so far as he's concerned.

When flak hits the highly sensitive leading edge where hundreds of wires and conduits are imbedded, the repair becomes a major job. Birds are Loving's pet peeve because they do nearly as much damage as flak when they strike the tender leading edge. Similar touchy points in the B-26 are the hydraulic system and, of course, the power plants, Loving explains.

Loving says he and his eleven mechanics are seldom told what target the B-26s are attacking, but they can usually tell where the ships have been by the amount of battle damage they bring home.

"Amsterdam and the Calais-Boulogne area are the toughest on the ships," Loving adds. "Amsterdam always means another 24-hour job for us.

"Pistol Packin' Mama got it worse than Flak Happy on the last Amsterdam mission. As for the other two ships, 739 had only a few holes in it and 906 didn't get off the ground because the oil dilution solenoid stuck open and let fuel run into the engine—another damn 24-hour job. After we'd drained the engine and changed plugs and started her up, a cylinder head blew out and that was about the limit. We changed it, though, and had it ready by next morning."

Loving figures that, on the average, the crew chiefs and other mechanics in his flight spend between fifteen and twenty man-hours daily on each B-26.

"But after a hot raid, much more than that," he quickly adds. "If we have the necessary parts we stick with the repairs until we're finished. Those 24-hour jobs wouldn't be so bad if it wasn't so damn dark and cold."

The speed of repair and maintenance of the B-26s in England recently drew a commendation from the Air Force on the general condition of the bombers, a recognition that Loving and his flight were glad to get after having both Bomber Command and Air Force inspectors snooping around for three weeks.

Loving says the combat crews were as happy over the commendation as the ground crews, which was proof enough that the boys who fly take an interest in what the mechanics are doing. On that point, Loving is emphatic.

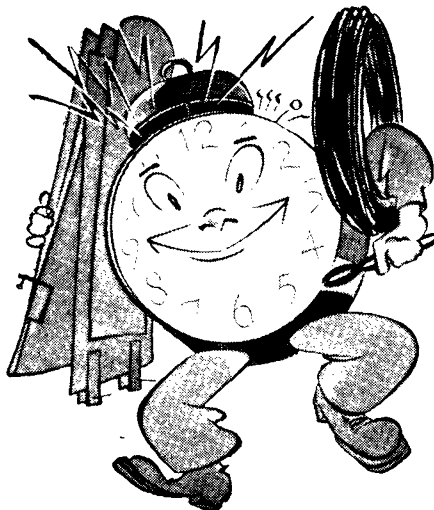
"The pilot on 739 and his crew take an unusual interest in what we do," he explains. "He is Lieut. Frank S. Barrett of Dallas, Texas, and the crew chief is Tech. Sgt. William L. Whitton of Austin, Texas. You might know what happens when you get two Texans together. Every time one of the combat men goes to London he always asks the ground boys if there's anything he can get them.

"We've put an awful lot of patches on old 739. It's been out on 29 missions and always gets back somehow. Lieutenant Barrett won't give it a name because he figures it will change his luck."

The name Pistol Packin' Mama was selected by the bomber's crew chief, Tech. Sgt. James T. Ratliff, of Tylertown, Miss., and his assistant, Sgt. Dominic G. Napolitano, of Brooklyn, N. Y. Although Marauders usually are christened by their pilots, occasionally the honor is taken by the crew chief because, Loving explains, the crew chief is as much the "boss" of the bomber on the ground as the pilot is while the plane is in the air.

"The crew chief can red line his Form 2-A at any time to keep the ship on the ground," Loving says. "And that's a matter that would take a command pilot to declare otherwise. The crew chief can red line his ship, but I'm always there when he's ready to take it off again. I'd never turn a ship back to a pilot until I am ready to go up in it myself."

Since May 14, 1943, when the Marauders made their first attack against Western Europe, Loving has seen a complete turnover of the bombers in his flight. He lost two ships on the disastrous May 17 raid, and one since then. The latter was 817, the B-26 that carried him across the Atlantic to England. The loss of 817 along with its crew and one of the most popular pilots in the group, hurt the crew chief, Tech. Sgt. Antonio L. Vendrame, of Santa Barbara, Calif., considerably, Loving says.



"Tony hardly believed it when I told him 817 had been shot down. He now has 906, the 'command' ship that the squadron operations officer or the CO fly. Everyone likes Tony on that job."

Some of the other B-26s formerly in Loving's flight have gone to training or replacement centers. One of them was the Silver Streak, a B-26 without paint that had extra speed but at a distance either was invisible or reflected a blinding flash from the sun. Silver Streak, an old type Marauder with the 65-foot wing, made only one mission at medium altitude and had to be rolled into a hangar every night to conceal its brilliance, but it was held in high regard because it had gone for 350 hours without an engine change.

"That might not seem so much as when compared to some other airplanes," Loving says, "but a year ago we would have thought it was wonderful for a B-26."

In addition to repair and maintenance, the ground flight must make engine inspections every 25 hours' flying time and modify the new replacement aircraft. Modifications always bring another 24-hour job, for the bomber may be scheduled for its first mission the following day.

As flight chief, Loving finds his overall job only begins with his store of technical knowledge. Coordinating the work of four crew chiefs and the other mechanics into a well-balanced team requires more than technical knowledge, especially from a youngster who gives instructions to men eight and ten years older than himself. But Loving proved he had the respect of the men all along the line, according to the group air executive.

"I first heard of Loving when the boys said he was the hottest aerial photographer in the business," the air exec recalls. "A few weeks later they began talking of Loving as being the best aerial gunner they'd seen. The next thing was how good this Loving was at navigation, and then I heard he was an expert on radio. Finally they told me he was a top-ranking air mechanic. I decided to go out and get acquainted with him."

Loving's brief but rare background runs from his enlistment May 20, 1941, as a photographer—"because I was interested in chemical solutions"—to April, 1942, when his squadron was given its first Marauders and he decided to be an air mechanic. He learned it all on the line and takes some pride in the fact that he never went to air mechanics' school.

A flight chief can live a decent life—less than fifteen hours a day on the line—only when there are few missions during a month, Loving admits. The day a mission is run, however, is fairly easy. On the morning the bombers are to go out, for example, Loving and his ground flight will leave their Nissen huts as late at 0500, eat breakfast—"we've learned not to wait"—then go to the hard stands.

"We pre-flight the bombers, checking everything and giving the engines a run-up, and then top off the gas tanks," he says. "If the wings have frost we scrape it off with de-froster fluid. Then we might talk with the combat crew until they climb in. Someone starts the energizer, and that's about the last we do."

The last thing, of course, is the cool, indifferent stare of the flight chief as his four B-26s trundle off the hard stands and swing around the track to the runway. Then he might sneak over to a shed where old Nap is mixing paint to finish the picture on Pistol Packin' Mama, when she returns. ☆