# Old Seventy

## REQUIEM FOR A BOMBER

BY STEVE DENNIS

More than 12,000 B-17 variants were produced during World War II. Only a few, like the *Memphis Belle*, have left deep tracks in the sands of history, allowing historians to follow their movements during their often brief life in the Army Air Corps. Of the "B" series, only one, serial number 38-215, has left a significant trail.

Through letters, personal journals, after-action reports, and government records 38-215, later nicknamed *Old Seventy*, can be followed from its November 1939 delivery at March Field to its fatal Aleutian crash July 18, 1942. During its life it played a number of roles: test platform for cold weather operations, patrol plane under Navy control, bomber, and weather reconnaissance aircraft.

The B-17B series was born in the middle of the Depression, when the Army had to beg for each development dollar from a reluctant Congress. A direct descendant of the Model 299, launched in 1935, and the 13 YB-17s, ordered for testing in 1936, the "B" series included a number of design upgrades, including superchargers, a larger tail, new nose, hydraulic brakes, and revised gun and bombardier positions. It is arguably the first "production" version of the B-17 and the first assigned to active bombardment groups: one on the Atlantic coast and one on the Pacific side. Only 39 B-17Bs were built and none survived the war, yet they made valuable contributions to the further development of the "C," "D," and ultimately the first model worthy of the "Fortress" moniker, the "E" series.

*Old Seventy* spent the first months of its career in California, between March Field and the Sacramento Air Depot. In early 1940 orders were issued for the transfer of *Old Seventy* and its sister ship, 38-216, to the new Army Cold Weather Test Detachment at Ladd Field (now Fort Wainright), then under construction near Fairbanks, Alaska. The detachment would be charged with testing aircraft, equipment, maintenance procedures, and other Army gear in the frigid northland. While bush and commercial pilots had been developing skills for Arctic flight operations, the Army lacked cold-weather experience.

*Old Seventy*, 38-216, and the Cold Weather Test Detachment (CWTD) would provide that knowledge.

On April 14, 1940, Maj. Dale Gaffney, Lt. Marvin Walseth, and 16 others were detached to Ladd to pave the way for aircraft and technicians to follow. They arrived to find a field under construction, so they set up their first operations in nearby Fairbanks.

***Old Seventy*, in an Alaskan winter. She is sporting her day-glow orange tail and engine cowlings intended to aid rescuers in the event of an unscheduled Alaska landing.**

At March Field technicians went to work on the two Alaska-bound B-17Bs to prepare them for their Arctic assignment. Guns and bomb racks were removed and replaced with test equipment. Day-glow orange was applied to the wingtips and tails of the silver birds, and a new symbol, a bomb-carrying polar bear, was applied to each fuselage. *Old Seventy* received a large "1" on the fuselage and a smaller "1" on the tail. 38-216 received a similar "2."

On October 4, 1940, the two planes departed March Field carrying six officers and 18 men. Arriving at Ladd bundled in heavy parkas they were surprised by the moderate fall weather and the lack of snow. They would soon learn why Fairbanks was selected as the cold-weather test site.

Anchorage-based Gen. Simon Buckner, newly assigned commander of the Alaska Defense Forces, favored the big plane and used it for his frequent aerial tours. Soon the planes were making appearances at remote fields all over the territory. While single-engine bushplanes were common, the big bombers were a novelty in the north. They were so noteworthy that on several occasions in October and November the Anchorage newspaper reported on the arrivals and departures of the planes. In one case they noted it "stayed on the ground for 15 minutes."

In addition to testing work, *Old Seventy* made frequent trips to Alaska's interior, inventorying available landing sites for use in flying emergencies and in time of war. At the end of November, Lt. Walseth, Gaffney's adjutant, flew to Fort Yukon and then out over the Arctic Ocean. On December 1 he was off to Nome to pick up fur parkas and mukluks locals were making for the Army. In a letter home he reported, "Believe me, it was a great treat for all the people over there and for all of us as the field was rolly and not a foot too long. We just got in and off."

The winter testing had fallen into a routine when tragedy stuck the small Ladd flying community. In early February Capt. R.S. Freeman flew 38-216 to the Sacramento Air Depot with reports concerning the winter flight operations at Ladd. On February 6, en route from Sacramento to Wright Field, the plane crashed into a Nevada mountain, killing all aboard. *Old Seventy* was now the only four-engine bomber operating in the Alaska Territory.

Later that month Lt. Walseth filed a report of the first year's activities of the Ladd CWTD. He reported that *Old Seventy* had flown more than 324 hours in just six months at temperatures ranging from -47°F to +50°F. During that time a number of changes had been made to the aircraft, including the installation of:

- 1,000-watt engine oil immersion heaters.
- A B-17C-style cabin heating system with boiler units on two engines. (First orders for the "C" series planes had been placed in July 1940).
- Six outlets for heated flying suits.
- 100-amp, type E-85 generators replacing the 50-amp models.
- Defroster for bombardier's aiming window.

He also reported on the testing of electric flying suits from General Electric and United States Rubber; flight crews had found them wanting for Arctic use. One had caught fire. All had cold spots and failed to maintain their temperature when the generators were not producing while idling on the ground. Worse ". . . if a man had to leave his ship . . . a man with good emergency equipment and good non-heated flying clothing would have a chance of surviving . . .. A man in . . . electrically heated outfits would be helpless . . .."

On April 30 Ladd nearly lost its remaining B-17B. As Walseth reported after a night flight, "Almost had to leave it [the plane] as the propeller governor broke and the engine ran away. Tore itself all to pieces, cylinder broke off, etc. In fact almost completely demolished. That is about the worst experience I have had."

Grounded until a new engine could be shipped to Ladd, its next trip didn't occur until the end of May, when *Old Seventy* flew at 15,000 feet nonstop to Sacramento, making the 2,400-mile flight in 11 hours. At Sacramento it received a complete overhaul, and some features from the "C" series were added. The most visible change was the replacement of the "teardrop" gun blisters on the waist with flush-mounted openings that produced less drag and gave better gun angles.

After nearly a month on the ground Walseth completed *Old Seventy's* trip to the lower 48 via San Antonio, Maxwell Field, and Wright Field in Dayton. In July it returned to Ladd to enjoy the last months of peace on the northern frontier.

When war was thrust upon the United States, December 7, 1941, *Old Seventy* was one of the few more modern aircraft available in the Alaska Territory. But since the CWTD reported directly to Wright Field, Gen. Buckner didn't even include it in his aircraft count. On January 3, 1942,

**The B-17-B, the newest model of the Boeing Flying Fortress, and first of its type to be permanently stationed at March Field, California.**

**A Ladd Field takeoff.**

**Ladd Field, near Fairbanks, Alaska, was still under construction when the first aircraft arrived. *Old Seventy* is visible on the right. Sister ship 38-216 is visible on the left. Wings are covered with light cotton cloth to prevent ice buildup.**

Buckner advised Army headquarters, "There is not at the present time a single up-to-date fighting plane in the Alaska Defense Command." The best he could muster were "seven obsolescent medium bombing planes [B-18s] and sixteen equally outmoded pursuit planes [P-36s]."

As 1942 progressed, the Anchorage-based 36th Bombardment Squadron began cobbling together a fighting force. *Old Seventy* was transferred to the 36th. In March a single B-17E arrived from Wright Field, followed in May by three LB-30s, an export version of the B-24. All but *Old Seventy* had rudimentary radar. This was the air fleet ordered to the NW Sea Frontier Command at the Kodiak Navy Base in late May. The same intelligence intercepts that set up the Midway battle included warnings of a Japanese attack on Alaska. The question was, where would it occur?

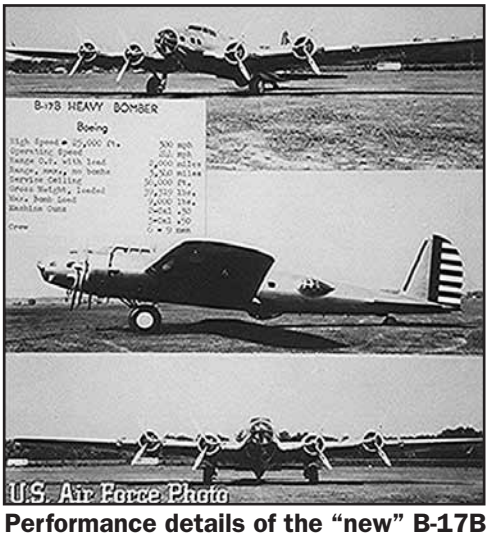
*Old Seventy* arrived at Kodiak with Lts. Jack Marks and Richard Ragle at the controls. The crew was given a top secret briefing and informed they were to be assigned to Navy Patrol Wing 4 and operate from a new, secret base on Umnak Island in the Aleutian chain. But their mission had been so secret that they'd departed Ladd with a sick engine and without bombsight, bomb shackles, guns, ammunition, and other essential fighting gear. Before *Old Seventy* could go to war it had to be converted from a test platform

**Without a completed hangar, in the winter of '40-'41, maintenance was performed with the aid of a heated "nose shelter" constructed locally.**

**As a part of the test regimen, personnel experimented with different ways to warm the engines. Here insulated canvas covers enclosed gas-fired burners.**

***Old Seventy*** **in Nome, in the winter of '41-'42, to pick up a load of native-made parkas for use by Army troops assigned to the territory. Note the packages visible through the waist gun position glass.**

***Old Seventy*** **in Nome, displaying its polar bear logo.**




**Performance details of the "new" B-17B Heavy Bomber.**

to a fighting ship.

It returned to Ladd on May 26 and, with ground crews working 24 hours a day, finally arrived at Umnak on June 2, ready to join the fight.

For the next six weeks *Old Seventy* would be in almost constant motion. The day they arrived at Umnak they were fueled, armed and, at 1800, sent on patrol looking for the Japanese fleet. Aleutian weather, which haunted most flights, forced it to fly under the 400-foot cloud ceiling. Returning at 0530, the third, they learned of the Dutch Harbor attack, refueled, and took off again.

With Marks and Ragle at the controls they ran into Japanese planes returning from Dutch Harbor, and the waist gunner, Sgt. K.E. Nelson, claimed a kill. He also put 50 holes in the tail of *Old Seventy*! Flying beneath the 250-foot ceiling they followed the retreating enemy planes and came upon what they believed was the entire Japanese fleet. They dropped their bombs under heavy clouds and returned to base.

The next few days *Old Seventy* was in the air more than on the ground, chasing phantom fleets over the unforgiving waters. At one point it nearly attacked an island rising from the foggy mists.

On June 4 it lost its bomb bay doors when its bombs released following a violent maneuver to avoid a cloud-shrouded mountainside. Later they were forced to shut down the number two engine when the cowling worked loose and nearly caught the propeller. While flying at reduced

***Old Seventy* on the left while undergoing engine maintenance. Note the portable shed over a port engine.**

speed they were jumped by Japanese planes. Only the dense cloud cover allowed them to avert disaster.

By June 6 the constant flying was taking a toll on the aircraft. After an early-morning patrol, departing at 0435, followed by a mid-day patrol, departing at 1150, it was serviced and in the air again at 1545. Shortly after takeoff, one engine failed. It turned toward Anchorage on three engines with two generators out, severe icing, and two superchargers acting erratically. More generator problems finally forced *Old Seventy* down at the small village of Naknek at 2320.

## ORIGIN OF THE NAME OLD SEVENTY

The origin of the name *Old Seventy* remains a mystery.

Maj. Walseth, the pilot on its ill-fated last mission, never refers to the name in his correspondence. He flew the plane extensively from its arrival in Alaska in October of 1940 until the Pearl Harbor attack. In early 1942, with many pilots and only one plane, other pilots were often at its controls. In May of 1942 Capt. Marks flew it on its first combat missions with Lt. Ragle as copilot. Both Marks and Ragle refer to her as *Old Seventy*, as do authors who wrote extensively about the Aleutian campaign.

Ragle, who survived the war, suggested that the name may have come from a radio call sign given it by the Navy during its brief stint as a Navy patrol plane in late May and early June of 1942. Even he couldn't recall specific details.

But the name stuck. And *Old Seventy*, the only "B" series bomber to see extensive combat action following Pearl Harbor, will live on in history with that moniker.

**Lt. Marvin, in addition to being a frequent pilot of *Old Seventy*, was the first adjutant at Ladd Field and prepared many of the reports of the cold-weather test operations.**

**Left to right: Lt. Marvin Walseth, adjutant and frequent pilot of *Old Seventy*; Brig. Gen. Simon Bucker, commander, Alaska Defense Command; Maj. Hobart Murphy, 4th Infantry; Maj. R.S. Williams, Quartermaster; and Capt. Wilson Neal, Weather Officer, Ladd Field, 1941.**

They made emergency repairs and returned to the fight only to be disabled on June 7 by a faulty fuel transfer pump, disabled during an earlier encounter with a Japanese fighter.

On June 9 it was assigned a bombing run to Kiska, where the Japanese were establishing a base. Its problems began to mount. It was too old and slow to keep up with the B-24s that were arriving to expand the strike force. Only by pushing the aircraft to the limit could it keep up with the newer, faster planes. It made the trip on June 9, but on June 10, the number two engine failed and she had to abort. A ground check revealed that two cylinders lacked compression. It needed a new engine, and the nearest spare was at Ladd.

It returned from Ladd sporting new Army green livery, replacing the international orange paint job from its testing days. Since it was not in the same league as the newer bombers, it was given a new and important solo role, weather reconnaissance, and redesignated YB-17B. Weather was a nightmare in the Aleutians: low ceiling, fog, high winds. Worse, storms came from the west, so flights taking off from Umnak had no idea what they would encounter on their 600-mile flight to Kiska. *Old Seventy's* new job was to serve as lead scout feeding weather information back to base operations.

Former Lt., now Maj., Walseth took over *Old Seventy* in July. The pace for aircraft and crews remained grueling. In a letter to his family, Walseth reported, "Most of our flights run around ten hours. Sometimes two or three in succession but when possible every other day. After three successive flights it takes about a week to recover, which none of us get. So we are generally quite worn down. The war we are fighting up here is a long slow process as everything depends on the weather. All the fronts move toward us so the [Japanese] sort of have an edge on us as they know what's coming and we don't."

And the grind continued. Outshone by the newer, faster models, *Old Seventy* continued to contribute to the fight in its own independent way. Finally, on July 18 it failed to return from a solo photo reconnaissance mission. *Old Seventy* was gone.

The diary of Lt. Billy Wheeler, of the 36th Bombardment Squadron, describes what happened: "The weather at Umnak [on July 18] was bad as usual. The visibility was as low

## WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Maj., later Gen., Gaffney remained in Alaska and took over responsibility for the Ferry Command, which managed the Lend Lease program that was ferrying planes to Fairbanks, where they were turned over to our Russian allies.

Lt., later Capt., Ragle returned to Ladd Field and played a major role in the Ferry Command under Gaffney.

Both Gaffney and Ragle survived the war.

Lt. Wheeler, who left behind an extensive diary of the 36th Bombardment Squadron activities, survived the Aleutian campaign and returned to Seattle with the remnants of the squadron after it was disbanded following victory in the Aleutians. The author has no record of his other war-time activities.

Maj. Marks and his crew perished in a B-17E, shot down during a July 17 raid over Kiska.

Maj. Walseth and his crew perished on a remote corner of Umnak Island the next day (July 18).

Gen. Buckner went on to lead the 10th Army on Okinawa, where he was killed in action.

B-17B aircraft assigned to Ladd Field, April 1940—38-215 (#1) and 38-216 (#2).

as 100 feet and a sea fog surrounded the island during the greater part of the day. Several days after the report of the loss, Major Walseth's ship was found on Cape Udak, the Southwest end of Umnak Island . . . [The crew was] buried near the Nikolski village, a short distance from the crash scene. These were the only burials in the squadron, bodies are rarely found in our job. It was assumed that Walseth had made a landfall on Umnak and had endeavored to follow the coastline to the field. An unexpected land projection caught him. He crashed only twenty feet from the top."

*Old Seventy's* contribution to the war effort ended 32 months after it began in the California sunshine. Piloted by a succession of young men, it provided valuable lessons concerning the operation of aircraft in cold climates. The groundwork it and its crew laid made life easier for those who followed and helped ensure the other 12,000 B-17 aircraft truly performed like Flying Fortresses.

WARBIRD TOONS

by Jean Barbaud

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