

B-17 Flying Fortress was a heavy military airplane used by the United States and its allies during World War II (1939-1945). It was a four-engine *bomber* (airplane used to drop explosives) made by the Boeing Company. *B* is the U.S. military's designation for a bomber. The plane was called the *Flying Fortress* because of its many machine guns used for defense against enemy aircraft. The B-17 became a lasting symbol of American air power.

The B-17 had a large tailfin that helped it maneuver in the thin air of high altitudes. The bomber carried as many as 13 heavy machine guns, 10 crew members, and up to 17,600 pounds (7,983 kilograms) of bombs. The airplane flew at a top speed of about 300 miles (480 kilometers) per hour. It could reach a maximum altitude of around 36,000 feet (11,000 meters).

The U.S. Army tested the first B-17's in 1935. They entered World War II combat with the United Kingdom's Royal Air Force in July 1941. When the United States entered the war in December, the B-17 (along with the B-24 Liberator) became the backbone of its heavy bomber groups.

Most B-17's were used in daylight bombing raids against enemy targets in Europe. Although the bombers' guns brought down many enemy planes, large numbers of Flying Fortresses failed to return from their missions. The B-17's that flew from England sometimes left the range of the fighter planes that accompanied them, leaving the bombers vulnerable to attack. Eventually, such fighter planes as the P-51 Mustang developed the range to escort the bombers during the entire mission.

From January 1943 until Germany's surrender in May 1945, B-17's pounded enemy targets throughout Europe. Hundreds of Flying Fortresses routinely took part in each mission. Of the more than 12,000 B-17's built, nearly 5,000 were lost in combat.