



2nd BG YB-17s over Manhattan

its colorful five machine-gun blisters Boeing quickly recognized the value of the title and had it copyrighted.

The first flight test was carried out on July 28, 1935, with Boeing chief test pilot Les Tower at the controls. Following the company test program the Model 299 took off for Wright Field, Ohio, on August 20, 1935. The aircraft flew the 2,100 mile trip in only 9 hours and 3 minutes an amazing ground speed of 233 MPH. The performance of the aircraft completely stole the show from the Douglas B-18, which was essentially a bomber version of the DC-2 transport and Martin's reworked, but obsolete B-10 bomber.

On 30 October of that same year, disaster struck the new bomber. After taking off from Wright Field, the 299 immediately went into a steep climb, stalled and failed to level out before crashing into the ground. The pilot, Major Ployer Hill, chief of the Wright Field Flight Test Section, was killed and the Boeing test-pilot, Leslie Tower, died from injuries received. One of the innovations of Model 299 was a system of control surface locks* which could be operated from the cockpit. Evidently Major Hill had failed to release the lock control and neither he nor Tower noticed this. The tragedy was a major setback for Boeing and there was little consolation to be had from the fact that the crash was due to human error and not to some fundamental weakness in the design.

**These locks prevented damage to ailerons, rudder and elevators from wind gusting when the aircraft was parked. The members of the 484th Bomb Group mechanics, and flight crews will remember the bright red tape that ran from top to bottom on the left side of the cockpit in plain view of the seated pilot. The usual practice before the innovation of the "Gust Lock" was to use a hand placed bright red wooden batten to block the movement of the flight controls. These were to be removed before flight, but there were*

incidents where their removal was forgotten, thus the gust lock.

The aircraft was not a complete loss, but the crash did dash the hopes that Boeing had for a sizeable contract. The bulk of orders for a new Army Air Corps bomber went to Douglas for the B-18. The Boeing Company had committed the major proportion of its resources to the building of this aircraft and, as the outstanding tests could not now be completed, the contract would be lost to one of the other competitors. The superiority of Model 299 was unchallenged, but the fact that the Army could have two Douglas B-18s for every Boeing purchased was an important consideration. The crash of the Boeing entry resulted in the decision late in the year to give Douglas a contract for 133 aircraft, to be known as the B-18A, based on the successful DC-3 transport. Again some of our members will remember flying this airplane with the early antisubmarine squadrons that became the basis of the 484th Bomb Group.

A contract, at long last was forthcoming: 17 January, 1936 for 13 YB-17s for service test. The new aircraft was fitted with Wright R-1820-39 Cyclone engines which developed 850hp, and a change from the hoop type landing gear struts, allowing easier tire changes.

The YB17s were assigned to the 2nd Bomb Group based in Langley Field, VA which at the time constituted the entire heavy bombardment strength of the US Army Air Corps "We were a careful bunch of fliers in those days," recalls Robert F Travis, then a second lieutenant and later a brigadier general in World War II, "and each crew was handpicked. We knew if a YB had crashed we could probably say goodbye to the nation's bomber program." To prevent future pilot error the 2nd Group devised a pilot's check list, a device listing all the actions of the pilot and copilot in preparing the plane for takeoff, flight, before and after landing. While the B-