

By John L. Frisbee, Contributing Editor

The Right Touch

Blinded by enemy fire, Forrest Vosler guided rescuers to his crew, downed in the North Sea.

IN October 1943, 20-year-old SSgt. Forrest Vosler, who had grown up in a small New York state town, was assigned to the 358th Bomb Squadron of the 303d Bomb Group, stationed at RAF Molesworth in the UK. After his first B-17 mission over Germany, the young radio operator-gunner was convinced that he could not survive 25 missions for completion of a combat tour. He was not alone in that conviction.

Nothing in the peacetime lives of thousands of young Americans had prepared them for the violence that lay ahead. Although such statistics were not circulated among Army Air Forces crews, the average life expectancy of an Eighth Air Force B-17 in late 1943 was 11 missions.

On Dec. 20, 1943, Vosler flew his fourth mission in a B-17F, called *Jersey Bounce Jr.*, against Bremen in northwest Germany. Eighth Air Force had attacked targets in that area on the 13th and 16th of the month. The *Jersey Bounce* crew knew how tough a mission it would be. Bremen was encircled by a ring of anti-aircraft guns a half-mile wide and protected by additional fighters that had been relocated from Germany's eastern front. Eighth Air Force would lose 27 aircraft on that mission.

Before "bombs away," Vosler's B-17 lost one engine to flak. From his position in the top turret, Vosler saw two B-17s explode into flames—not exactly a confidence builder. As *Jersey Bounce* began its long flight back to Molesworth, 120 miles of it over the cold winter waters of the North Sea, flak took out another engine and damaged the radio. With two engines out and other structural damage, the pilot could not stay with the formation.

The lone and limping B-17 immediately became the target for a



Forrest Vosler (second from right) was among the Medal of Honor recipients who made a special appearance at the 1948 Air Force Association convention's climactic event at Madison Square Garden in New York City. At far left, actor and Air Force Reservist Jimmy Stewart is at the microphone.

succession of fighter attacks. The tail gun was destroyed and the gunner seriously wounded. Fragments of an exploding 20 mm shell hit Vosler in the arms, leg, and chest. He recalls that he was so shaken, he was unable to man his guns. Then he thought: "If I'm going to die, it will be fighting." Immediately all fear left him. He climbed back into his turret and fired continuously to protect the tail of the bomber. Then another 20 mm shell exploded near Vosler. Fragments entered his eyes, leaving him almost totally blind. In great pain and firing by instinct, he refused aid until the tail gunner was given emergency treatment.

As the enemy fighters ran low on fuel, their attacks diminished and finally ceased over the North Sea. The pilot announced they would have to ditch. Since their condition and general location were not known to friendly forces, Vosler knew the likelihood of rescue was reduced drastically. Only he could improve the odds. He groped his way to the radio compartment and, working entirely by touch, repaired the transmitter during periods of semi-consciousness. The distress signal he sent out, they learned later, was received in the UK.

After a successful ditching, Vosler, able only to distinguish light and darkness, found his way to a wing

where he joined other crew members. The wounded tail gunner also reached the wing near Vosler. While uninjured crewmen were inflating a raft, the tail gunner began to slide toward the water on the wet, slippery wing. Vosler, himself in great pain, held the man with one hand while clinging to an antenna wire with the other. Both men were helped into the raft, subsequently picked up by a Norwegian fishing boat, and finally returned to the UK by a fast rescue boat that responded to Vosler's SOS.

Forrest Vosler spent many months in hospitals abroad and in this country. For a time, he was totally blind, but doctors were able to restore sight in one eye. He was discharged from the service in October 1944.

Vosler was promoted to technical sergeant and awarded the Medal of Honor, one of only three Eighth Air Force enlisted men of World War II to be awarded the nation's highest decoration for valor. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who presented the medal, postponed the ceremony until Vosler had regained his sight.

As soon as he was able, Forrest Vosler enrolled in college and earned a bachelor's degree. He continued his interest in the Air Force which he had served so valiantly and, in 1946, along with other Air Force heroes, was named a member of the new Air Force Association Board of Directors. ■