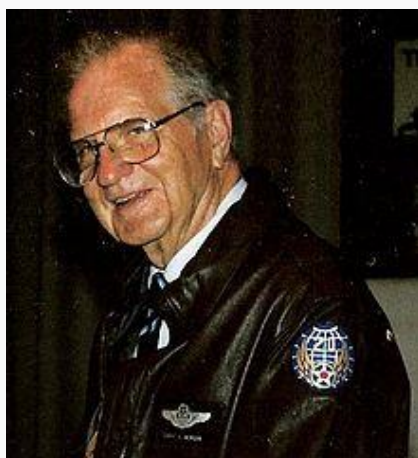


# Robert K. Morgan

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<b>Born</b>	July 31, 1918 Asheville, North Carolina
<b>Died</b>	May 15, 2004 (aged 85) Asheville, North Carolina
<b>Service/branch</b>	United States Air Force
<b>Years of service</b>	1941–1965
<b>Rank</b>	Colonel
<b>Battles/wars</b>	World War II
<b>Awards</b>	Distinguished Flying Cross (3) Air Medal (11)

**Robert Knight Morgan** (July 31, 1918 – May 15, 2004) was a Colonel and a Command Pilot in the United States Air Force from Asheville, North Carolina. During World War II, while a Captain in the U.S. Army Air Forces, he was a bomber pilot with

the 8th Air Force in the European theater and the aircraft commander of the B-17 Flying Fortress, *Memphis Belle*.

## **Biography**

Morgan, born July 31, 1918 in Asheville, North Carolina (he has lived his entire life there) in the Western North Carolina Blue Ridge Mountains, was a student of history and realized early on that America would get into the war. After attending the University of Pennsylvania, Wharton School of Finance, he joined the Army Air Corps in 1940.

His basic flight training took place in Camden, South Carolina; Primary Training at Bush Field, Augusta, Georgia; and Barksdale Field, Louisiana; B-17 training at MacDill Field, Tampa, Florida; and Advanced B-17 Training in Walla Walla, Washington. On December 12, 1941 (five days after Pearl Harbor), he pinned on his Pilot Wings and received his Second Lieutenant bars.

In October 1942, Morgan flew the Memphis Belle to Bassingbourn, England, home of the 91st Bomb Group, 324th Bombardment Squadron. "Back then," Morgan recalls, "there was no book on high altitude strategic bombing. The Generals didn't know any more than we did. They had to figure bombing strategy as we went along. Initially, the Memphis Belle flew missions into France and the Low Countries, but in early 1943, Germany became the target.

In the first three months of the Belle's sorties from Bassingbourn, 80% of their Bomb Group was shot down. Moral was low, so the Generals set the completion of 25 missions as an incentive for a man to go home. Morgan frequently speaks to school kids and explains, "80% losses means you had breakfast with 10 men; dinner with only 2 of those 10. On 17 May 43, the Memphis Belle crew became the first to complete 25 missions;

then return to the United States on their 26th Mission.

“There were no easy missions”, says Morgan, who never lost a crew member. “But, the secret to the B-17 was the capability of flying in tight formations - so tight that the wings were often almost touching. We were able to put out an amazing amount of firepower. That, and the Norden Bomb Sight, which made us extremely accurate at high altitudes. I also positively feel that was a bit of divine intervention for our crew.

## Memphis Belle

The *Memphis Belle* was the first heavy bomber in the Eighth Air Force to complete 25 combat missions in the European Theatre; and was the first to return to the United States as part of a publicity campaign to sell war bonds. In those missions, all of which were daylight raids, the *Memphis Belle* flew 148 hours, dropped over 60 tons of bombs, and had every major part of the plane replaced at least once. Morgan and his crew were the subjects of a 1944 film documentary, *Memphis Belle: A Story of a Flying Fortress*.



In June 1943, the crew departed England for the United States and began a 30-city Public Relations/War Bond Tour. First stop - Washington Natl. Airport, D.C., where Morgan was ordered to buzz the field. All the dignitaries ducked when he made a low pass over the reviewing stand. All through the tour the crew thanked the American public for their war efforts. They told them what was really going on in the war. The boys (Morgan was 23) were treated as heroes everywhere they went. Wined and dined from June through August of '43. The red carpet was rolled out in every city. They even took their mascot, Stuka (a black Scottie dog), with them. The tour was an emotional, but exhausting event for the crew, but an incredible moral boost for them and the public. Then it was over. The Generals told the crew they could have any job they wanted in the Air Corp. (except theirs).

## **Pacific Theater**

Morgan had seen the still secret B-29 during the tour in Wichita and volunteered to train in this new bomber. He wanted to command his own B-29 Squadron and he trained hard and earned it. In Oct 1944 he deployed to Saipan. Promoted to Major, Morgan flew a second combat tour in the Pacific Theater, commanding the 869th Bomb Squadron, 497th Bomb Group of the Twentieth Air Force. His B-29 was nicknamed *Dauntless Dotty*, after his third wife, Dorothy Johnson Morgan.

On 24 November 1944, Morgan made history with another "first". With Wing Commander Brigadier General Emmett "Rosie" O'Donnell, Jr. on board "Dotty", Morgan, as command pilot, led the first mission of the XXI Bomber Command to bomb Japan, leading 110 aircraft of the 73rd Bomb Wing to Tokyo. This was the first time that the U.S. had bombed Tokyo since the '42 Doolittle raid in B-25s. The mission was successful.

After completing another 24 B-29 missions, Morgan was sent home in April 1945. He continued to serve his country in the USAF Reserve and retired in 1965 as a full Colonel.

Among his military awards were the Distinguished Flying Cross with two oak leaf clusters, and the Air Medal with ten oak leaf clusters. He retired from the Air Force Reserve in the rank of Colonel in 1965.

## **Later Life**

In April 1999 he was invited to fly the Boeing B-52 at Barksdale AFB, Shreveport, LA and in October 1999, he was invited to fly the subsonic B-1B Bomber at Robins AFB, Georgia. Robins subsequently named one of its B-1's "Memphis Belle" and painted the new nose art on in February, 2000.

In 2001 Morgan published his autobiography, *The Man Who Flew the Memphis Belle: Memoir of a WWII Bomber Pilot*, co-written with Ron Powers.

Morgan was hospitalized April 22, 2004 with a fractured vertebra in his neck after falling outside the Asheville Regional Airport while returning home from what would be his last airshow appearance at the Sun 'n' Fun airshow at Lakeland Linder Regional Airport in Lakeland, Florida. He died at Mission Hospital on May 15, 2004 from complications due to his injuries, including pneumonia.

He's a damn good pilot. He always brought us home" These words from a crew member of the B-17 "Memphis Belle" probably best sum up Bob Morgan's military career. Commanded by Morgan, the B-17 Memphis Belle was the first of the heavy bombers to achieve 25 missions over Europe. The plane and her crew were immortalized in a 1943 combat documentary directed and filmed by William Wyler; and again in 1990 by a Warner Bros. Hollywood movie (produced by

Wyler's daughter, Catherine) - both were titled "Memphis Belle".