

Students will use Staff Sgt. Vernon K. Lykken's diary to identify important military targets and their locations as they map his combat missions across Europe during World War II.

## Supplies

- Excerpts from Lykken's diary: Pages [1-20](#), [21-40](#), [41-60](#), and [61-80](#) (printed or digital)
- Map of Europe (preferably a large, printed map or a digital mapping tool such as [scribble maps](#) or [Felt.com](#))

## Setup

- Make sure students have access to the map and diary.

## Objectives

- Students will be able to understand why certain military targets were important to ending WWII.
- Students will be able to map out missions that Lykken and other B-17 pilots conducted.
- Students will understand how North Dakotans contributed to the war.

## Background

During World War II, the role of the U.S. Army Air Forces in Europe was crucial to the success of Allied operations. As the war progressed, air power became increasingly vital for achieving strategic objectives. The U.S. Army Air Forces conducted extensive bombing campaigns aimed at crippling German industrial capacity, disrupting supply lines, destroying military installations, and undermining enemy morale. Missions included strategic bombing raids on key cities, factories, oil fields, communications networks, and transportation hubs, which were designed to weaken Germany's ability to sustain its war efforts. The air campaign also provided vital support for ground troops during major operations, ensuring that they had air superiority over the battlefield.

One of the most iconic aircraft used during this period was the B-17 Flying Fortress. Known for its durability and advanced features, the B-17 was a

heavy bomber that could carry a substantial payload of bombs while withstanding significant damage. Crews of B-17s typically consisted of 10 men, each with a specific role, including pilots, navigators, bombardiers, gunners, and engineers. These airmen faced tremendous risks as they flew long missions deep into enemy territory, often enduring heavy flak and enemy fighter attacks.

A B-17 crew member typically needed to fly around 25 missions to complete their tour of duty. This number varied depending on the theater of operations and specific bomber groups, but 25 missions became a common benchmark. However, the high casualty rates meant that many crews were lost before reaching this number, and some airmen flew significantly more missions than the average due to extended service or the need for replacement crews. Overall, the U.S. Army Air Forces' involvement in Europe during WWII not only changed the course of the war but also set the stage for the role of air power in modern military conflicts. In 1947, Army Air Forces personnel were transferred from the Department of the Army to the Department of the Air Force and established as the United States Air Force.

Vernon K. Lykken grew up near Grafton, North Dakota, and served on a B-17 during WWII. He became a member of the U.S. Army Air Forces in October 1943 and went on to serve in Europe. While stationed in Horham, England, he flew at least 17 combat missions and one mission where his B-17 delivered food to people in the Netherlands toward the end of the war. Lykken received numerous awards for his service and was honorably discharged after the war. He spent the rest of his life in North Dakota. Lykken's diary and photo album were donated to the North Dakota State Archives to share his experiences and enrich our understanding of the past.

## Activity

1. Introduce WWII air operations, focusing on the role of airmen.
2. Discuss key terms: missions, targets, reconnaissance, and bombing campaigns.
3. Introduce the class to Staff Sgt. [Vernon K. Lykken](#). Lykken grew up outside of Grafton and graduated from Grafton High School. He was a waist gunner and a ball turret gunner on a B-17 during WWII. Lykken was stationed in Horham, England, as part of the 9th Bomb Group, 412 Squadron, 8th U.S. Army Air Forces.
4. Distribute Lykken's diary and newspaper clippings. The students will be mapping Missions 1, 3, 4, 5, 13, 14, 17 and "Miscellaneous." Each entry has information written by Lykken specific to the mission and newspaper clippings reporting the outcome of the mission.
5. Instruct students to read about each mission and locate the targets mentioned in the diary on their maps.
6. Have them mark each location and note the mission, target, and date.
7. When the students are finished mapping discuss the following:
  - Which missions stood out as most interesting? Why?
  - Why do you think the targets were chosen?
  - What impact did the U.S. Army Air Forces have on WWII?

## Extension

1. Students could measure the miles flown for each mission. The WWII pilots may not have taken the same route as the students mapped, but it could help them understand the length of the missions and the inherent danger of simply being in the air for extended periods of time.
2. Find stories of other airmen from North Dakota as part of additional research into the impact of North Dakotans on WWII.
3. Write a narrative or poem from the perspective of an airman on one of the missions that was mapped.
4. Compare a timeline of WWII and the locations of the U.S. Army to the missions and infer how these missions impacted the war.

## Reflection questions

1. In WWII, the U.S. Army Air Forces played a much larger role than in previous wars. How do you think it changed how wars were fought?
2. If you had to serve in WWII, would you have chosen to be in the U.S. Army Air Forces or a different branch of the military?