

1945 April 2-8

Mr. Wizard & the B-24

Shell Explodes In Liberator Bombing Plane; Crew Miraculously Escapes Unhurt In Blast

15TH AAF IN ITALY —(Special)—A split-second after a load of high explosive 500-pound bombs left a 15th AAF B-24 Liberator group's lead plane over the rail-yards at Graz recently, a highly explosive 155-millimeter shell whistled in through the open bomb bay, giving the pilot, 1st Lieut. Donald J. Herbert, 27, 1131 State street, La Crosse, Wis., his closest escape of the war.

The shell exploded in the ship's radio room, directly above the rear bomb bay, blowing a yard-wide hole in the fuselage and scattering fragments throughout the waist section, although most of the blast shot back through the open bays, cutting the rudder control cables, knocking out the interphone and oxygen systems, and causing a gas leak.

"It didn't worry me much when I felt the rudder controls go slack," he said. "A B-24 flies very well with just the ailerons and throttles, but I was worried about the men in the back because we couldn't raise them on the intercom. Then the engineer went back



First Lieut. Donald J. Herbert, 1131 State, pilot, surveys the damage done to the waist section of his Liberator bomber by a 155-millimeter shell on a recent mission over Graz railyards in Austria. (AAF Photo, Italy).

and stopped the gas leak and reported the men o.k. That was a relief."

Luckily, the radio operator had been working back in the waist and was just going to his radio room to send a "bombs away" report when the shell exploded. The radio room was a shambles. While the transmitter was smashed, the receiver, oddly enough, was the only thing in the room not touched, and was in perfect shape.

Now a squadron lead pilot, Herbert was flying his 30th combat mission. He arrived overseas Aug. 11, 1944, and flew his first mission on Aug. 27. He now wears the air medal with two bronze leaf clus-

ters. As a member of a group commanded by Col. Brooks A. Lawhon, Tacoma, Wash., which has been twice cited for outstanding performance in combat, he is authorized to wear the distinguished unit badge with one bronze oak leaf cluster.

A 1935 graduate of Central high school, La Crosse, he won his bachelor of science degree from La Crosse Teachers college in 1940. Before joining the AAF Oct. 15, 1942, he was a department manager for the R. H. Macy Co., New York City.

His parents, Mr. and Mrs. H. G. Kemske, live at the La Crosse address.

Military service in World War II was the highlight of many men's lives. As the daughter of one veteran once said, everything after the war was just an anti-climax for her father. For Don Herbert of La Crosse, however, it was just the beginning of an extraordinary life that made him one of the most famous people to ever come out of La Crosse, Wisconsin.

Donald J. Kemske was born in Waconia, Minnesota in 1917. His family moved to Minneapolis when he was a child.¹

In 1927, they moved to La Crosse.² His parents were Mr. and Mrs. Herbert G. Kemske, and they lived at 1131 State Street for many years.³ Donald Kemske attended the Hamilton Elementary School, Lincoln Junior High School, and graduated from Central High School.⁴ He was part of the Central High Class of 1935.⁵

After high school, Kemske enrolled at La Crosse State University where he would earn a Bachelor of Science degree in secondary education with majors in English and science.⁶

Don Kemske married Maraleita Dutton of Chicago, a student at the University of Wisconsin, in 1939.⁷

He graduated from La Crosse State University in 1940. During his college years, he was active in theatrical productions and organized a theatre group called the Pioneer Players. In the summer of his junior year in college, Kemske organized the Lawsonia Summer Theater at Green Lake, Wisconsin. Following his graduation from college, Kemske was an actor in the Oconomowoc (WI) Summer Theater where he played the leading man in a production that featured Nancy Davis as the leading lady.⁸

Rather than go into teaching, he pursued an acting career using a professional name created by taking his father's first name as his last name. Don Herbert's first job was with the Minnesota Stock Company in Minneapolis as an actor and stage manager.⁹ This touring theatre group broke up after about six months.¹⁰

Don Herbert and his wife then moved to New York.¹¹ While trying to establish himself as an actor, Herbert worked as a department manager for the R. H. Macy Co.¹² He was cast in a play at the Theater Guild on Broadway, but World War II intervened before he had a chance to perform.¹³

Herbert's next role was as a pilot in World War II. He joined the Army Air Force on October 15, 1942.¹⁴ As the pilot of a B-24 Liberator bomber in Italy for nine months, Herbert flew 56 combat missions against targets in Germany, Austria, Yugoslavia, and Hungary. He returned to the United States in May 1945.¹⁵ During his military service, he earned the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with three clusters.¹⁶ Herbert held the rank of Captain when he left the Air Force.¹⁷ He was discharged in July 1945.¹⁸

The aircraft the Don Herbert flew, the B-24 Liberator, was one of the most important and versatile planes of World War II. With its somewhat boxy profile, the Liberator lacked the sleek glamour of the B-17 Flying Fortress, and it did not handle as smoothly as the B-17.¹⁹ Because of its complex construction, the B-24 could not take as much punishment as the B-17 either. The Liberator's wings were particularly prone to collapsing if hit in a crucial spot.²⁰ But versions of the B-24 were used on every battlefield and by 15 Allied nations during the war.²¹



B-24 Liberator bomber
(Ann Arbor Library District)

The Consolidated B-24 Liberator entered the Army Air Force inventory in 1941. This bomber had a wingspan of 110 feet and was just over 67 feet long. Each of its four engines had an output of 1,200 horsepower that could give the Liberator a top speed of 303 miles per hour.²² The maximum bomb capacity was 12,800 pounds (2,000 more pounds than the B-17) for shorter missions, or 5,000 pounds of bombs for its normal range of 2,850 miles. It carried ten 50-caliber machine guns in six gun positions for defense. The 10-man crew was four officers and six enlisted men: pilot, co-pilot, navigator, bombardier, radio operator, flight engineer, and four gunners.²³

The Liberator also came in several variants for specific missions. The C-87 was a cargo transport with a crew of five, and it had 20 passenger seats, ten sleeping berths, and could carry 12,000 pounds of cargo. The C-109 flew loads of aviation fuel over the Himalayan Mountains for B-29 bombers based in China. The F-7 was a long-range photo-reconnaissance aircraft that could carry as many as twenty cameras. The AT-22 was "a flying classroom" for flight engineers. The Navy also used two single-tailfin versions: the PB4Y Privateer was patrol bomber with twelve guns, and the RY-3 was a cargo transport.²⁴

The Liberator saw extensive service in all theaters of World War II. B-24Ds were sent to Pacific Theater in April 1942. On June 11, 1942, B-24's of the Middle East Air Force conducted the first American

bombing raid in Europe by attacking oil refineries in Ploesti, Rumania. In December of the same year, B-24's made the first bombing raid on Italy. The most famous mission carried out by B-24's was the August 1, 1943 low-level raid on oil refineries in Ploesti. "Operation Tidal Wave" took off from Benghazi, Libya with 177 planes and 1,726 men. When it was over, 57 B-24's and 532 crewmen were lost. Five Congressional Medals of Honor were awarded for bravery during the mission, and three of those were posthumous awards. Liberators also flew from bases in England to bomb targets in western Europe.²⁵

B-24's dropped 635,000 tons of bombs on enemy targets and destroyed 4,200 attacking aircraft in World War II.²⁶

With 18,188 built during World War II, the B-24 and all its variations was the most produced combat plane in American history.²⁷



Restored B-24 bomber at the La Crosse Regional Airport, 2019 July 28
(Jeff Rand)

After his discharge from the Army Air Force, Don Herbert resumed his entertainment career by moving to Chicago in August 1946.²⁸ As a freelance writer and actor, Herbert appeared in several radio shows, including *Jack Armstrong* and *The Guiding Light*, as well as writing scripts for five other programs.²⁹ Then he was appointed director of the radio scriptwriting department of the Radio Institute of Chicago, which trained ex-servicemen to work in radio.³⁰

In 1949, he became radio director for the Community Fund of Chicago. Herbert created a series called *Feature Story* that won several awards.³¹

After that job, Herbert became the assistant producer of a new radio series called *It's Our Life*. Sponsored by the Chicago Industrial Health Association, it consisted of "on-the-spot" interviews with people in Chicago about their lives and health problems.³² That series won nine national radio awards for excellence in public service.³³

By 1951, Herbert had become somewhat bored with his career. He entered a period of self-introspection over his future direction. Herbert wanted to combine his talent for writing, his training as a teacher, his ability to get along with children, and his enjoyment of working with his hands into something new.³⁴

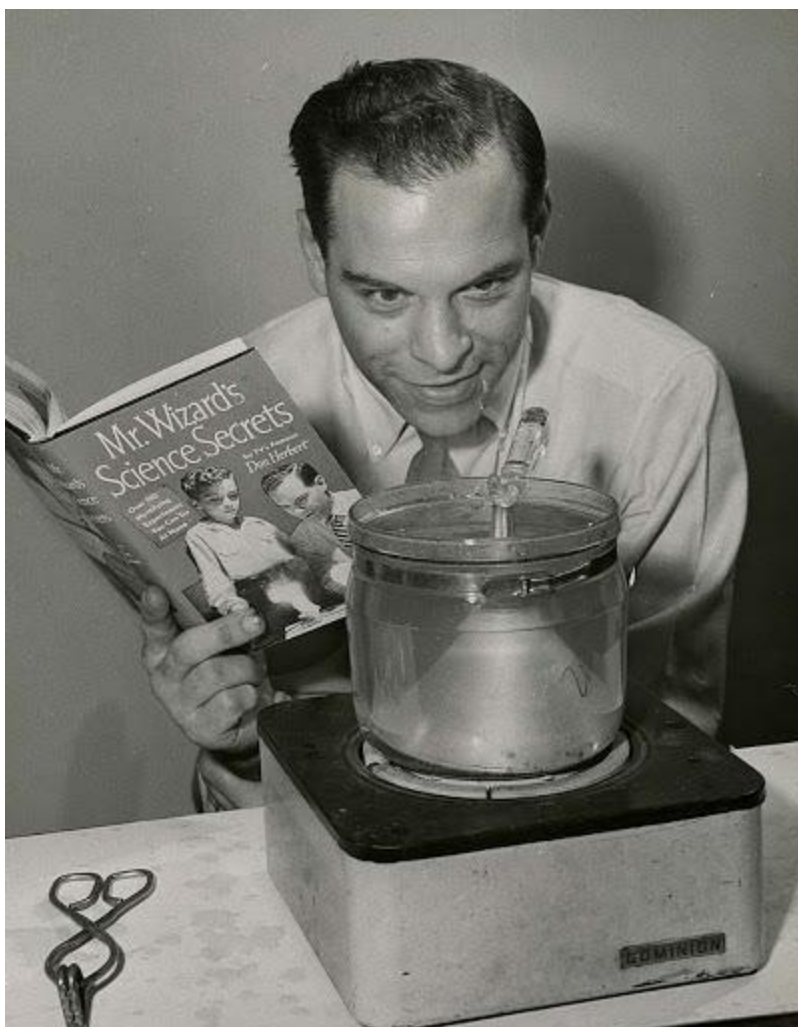
Herbert then created the television show that would become his trademark in television history. About two years earlier, he had started thinking about a way to present science as entertainment. He regarded physics experiments as magical until a person understood the scientific principles behind them. He also wanted to make science fun to learn. *Mr. Wizard* would be the science teacher not constrained by time, money, or the requirement to give grades. Herbert took a year to research and develop the idea.³⁵

Mr. Wizard debuted on March 3, 1951 and was soon carried by about 54 stations around the country.³⁶ Televised on Saturday afternoons by NBC-TV, it featured Herbert as Mr. Wizard, and a young assistant named Willy (a girl was added later), demonstrating the principles of science with experiments using common household items and other familiar objects. Critics praised it as good entertainment that was also educational.³⁷ It won four awards for its first year of episodes, and it was the third highest rated children's television show in the United States.³⁸ It had an audience of more than 850,000 children and adults. There were even more than 2,000 *Mr. Wizard* science clubs across the country, each with a charter, membership cards, "and special science helps from *Mr. Wizard*."³⁹

The Cereal Institute sponsored the show, and NBC thought it was such a public service that they provided *Mr. Wizard* to stations free of charge.⁴⁰

Two things made the show appealing to children. Herbert said having a boy and a girl there to talk to him about science made the show more of an exploration than a school lesson. His science trick would hook the kids, and then he would explain the science. Simple scientific questions were also the basis for some shows.⁴¹

National print media took notice too. The November 19, 1951 issue of *Time* magazine included an article about him.⁴² *Life* magazine also did an article about *Mr. Wizard*.⁴³ Other magazines that featured him over the years were *TV Guide*, *Newsweek*, *Science Digest*, *Boy's Life*, and *Glamour*.⁴⁴



Don Herbert as Mr. Wizard
(AMIA Conference)

Popular Mechanics Press published *Mr. Wizard's Science Secrets* in 1952 with 150 of his experiments from the show that kids could do at home.⁴⁵ Later books were *Mr. Wizard's Supermarket Science* and *Mr. Wizard's Experiments for Young Scientists*.⁴⁶

In 1954, the show won the George Foster Peabody award for the best television program for young people. The Peabody award is on the same plane as winning an Academy Award for a motion picture.⁴⁷

With *Mr. Wizard* now being carried by 81 NBC stations around the country in 1954, Herbert created another television show. This one was called *It's a Curious Thing*, and the premise was displaying an unusual object or procedure to a three-person panel who had forty-five seconds to guess what it was. The host would then provide clues until one of the people gave the correct answer. This show, hosted by the director of the Science Museum in Chicago, was broadcast in the Chicago area.⁴⁸

That same year, Herbert became the "progress reporter" for the new television series *General Electric Theater*. It was seen on the CBS-TV network on Sunday nights. Actor and future president of the United

States Ronald Reagan was the host of the program. Nicholas Ray, another La Crosse native, was the producer and director.⁴⁹

Four years after the inception of *Mr. Wizard*, local viewers finally got the chance to see it on their television screens. WKBT-TV Channel 8 started to carry the show at 6:00 p.m. in January 1955.⁵⁰ Later in the year, it was broadcast at 9:30 a.m. on Saturdays.⁵¹

Mr. Wizard was even recognized for its contribution in the Cold War. In 1955, The American Chemical Society cited it as inspiring young people to be scientists at a time when the United States was seen as lagging behind the Soviet Union in science and engineering. By now the audience for the show had grown to five million, and more than 100,000 young people were members of 5,008 Mr. Wizard Science Clubs in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Dr. Paul E. Klopsteg of the National Science Foundation said, "Don Herbert and Mr. Wizard do more to interest young people in science research today than any other medium of science promotion."⁵²

The year 1955 also saw a move from Chicago to New York for Herbert and his family. Herbert was producing his own program in Chicago and filming the *General Electric* segments in New York. Traveling between the two cities every week became too much.⁵³ He shifted his business, Prism Enterprises, to New York City, while he and his wife lived in Bronxville, New York with their three adopted children, two boys, and a girl.⁵⁴

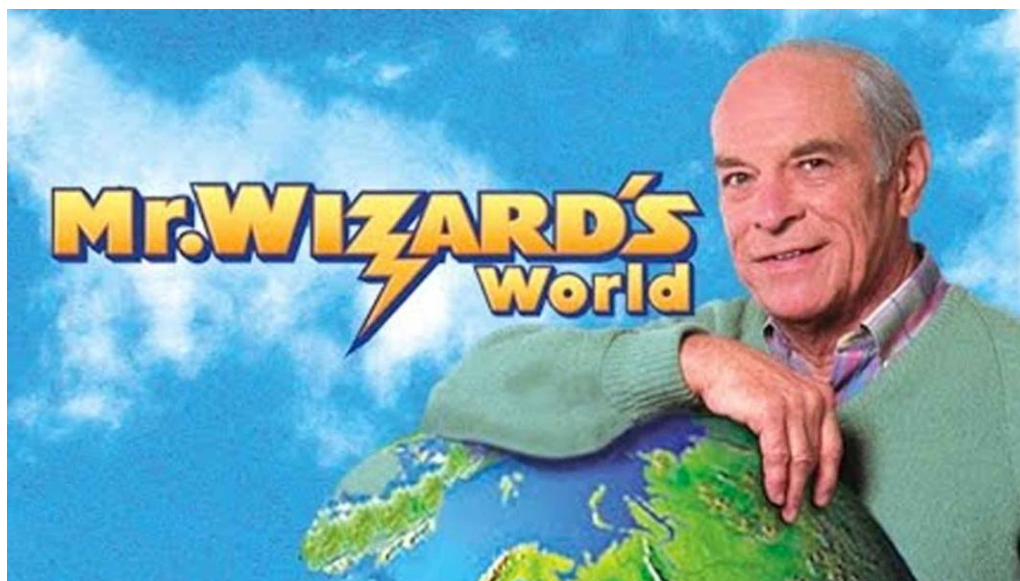
Mr. Wizard was still going strong in 1958. "Thousands of requests from teachers, parents and children" prompted Herbert to produce a monthly booklet of about 25 science experiments, including many not seen on television. The cost for nine issues was \$1.00.⁵⁵

Herbert was working seven days a week in 1958. On Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday he traveled around the country researching his stories for *General Electric Theater*. *Mr. Wizard* shows were planned, practiced, and filmed on Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.⁵⁶



Mr. Wizard
(*Smithsonian Magazine*)

Mr. Wizard ran for 14 years before being canceled in 1965. Don Herbert was a frequent guest on talk shows like *The Tonight Show* and *Late Night with David Letterman*, and then there was a one-season revival of the show in 1971. Herbert performed a second act, *Mr. Wizard's World*, that was broadcast on Nickelodeon from 1983 to 1990.⁵⁷



Don Herbert in *Mr. Wizard's World*
(MethodShop)

In 1973, Herbert married his second wife, Norma. He had two stepdaughters from that marriage. His step-son-in-law, who had grown up as an avid fan of *Mr. Wizard*, became the president of Mr. Wizard Studios.⁵⁸

Herbert helped set up a website to continue his influence on young people's lives---
<http://www.mrwizardstudios.com/> ---that is still active today. You can also see Mr. Wizard videos on YouTube.

Don Herbert died in June 2007 of multiple myeloma at his home in Bell Canyon, California.⁵⁹

Distinguished service as a bomber pilot in World War II would have been enough of a legacy, but Don Herbert did even more for his country after he left the armed forces. George Tressel of the National Science Foundation said in 1989, "Over the years, Don has been personally responsible for more people going into the sciences than any other single person in this country."⁶⁰

Don Herbert played several roles in the different acts of his life--actor, military pilot, writer, reporter, producer, performer, teacher. Each of them deserved a standing ovation.

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 La Crosse Public Library
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Sources & Notes:

¹ Dennis McLellan, "Don Herbert, 89; TV's 'Mr. Wizard' taught science to young baby boomers," *Los Angeles Times*, 2007 June 13, <https://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-me-herbert13jun13-story.html>.

² "Don Herbert To Be On Television Show," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1962 March 7, page 29.

³ "Don Herbert To Talk Before LSC Audience," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1958 June 15, page 12.

⁴ "Don Herbert Speaker On Program At College," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1958 June 20, page 49. The old Hamilton Elementary was torn down in 1961. "Goodby (sic) to Hamilton," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1961 May 24, page 25.

⁵ "Shell Explodes In Liberator Bombing Plane; Crew Miraculously Escapes Unhurt In Blast," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 April 8, page 3.

⁶ "Don Herbert, Former City Resident, Producing One Of Major TV Programs," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1952 June 22, page 4.

⁷ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1958 June 20.

⁸ "La Crosse's Own 'Mr. Wizard' Shows Science Skill Wednesday," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1952 June 15, page 16. Nancy Davis went on to become a Hollywood actress and would later marry actor, and future president of the United States, Ronald Reagan.

⁹ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1952 June 15.

¹⁰ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1958 June 20.

¹¹ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1952 June 15.

¹² *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 April 8.

¹³ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1952 June 15.

¹⁴ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 April 8.

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- ¹⁵ "Herbert Heads Script Writing Department Of Radio Institute," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1946 October 10, page 5.
- ¹⁶ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1952 June 15. Clusters on a military medal mean additional instances of earning the same award.
- ¹⁷ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1958 June 15.
- ¹⁸ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1958 June 20.
- ¹⁹ Bill Gunston, *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Combat Aircraft of World War II* (New York: Bookthrift Publications, 1978), 204.
- ²⁰ Enzo Angelucci, *The Rand McNally Encyclopedia of Military Aircraft 1914-1980* (New York: The Military Press, 1983), 291.
- ²¹ Gunston, 204.
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- ²³ Waters, 92-93.
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- ²⁶ Waters, 94.
- ²⁷ Waters, 94.
- ²⁸ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1946 October 10.
- ²⁹ "'State' Drama Star Making Good In TV Science Showings," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1951 April 29, page 19.
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- ³² "Former Local Man Accepts New Position," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1948 October 6, page 5.
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- ³⁴ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1958 June 20.
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- ³⁶ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1952 June 15.
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- ⁴⁰ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1952 June 22.
- ⁴¹ McLellan, *Los Angeles Times*, 2007 June 13.
- ⁴² "Feature Actor in Magazine," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1951 November 18, page 26.
- ⁴³ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1952 June 15.
- ⁴⁴ McLellan, *Los Angeles Times*, 2007 June 13.
- ⁴⁵ "'Mr. Wizard' Book Printed," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1952 November 30, page 7.
- ⁴⁶ McLellan, *Los Angeles Times*, 2007 June 13.
- ⁴⁷ "Peabody TV Award Presented 'Mr. Wizard,' Ex-Local Man," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1954 April 21, page 8.
- ⁴⁸ "New TV Idea Brings Added Fame To Former Local Man," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, page 11.
- ⁴⁹ "Two Former La Crosse Men To Take Part In TV Program," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1954 September 26, page 6.
- ⁵⁰ "WKBT TV Topics," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1955 January 8, page 6. WKBT-TV in La Crosse, a CBS affiliate, was the only television station broadcasting in the area at that time.
- ⁵¹ "Kids! What A Morning," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1955 October 7, page 14.
- ⁵² "Mr. Wizard Of TV Wins New Honors," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1955 March 31, page 16.
- ⁵³ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1958 June 20.
- ⁵⁴ "'Mr. Wizard' And Wife Adopt Third Child," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1956 March 3, page 5.
- ⁵⁵ "Mr. Wizard's Experiments," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1958 January 14, page 2.
- ⁵⁶ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1958 June 20.
- ⁵⁷ McLellan, *Los Angeles Times*, 2007 June 13..

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⁵⁹ McLellan, *Los Angeles Times*, 2007 June 13..

⁶⁰ McLellan, *Los Angeles Times*, 2007 June 13..

See also: Larry Dwyer, "Consolidated B-24 Liberator," *The Aviation History Online Museum*, 2015 February 17, <http://www.aviation-history.com/consolidated/b24.html>.

To see the B-24 in action and up close:

Military.com <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=osEDe2hkrH4>

Best Film Archives <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ZMfUUEjrIY>

"The Story of Willow Run" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2zukteYbGQ>

1945 silent film <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zgYfuiXGdVo>

Discovery Channel <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juTUFFeJ4Ag>

Commemorative Air Force <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OYq0CyV0g0>

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