

Will Foard of Washington, North Carolina was a replacement pilot of the 364th Fighter Squadron. After the end of WW II, Will became friends with Willis Hastings of Sherman, Texas. During WW II, Hastings was a Bombardier on a B-24 Bomber and returned home to eventually become the manager of a Textile Mill in Sherman.

Hastings had a flare for writing short stories and with the encouragement of Will Foard and others, wrote a book of short stories with the title "From Barn Burner to Bombardier".

Will Foard has given us a short story written by Hastings that was not included in the book. The story as follows:

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE, THERE'S FIRE

In order to get into the nose turret in the B-24 Bomber, you had to face its open, bi-parting doors, then reach up with both hands and grasp the metal super structure encasing the plexiglas cover, pull your weight up as if on an exercise chinning bar, draw your knees up and enter the turret feet first. Once inside and seated before the gun control column, you reach behind, close the door and latch it securely. Only then could the gunner rotate the turret from right to left. With the handles in the control column between your legs, you could now properly and quickly move the twin fifty caliber machine guns in both azimuth and zenith directions as you aimed them at an approaching enemy plane.

I had done all of this on a mission to Ploesti, Romania in June of 1944. We were flying one of the older ships in the squadron. It was equipped with a, now obsolete, consolidated hydraulic powered nose turret. This type of turret was out-dated and prone to frequent malfunctions. When we approached the target, the Americano-Romano Refinery in the oil fields of Ploesti, I, as bombardier, got out of the turret to prepare for the bombing run and operate the bomb site. The Norden bombsight was mounted on the floor of the ship's nose directly beneath the turret.

Getting out of the turret, I had a problem. As I reached back to release the door latch behind me, I found it jammed. In fact, I had to call for assistance from the navigator whose station was directly behind the turret door. If under attack by enemy planes at this time, he would replace me in the turret while I operated the bombsight. It was with some difficulty that I was finally able to make the balky latch release. By now I was seething with anger at our ground crew. That door latch problem had been reported earlier and it had been duly noted in the Pilot's log book as having been repaired.

As we turned into the bombing run, I noted that visibility was near perfect. It was an absolutely beautiful day with not a cloud in the sky except for the ominous black cloud created by the flak exploding over the target. The Germans simply "zeroed in" with radar to determine the altitude of our approaching formations and set the shells to explode in a blanket barrage at that altitude. We were compelled to fly through it if we were to have any chance of hitting the target. That day one

could see the B-24 group ahead several miles away flying into that barrage and know that in a matter of minutes, your own plane would be doing the same. It was something of a "Russian Roulette" situation and a seeming miracle if you got through unscathed. Even a near miss created shock waves which could shake the big, heavy Liberator like a bulldog shaking an unlucky cat.

After we had released our bombs and gotten away from the barrage, there was a collective sigh from ten relieved crew members as the Pilot called for a report from each station to determine casualties and damage. That day we had sailed through that maelstrom of enemy fire without a scratch. Our luck continued. We did not encounter enemy aircraft in the target area.

It was then that I returned to my station as nose turret gunner. Again I wrestled with that cranky nose turret door. Finally, ensconced on the turret seat inside, I looked with hope for an uneventful return journey back to our base. We had hit our target and escaped the flak barrage. Now things looked good -- dodged another bullet as it were, another completed mission, another notch on our lengthening record of completed missions.

My comfortable feeling about our day's work was to change sharply when I smelled smoke. I immediately called Bud, our Navigator and asked "Bud, are you smoking"? He replied, "No, I'm too damn busy plotting our position to smoke". Still smelling the smoke, I heard on the intercom, the co-pilot also report the smell of smoke. The pilot got on the horn and told all crew members that smoking was forbidden. All members of our crew smoked. A couple were heavy smokers and would sometimes get such a craving for a smoke that even at high altitude and on oxygen, they'd slip off the oxygen mask, light up on the sly for a few puffs of cigarette smoke.

Meantime I smelled smoke! It was stronger than ever! If no one was smoking a cigarette, something was on fire in the plane and my immediate reaction to that thought was, "Willis, be sure you can get out of this damn turret". At least I must have the door latch released so I can get out quickly if necessary! In my mind, there was the horrible vision of the crew bailing out of our burning plane with me trapped in that turret. When I reached back to release the latch I again found it jammed. I couldn't budge it and the smell of smoke was stronger now than ever. On intercom, I said to the navigator, "Bud, open this goddamn door right now"! Navigators are a breed apart. He replied, "Just a minute, I'm getting a reading on wind drift and am about to post our coordinates in my log". "Just a minute-Hell", I Said, "You open this damn door now or I'm going to whip your butt when I get out"! This got his attention! I could feel the vibrations of his pounding on the door and latch but it simply would not budge. The smoke was getting much worse. I'd heard the pilot order the crew's engineer to go back to the bomb bay and waist section to see if he could find the source for the pilot now smelled the smoke and was quite concerned. At this point, I called Bud and told him to crawl back through the catwalk under the flight deck and get the plane's toolbox which was stowed on the flight deck.

This he did and although he did it quickly, for he too smelled smoke, it seemed forever before he got there. The catwalk is directly beneath the flight deck in a B-24. It's access to the flight deck is a two part floor which can be opened upward for one to ascend the deck. When he opened the door, much as a curious mole might ascend to the surface of the earth to look about, Bud emerged from the catwalk to be greeted by the radio operator at his station on the flight deck with a vigorous back pounding. Bud was carrying the smoke from a smoldering spot in the back of his electrically heated flight jacket. It had an electrical short that created the fire. He'd been carrying it around on his back as it progressively smoldered to an area of about three square inches. They immediately beat out the smoldering fire and quickly informed me of the cause. My panic was over but Bud dragged the toolbox into the nose area and using a large screwdriver as a chisel, knocked the hinges off the door. I could not bear to get into the turret again on that flight. In fact, I told the pilot, "I'll never fly in this damn plane again unless a new fool-proof latch was installed on that turret door".

On landing back at the base and still livid with anger, I found some new "cuss words" I didn't know I possessed. Our ground crew caught this brunt of my anger but I couldn't stay angry for long. I really loved those guys. They were hardworking and dedicated to our safety. The nose turret door malfunction was certainly just one of those "accidents of war". I cooled off quickly and apologized for my purple rhetoric. But on subsequent missions, I always examined the turret door latch with the thoroughness of an expert lock smith before we became airborne to be sure it functioned smoothly.

VIRGINIA RADO CURNUTT

1944

Red Cross Gal
at
Leiston Air Base



1996

Frequent Traveler
with
Elder Hostel

Virginia Curnutt is the only Red Cross Girl who served at Leiston and is a member of the 357th Fighter Group Association who keeps in touch with us. After reaching the age of 77, she wrote about some of her activities. She served as an instructor of Culture Global Geography for 20 years at Tulsa Oklahoma Junior College. During those years, she was host to many foreign travelers. She spent time as a private conductor for foreign study group tours when called upon and speaks three foreign languages.

Quite a career for a "Doughnut and Coffee Gal".

Some of the "A" ground flight members of the 363rd Fighter Squadron

From left to right kneeling:
Elsworth Stevens, Don Marcotte.

Back row:

Roy C. Berridge, Roger Bender, Murray Golstein, George R. Kelly,
Claude L. Allen.

Aircraft squadron code-B6-F

Aircraft name-Speed Ball Alice

Pilot- Capt Don Bockay

Photo from Claude Allen



An early P-51 Mustang Aircraft Model B. Note the tear drop shaped metal drop tank under the wing. Between the wing and the tank, one can see the two connections consisting of the glass elbows that are intended to break when the fuel tank is dropped. These tanks each held 75 gallons of precious fuel. There were occasions when this fuel hook-up failed to draw the fuel from the drop tanks. The short pieces of rubber hose with the hose clamps gave many pilots and crew chiefs concern.

AMERICAN FIGHTER ACES CONVENTION

This convention was held 12-14 April 1996 at Mesa, Arizona with seven of the 357th Fighter Group attending.

Gray Berg who attended, provided us with a list of those sixty eight aces who came together for the convention. The 357th Fighter Group Aces were C. E. Anderson, Frank Gailer, Don Mc Gee, William O'Brien, Richard Peterson, Arval Roberson and John Sublett. A good representation from our association and you can be sure they enjoyed every moment of it.

THE COUNT

"The Count" aircraft B6-Y flown by Carroll Ofsthun, 363rd Fighter Squadron. This is a rare photo taken in a Leiston blister hangar and most likely during a 100 hour aircraft inspection when the landing gear had to be checked out with the aircraft raised off the ground.

A tripod jack can be seen at a wing jacking point just over the shoulder of the fellow on the bicycle. The other wing jacking point is over the shoulder of the fellow on the right. At the rear of the fuselage, two strands of a lifting sling are visible going up to the cable and winch on the boom of the 363rd cleotrac machine. The landing gear is almost in a full upward position with the wheel well cover about to close into the wing.

photo from John Lewelling
enlarged by Merle Olmsted

If any men in this photo can be identified, please notify Historian Merle Olmsted.



This past April, former 363rd Fighter Squadron Pilot John Bacon of Memphis was elected President of the Tennessee Chapter of the 8th Air Force Historical Society for the 1996-1998 term.

On 13 May 1996, President Bacon represented his chapter at the opening of the Mighty Eighth Air Force Heritage Museum in the Savannah, Georgia area.

A SPECIAL LUNCH

by

Joe De Shay

This past May, I was enjoying my lunch on our back patio. The menu was not the normal sandwich and since I was eating alone, I had prepared a special sandwich of "left-over's" from the Mother's Day dinner. My special sandwich was a cold roast beef sandwich. As I ate my lunch, my mind wandered back to 51 years ago at the Leiston Airbase. In fact, the date was 25 May 1945.

Our squadron had flown it's last combat mission a month prior on 25 April. The pressures of military duty had eased. The need to have every available aircraft ready the next morning for a possible "maximum effort" mission, no longer existed. Still there was flying and plenty of work to be cared for.

Things had changed. More passes were issued for off the base and programs organized to benefit the tired and war weary men. Our Group Physical Education Officer, Emil "Muscles" Moldea prepared a program in conjunction with the nearby bomber base men. The bomber flight crews wished to accumulate flying hours so they offered to show their appreciation to the "Little Friends" for their fighter protection by taking men of the non flying personel on a mission over Europe. This was called a "Victory Ride". At that time, having been 26 years old and married for 7 years, I was not one to volunteer for any wild adventures.

Men could sign up at the orderly room for this mission and somehow on the morning of 25 May 1945, I found myself at a 7:30 A.M. briefing for the mission. The B-17's came in at 9:30 A.M. and taxied on the perimeter track to a place at the "apron" of the T2 hangar of the 469th Air Service Squadron. The control tower was just across the track. The bomber crews consisted of pilot, co-pilot and navigator and four of us enlisted men were passengers at stations within the aircraft. I was situated at the starboard waist gun. Before we boarded the B-17's, we were presented with a brown bag lunch for we were to be out a long time. WHO EVER HEARD OF A "MILITARY BROWN BAG MEAL"?

We took off in very good weather flying at low altitude for this was to be a scenic mission for us. Our pilots had flown over this territory many times at high altitude with their eyes scanning the sky, not the scenery below.

For a grounded Air Force person, this was quite a treat. The vast North Sea, the shore of the Continent, the huge windmills and the tulip fields. Then the Rhine River with it's barges and castles piercing up into the sky.

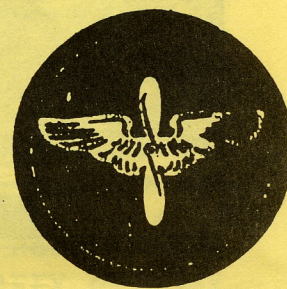
As we passed on over Germany, it became time to enjoy the brown bag lunch. A COLD ROAST BEEF SANDWICH AND AN ORANGE. How thoughtful of "Muscles" to get next to our Mess Sergeants! That roast beef never came from the Enlisted Man's Mess Kitchen. I sure enjoyed that sandwich but soon in our flight, the turbulence became very rough. It didn't

take long for me to begin to get air-sick. Being one of those ingenious G.I.'s, I didn't want to mess up some bomber crew chief's beautiful aircraft. Had to think of something fast. Just behind the port waist gun position, was a 2"x3" chute known as the shaft chute from which the gunners fed out strips of aluminum foil when they were flying over ground firing guns that were aimed by radar. The foil would foul up the radar tracking. When my situation worsened, I made a dash for the shaft chute and placed my face over it and exhausted the contents of my stomach over the farm lands of Germany. A special sandwich had been lost. The weather became so bad the flight of B-17's turned homeward. We were out on our "Victory Ride" for over 6 hours.

I do not recall how many B-17's made the mission that day or if other missions were made for the benefit of our men on other days. Today I can look back and appreciate what some thoughtful men did for us. It was a drastic change after so many days of the same duty. I hope there were many others who made the "Victory Ride" but in better weather. I never heard!



THE DESERT BOMBER



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Issued Weekly

Physical Training Program Slated

An intensified physical training and sports program was seen this week with the assignment of Lt. Emil Moldea, former Ohio State football, basketball, baseball and track star, as physical training officer for the Base.

Lt. Moldea has an interesting sports background, including a tryout with the New York Yankees and assignment to one of the former world champions' farm teams. He played tackle on the Ohio State football team and was an outstanding shot-putter in Big Ten meets.

The new physical training officer has also participated in boxing and wrestling and is a qualified instructor of "Judo," a slightly civilized form of mayhem which is incorporated in "Commando" training.

MIZPAH HOTEL



*If He Is in Town . . .
He's Staying at the
Mizpah!*

Fighter Group Party Success

The Wednesday night dance at the Tonopah USO clubhouse was given in honor of the enlisted men of the Fighter Group.

A large crowd attended and proclaimed the evening a huge success.

Highlighting the affair was a dance contest, honors going to Miss Margaret Landers of Tonopah and Cpl. Richard Eagen of "C" Squadron. The couples were so evenly matched that it was difficult for the judges to make a decision.

Music was a la juke box with all the latest recordings. Refreshments were served throughout the evening.

Another dance session is scheduled for the group Thursday, April 22, and the Post dance band will be present. Here is an opportunity for an evening of relaxation and fun (refreshments too).