A NAME FROM THE PAST

BY MERLE OLMSTED

This is the story of an amazing co-incidence involving one of our long gone comrades from the old 357th Fighter Group.

For many years I have been a collector of military memorabilia, primarily in two categories - aviation, and 19th century U.S. Army. Recently a friend, and fellow collector told me he had purchased a small batch of WW2 items and showed me some 8x10 photos from that collection. It was instantly obvious that the P-39s in the photos were from my own 362nd Squadron, during the Hayward days in that summer of 1943. When I told him this, he said "well, maybe you know the original owner of the medals". When he brought them out, the name "2nd Lt. Alvin F. Pyeatt III" leaped out at me from the back of an Air Medal. I was astounded that after 55 years these would return to a 362nd sqdn member.

Included, besides the named Air Medal, was an unnamed Purple Heart, 2 pilot wings, an officers cap badge, a bracelet made from a bent pilots wing, some odds and ends of insignia, and two bicycling medals, one named to Pyeatt as 6th place winner in a 25 mile race.

Perhaps the most interesting of all was Al's SHORT SNORTER, on a Canadian two dollar bill. There are about a dozen names i cannot decipher, but the following are clear: Leonard Carson, MSgt McGinnis, Joe Broadhead, Doc Snedden, Cal Williams, Fletcher Adams, Ken Hagan, Robt Becker, Brown (which one?), Hank Beal, K. Vogel, Al Lichter, Elmer Rydberg, Bob Wallen, Dave Perron, Don rice, Fred Gilbreth, and 362 comdr, Hubert Egnes. Except for McGinnis, Snedden (flt Surgeon) and Gilbreth (eng. officer), all were part of the original pilot cadre of the sqdn.

Of these, Adams, Rydberg, Perron and Egnes, were all killed in action. Of the rest, those still with us are: Al Lichter, Cal Williams, Doc Snedden, Fred Gilbreth, and Don Rice. McGinnis status is unk.

How did these relics come on the collector's market? Usually they come out of estate sales when the wife, or parents are gone, or sometimes from the children who have no interest in the matter. These showed up in central California, but I have no other info. Pyeatt was from Bakersfield.

On the 16th of March, 1944, Pyeatt was flying wing to John England on an escort mission to Lechfield, when they were attack by three Me 109s. By the time England has extricated himself, he had lost sight of Pyeatt and was not able to riase him on the R/T. The story that went around was that, having been shot down, he died in a German hospital. His Missing Aircrew report does not confirm that since there are no German documents with it. Previous to this he had shot down two German aircraft.

The Air Medal and Purple Heart were probably awarded postumously to his parents, or wife (I do not know if Pyeatt was married or not). Normally when medals were awarded posthumously, they were engraved by the army with the man's name. The Air Medal is so named, but for reasons unknown, the Purple Heart is not. I intend to have is engraved to match the Air Medal.

I have added some photographs of Al and intend to frame the collection as a small tribute to one of our own who died in the line of duty.

Merle Olmsted, Jan 1999

Tom Beemer has left our ranks and gone on to the "big hangar in the sky'. Tom was a special person among us, not because of the number of enemy aircraft he shot down, which was none. Not because of a lengthy combat tour - it was short. Not even because of his time as POW, and his injuries, other 357th men went thru that. Tom was special not only because he was gentleman, but because of the great effort and personal expense he devoted to putting the story of the 357th FG on video tape, which resulted in MUSTANG MAGIC.

Tom Beemer was one of the original cadre of 25 pilots in the 362nd sqdn. Like all the group pilots he trained hard, learned to fly the cantakerous P-39, and loved it, and in the fall of '43, found himself in England ready to become a real fighter pilot and smite the enemy. The Group became operational on 11 February, 1944, and on the 25th of February, 2nd Lt Tom Beemer was shot down by a B-17 gunner. His element leader Joe Broadhead, with Tom following had made the mistake of pointing their noses at a box of B-17s while chasing an Me 109. Gil O'Brien followed them thru and reported "every turret on the B-17s was smoking and winking at me". Beemer bailed out at a very low altitude and his chute was still streaming when he went thru the trees. With badly injured legs, he spent the next 11 months in POW hospitals. In January 1945, along with many other badly injured POWs, he was repatriated, and wrote to his parents that he was free, in Switzerland, and headed for a boarding of the Swedish liner GRIPSHOLM, which would bring him home.

His war was not over however, as he suffered from his injured legs and also the emotional trauma of the experience for many years. In the spring of 1990 our Joe DeShay located him and he joined the Group. In the ensuing years he told me that re-joining the Group had finally allowed him to overcome his emotional problems. I would like to quote from a lengthy letter he wrote to DeShays, with a message for his crew chief: "Feb 25th, about 4 A.M. he turned over a plane to me and never got it back. Maybe he's still waiting! The message: "Sorry about the plane Sarge, what a waste, it was brand new and you said you had not had time to bore-sight the guns. No problem there, I fired a long burst at an Me 110 after Broadhead broke away - right on! But the blower needed work, it conked out just before I did. But forget the plane Sarge, it has holes in it. You don't have another one do you?" (we have not been able to identify the crew chief since, altho we know the tail number, we do'nt know the sqdn. code on the P-51)

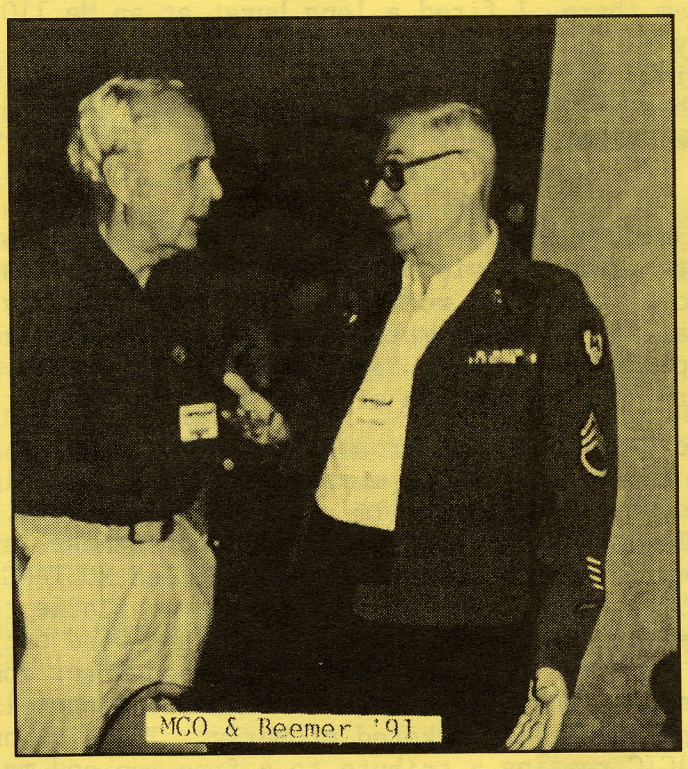
Soon after re-joining us, Tom contacted me as Group historian, and said he would like my help to produce a video tape history of the Group. He was well qualified to do it as he had worked in the movie industry in Hollywood for 40 years as an artist and film maker. There had been a previous tape, an excellent video produced by Peter Peterson Obee O'Brien et al, but it was not so much a history, as a narration of their experiencies.

With the help of many people, our pilots supplying their gun camera film, the USAAF archives, and our associate member Art Vance providing his lovely P-51 for air and ground scenes, the film was finished in 1994. Altho I was his chief "gofer", Tom did all the work and all the expense, except for I believe, a little help from other 362nd types. Titled MUSTANG MAGIC, THE CHRONICLES OF THE 357th FIGHTER GROUP, it was made available to members of the Group and a few were sold to whoever we could get the word out to. Tom had battled Parkinson's disease for many years, and soon after completion his illness had progressed to the point where he could no longer live a normal life. Hence the tape was never marketed properly. Tom died on 12 January, 1999, but MUSTANG MAGIC remains a tribute to a fine man and my friend.

Merle Olmsted, Historian, 357th Fighter Group.



Nov, 1943. L-R, Roberson, Don Rice, Al Pyeatt, Tom Beemer, Gil O'Brien, at Jack Dempsey's resturant in New York.



photos
Olmsted

We are saddened when our 357th F.G. members slip away from us. Memories of some fine men! Recently when Tom Beemer passed away, I asked Merle Olmsted who became a close friend of Tom's, to write up an article.

EMERGENCY LANDING INCIDENT

During the return trip to England following a raid, a crippled B-17 was escorted from Germany to England by a small flight of P-51 Mustangs. Captain Clarence E. Anderson was the flight leader of these 357th Fighter Group Mustangs. He states that the Fortress was badly shot up nose to tail with one of the propellers feathered and severe damage to the tail gunner's position. The pilot of the bomber nursed the aircraft to England where he proceeded to make an emergency landing at the first air base in sight.

As the pilot lined up on final approach, Captain Anderson realized the crippled bomber's radio was out for he could see a flight of B-17s returning from the mission approaching a landing from the opposite end of the runway. Realizing the tower control had not spotted the crippled B-17, he buzzed the lead B-17 at the other end of the runway to get the pilot's attention. Anderson then made a 180 degree turn, out in front of the B-17 he had just buzzed and raced back towards the crippled bomber with his wings waggling.

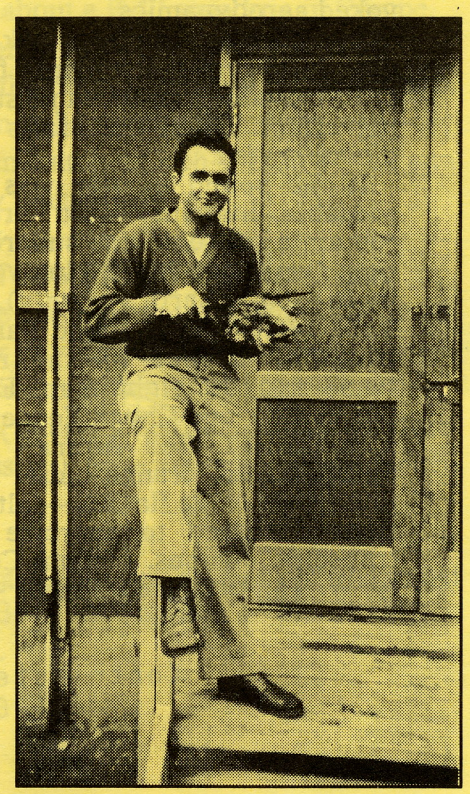
This action caught the attention of the ground personnel who waved off the bombers approaching from the opposite direction, allowing the crippled B-17 to belly in. Captain Anderson, now a retired USAF Colonel, does not remember the exact date this event took place, but thinks it happened between 5 October 1944 and 15 January 1945. Anyone who remembers this event can contact me at the address and phone number listed below. Colonel Anderson and I are curious to find out what happened to the crew of this crashed B-17.

Sincerely yours,
Scott Richardson
4113 W. Main Apt. E
Norman, OK 73072 405-360-6518

This article barrowed from the 8th A.F. NEWS.

Luigi Valpi

362nd Fighter Squadron
Mess Sergeant



EDITORIAL: THE MEMPHIS (TN) COMMERCIAL APPEAL OCTOBER 13, 1997

Barrier breaker

ENGLAND'S Geoffrey de Havilland Jr. was fearless and skillful. But when he tried to make his experimental Swallow jet exceed the speed of sound, the plane crumbled and his body washed up in the Thames — grim evidence that no man or flying machine could break what many scientists considered a brick-solid "sound barrier."

De Havilland was not the first flier to die on a battlefield of physics known as the transonic zone — the range approaching supersonic (or "Mach") speed. World War II pilots who put their planes into a steep dive entered a land where malevolent magic revoked aerodynamics.

Inexplicably, planes shook like dice in a cup. Instruments froze or, if movable, produced no steering effect. Often the crafts just disintegrated.

If the sound barrier was impassable, humans would forever remain a subsonic and suborbital race (you need Mach-plus velocity to escape Earth's gravity). But some believed the sound barrier could be broken by the right plane and the right man. Enter the Bell X1 and Chuck Yeager.

In the X1, Bell Aircraft produced a little orange bullet with thin wings and a flat tail — alterations designed to exorcise the transonic demons. Lincoln County, W. Va., produced Yeager — at 24 a combat ace assigned to California's Muroc Air Force Base.

Fifty years ago this week (Oct. 14, to be precise), Yeager scooted into the X1's cockpit, punched in his rockets, bounced around in the near-Mach dice cup — and left the sound barrier in shards.

"All at once the stars and the moon came out," Tom Wolfe wrote in his book *The Right Stuff,* "and the sun shone at the same time. He (Yeager) was simply looking out into space."

The feat was not a literal prerequisite to space travel: In 1961, a Yeager-less Soviet Union would blast Yuri Gagarin into orbit. But the X1 flight tore down a wall of doubt, announcing with the lustiness of a sonic boom that the human spirit could soar without boundary.

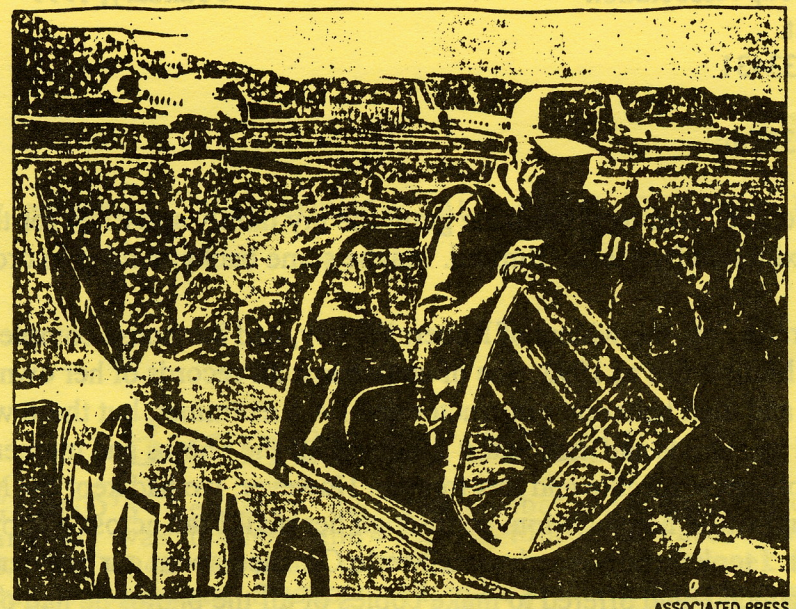
Steppingstones generally lead someplace. Orville Wright was still alive when Yeager outran sound. Yeager was still jockeying jets when Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. Armstrong may live to see a human stand on Mars.

And beyond Mars, there will always be barriers.

"Think you can fly this thing?" an engineer may ask 100 years hence, and a young pilot, chasing light speed, may think of the ancient X1.

If the new starship has a dashboard, he will likely place a plastic Chuck Yeager there.

Contributed by John Bacon
(363rd)



ASSOCIATED PRESS

GEN. CHUCK YEAGER lowers himself into a vintage P-51 fighter to lead a flight of his WWII fighter group over the Air Force Academy cemetery in Colorado Springs on Friday.

Pilot Yeager rejoins WWII fighter group

■ The man who first broke the sound barrier flew with his companions in a dedication ceremony at the Air Force Academy

By John Diedrich
KNIGHT RIDDER NEWSPAPERS

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. — Chuck Yeager, considered by some to be the greatest pilot in the world, didn't see a plane firsthand until he joined the Army Air Corps at age 18.

But that didn't stop the West Virginian from becoming a legend in the cockpit as a World War II ace and as the first person to break the sound barrier.

"You don't need to look at a plane for a year to be a good pilot. You need good eye-hand coordination, visual acuity and aggressiveness," the 75-year-old Yeager said from his home in the Sierra Nevada.

Yeager had all those skills, and he used them to make history during his 55 years flying for the Air Force.

He ended his illustrious career, most recently as a test pilot consultant, last October.

But he's not finished with flying.

In fact, Yeager traveled to Colorado Springs on Friday to fly a P-51 Mustang, which he considers to have been "the most aerodynamically perfect pursuit plane in existence" during World War II.

He joined other veterans of the 357th Fighter Group — some of the hottest World War II fighter pilots — to fly P-51s over the Air Force Academy cemetery.

The flight was part of a dedication ceremony for the 357th.

For Yeager, it was a chance to revisit the men with whom he shared the experiences of war. In just over a year, the 357th became the first group to roll up 600 victories.

It had 42 aces — pilots with five or more victories — the most among fighter groups, said Merle Olmsted, the group's historian.

Yeager was one of those legends. He shot down 13 enemy aircraft during the war, including five in one day.

A day after his first kill, he was shot down over Nazi-occupied France. But he escaped capture and made his way to freedom with the help of the French Resistance.

Yeager has long been considered a pilot's pilot. He is among the pilots featured in Tom Wolfe's book, "The Right Stuff," which was made into the 1983 movie of the same name.

Yeager, who was played in the movie by Sam Shepard, made a cameo appearance as Fred the bartender at Pancho's Happy Bottom Riding Club.

"The Right Stuff" included Yeager's early years as a test pilot at what is now Edwards Air Force Base in the Mojave Desert of Southern California.

He flew and evaluated scores of wildly different aircraft, narrowly escaping death several times.

Among the planes, the X-1 rocket plane was in a class by itself.

On Oct. 14, 1947, Yeager became

the first person to break the sound barrier, flying 700 mph in the X-1. Yeager broke the barrier despite falling and breaking some ribs the night before.

Yeager plays down the feat as well as the dangers of being a test pilot.

"It is just a job, and you try to come out of it alive," he said.

Yeager would later fly at almost twice the speed of sound. He also flew in Vietnam, supervised the Air Force safety program and received a slew of medals.

He retired March 1, 1975, as a brigadier general but continued to fly and consult at Edwards for another 22 years.

On the 50th anniversary of his sound-barrier flight, Yeager broke the barrier again, this time in an F-15. Then he left the Air Force for good.

"I'm 75. It's a lot of night work," he said of being a test pilot. "That's for young men."

Yeager now spends his time hunting and fishing with friends in Wyoming, Montana and Colorado, where his son lives.

He also flies Mustangs in air shows, though he doesn't own a plane.

He visited Colorado Springs on a number of occasions, mostly to speak to the academy cadets. His advice to them: Love the plane or don't fly.

"You gotta know your equipment and know how to use it. If you like your job, you will be good at it," he said.

Yeager is disturbed by the recent exodus of fighter pilots from the Air Force. They are leaving for higher pay with commercial airlines and to spend more time with families.

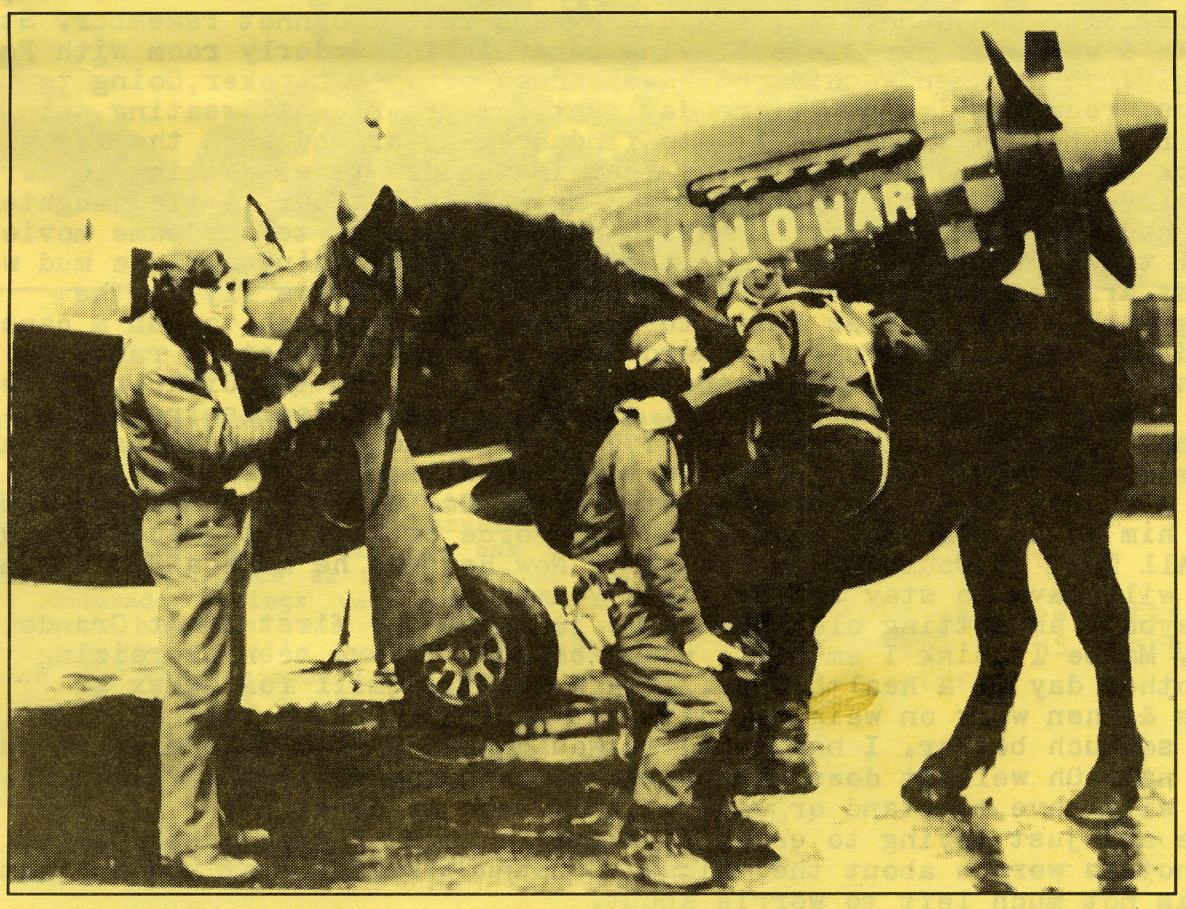
"The Air Force treats its fighter pilots like second-class citizens," he said.

"You can't expect these guys to be living in Italy, away nine months and living on peanuts. The Air Force has to face that. I think they are coming around."

In his later years, Yeager's face became familiar to a new generation through the car-battery TV commercials he made. But he's still known primarily as the man who broke the sound barrier.

Even today, he is swamped on city streets by people eager to meet the man who smashed a hole in the sky.

"I can walk down the street of San Francisco and every kid, 10 to 18, comes up to me like they personally know me," he said.

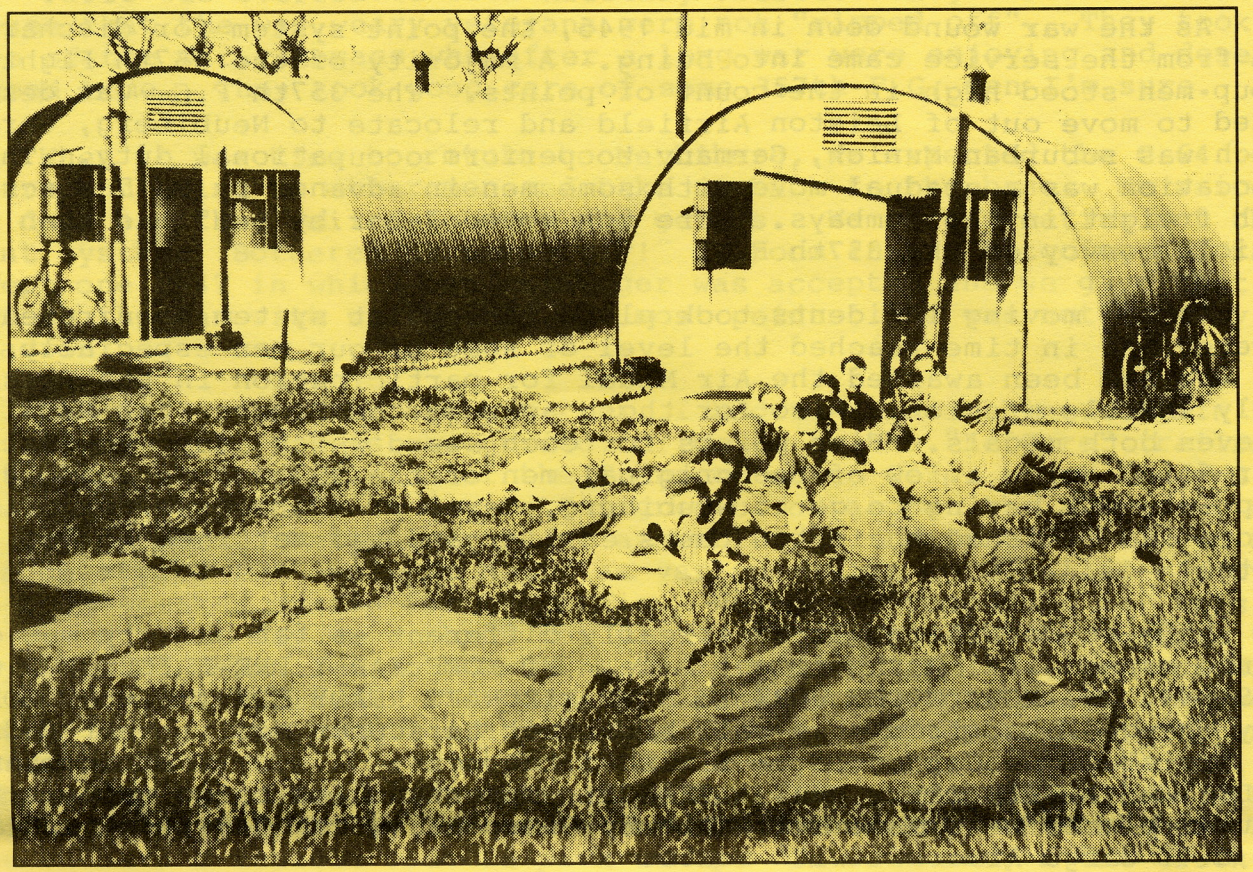


" HORSE PLAY "

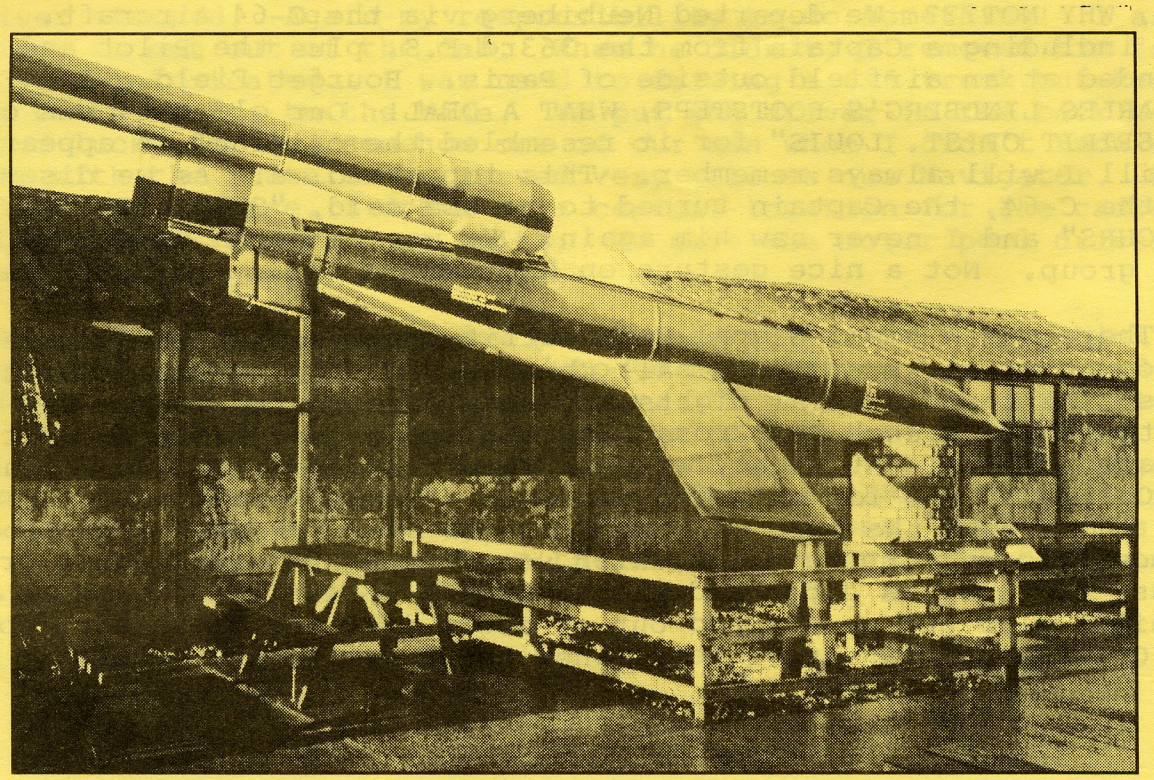
Pilots Left to Right: Winks, Mc Gee, Hatala
Mc Gee photo via Olmsted

AIRING THE BEDDING!

362nd Orderly Room troops at the Nissen Hut billeting area.
Jim Frary photo via Merle Olmsted



A photo of a real "Buzz Bomb" taken by Tony Stirpe (1060 M.P. Co)at an Air Museum in England.



THE LONGEST THREE DAY PASS

As the war wound down in mid 1945, the point system for discharging men from the service came into being. A majority of the 357th Fighter Group men stood high in the count of points. The 357th F.G. was designated to move out of Leiston Airfield and relocate to Neubiberg, Germany which was suburban Munich, Germany to perform occupational duty. The relocation was a gradual move with some men in advance by B-17 aircraft with freight in the bombays. More men moved later by B-17 and then the vehicle convoy of the 357th F.G.

As the moving incidents took place, the point system requirements lowered and in time reached the level of some of our men especially anyone who had been awarded the Air Medal for participation in the Russia-Italy shuttle mission. Also for those awarded the Bronze Star Medal or even both medals. Five points for each award which added up fast. Therefore, quite a few of the original men of the 357th F.G. left Leiston on points not having to go to Neubiberg, Germany. Of course our original pilots had finished their two tours earlier and had returned to the states.

Life at Neubiberg was drastically different as far as duty was concerned especially on the flight line. NO MORE EARLY PRE-FLIGHT FOR COMBAT MISSIONS. NO MORE NIGHT WORK TO HAVE AIRCRAFT READY FOR THE NEXT MORNING. Duty changed also from mess hall breakfast to supper meal. What didn't get finished one day could be finished the next. A very drastic change. SUNDAY WAS A FREE DAY. WHAT A CHANGE! Opportunities to go on pass to popular places were made available by Group using the C-64 Aircraft and the C-47 Cargo Aircraft with seats.

GO ON PASS WITH ME!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

I had an opportunity on 2 September 1945 to go to Paris. The Riviera and Amsterdam were also 3 day R & R locations at the time. Since I claim to be of French Ancestory and had two years of High School French Language, WHY NOT??? We departed Neubiberg via the C-64 Aircraft. Sixteen of us including a Captain from the 363rd F.S. plus the Pilot and Co-pilot. We landed at an airfield outside of Paris. Bourget Field. I'M FOLLOWING IN CHARLES LINDBERG'S FOOTSTEPS, WHAT A DEAL! Our old C-64 was called the "SPIRIT OF ST. LOUIS" for it resembled the original in appearance. A thrill I will always remember. This impressed me! As we disembarked from the C-64, the Captain turned to me and said, "SERGEANT, THEY ARE ALL YOURS" and I never saw him again. He was to be in charge of our small group. Not a nice gesture on his part.

There was a small Signal Corp outfit stationed at the airfield with new wooden barracks and mess hall that served good meals. A blessing for us. We spent several nights and some days in the city. Had an excellent tour by a French Red Cross Lady who spoke good English. Hit all the famous spots. At night, we spent two evenings at a night club called the "Coliseum" and for enlisted men only. There were continuous vaudeville shows with the best of acts from all over Europe. Some food served but mostly one thing to drink which was Champagne. Reasonably priced! As easy to enjoy as cider and plenty of it! When it was time to leave the night club and we stepped out of doors into the fresh air, someone "PUT OUT THE LIGHTS" and I never knew how I got to the hotel.

Paris was overloaded with Military Police. They were on a mission to see that the war weary veterans were not "ripped off". They took care of the war veterans who after a long war were enjoying and deserving a good time. They took good care of some 357th F.G. men I'm sure.

When it was time to return to Neubiberg, we expected the C-64 to return and bring in other men and take us back to the base. We waited for days and they failed to come and get us. We were sweating out the point system. Bothered us immensely! No room in any outgoing aircraft except one C-47 in which one passenger was accepted and we gave that seat to the man with us who had the most points. He was not from my squadron.

Since I was of the highest rank, I had to do something. Again I prevailed on the M.P.'s who guided our cadre to the "Le Gere" (railroad station) under supervision of the Transportation Corp. They had a G.I. train to Munich the next day so I signed us on as per the alternate of our G.I. orders. We got our cadre assembled at "Le Gere" on time. Stood in a courtyard for over two hours as various units were called off over the loud speaker system for the train. We became concerned for this was our seventh day on a three day pass. We of the 357th F.G. were the very last to be called to board the train but we made it. We were all out of money and tired. Old passenger cars with wooden seats like we endured on our troup trains across the states. G.I. portable kitchens serving food by mess trays at locations along the route. Good chow!! A three day and three night train ride arriving at Munich at 2:30 A.M. Again I asked the M.P.'s for assistance in contacting our Neubiberg Air Base to have a vehicle come to pick us up. In due time, a 6x6 truck arrived with the usual canvas cover over the back.

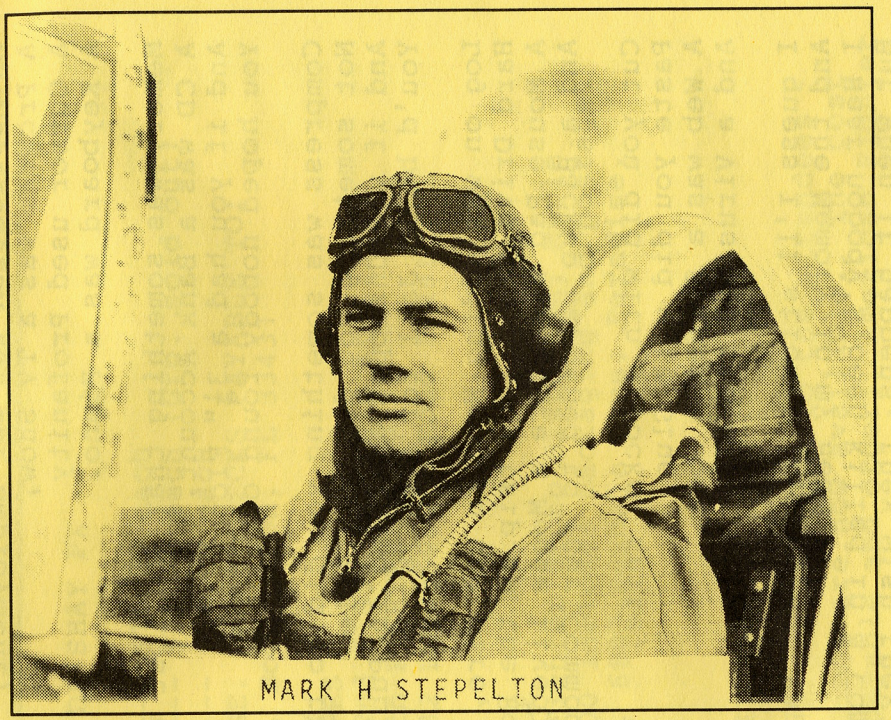
As we started for the airbase, the lone driver drove at excessive speeds and took corners dangerously. My fellow airmen became very upset. So much that they beat on the cab of the truck with their fists until the driver stopped. Again my responsibility to do something! I asked the driver to get out of the cab. When he didn't, I removed him for he was very intoxicated. I was used to driving a 6x6 truck but had no idea as to the route to the base. We put the driver in the back of the truck and lucky for me, somehow one of our men whom I didn't know was familiar with the route so he served very well as our Navigator. When we entered our airbase, I drove to a central location for the cadre consisted of men from various units. We gave the motor pool driver his truck and let him go his MERRY WAY.

Ten days away on a three day pass. Was it worth it?? I think so for many years later in life, I had to go to Paris on business and I never forgot the kind French lady's tour. It was helpful. Scuttle-butt had it that the C-64 Aircraft did not come to Paris to pick us up for a wing tip had been damaged and being an odd craft, it took a longer time to obtain a new wing tip. Ten days after returning to the airbase, my G.I. orders along with 84 other 357th F.G. men was "cut" for us to depart for home and discharge from the military service on the point system. IT HAD BEEN A LONG WAR!

Joe DeShay



C.E. "BUD" ANDERSON



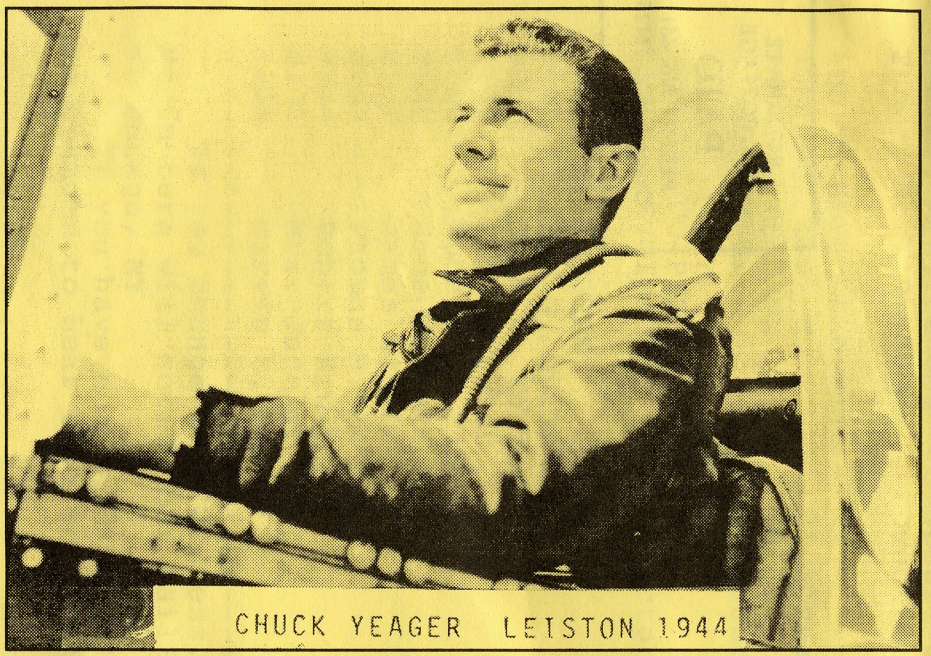
MARK H STEPELTON



WILLIAM B OVERSTREET



CHARLES K PETERS



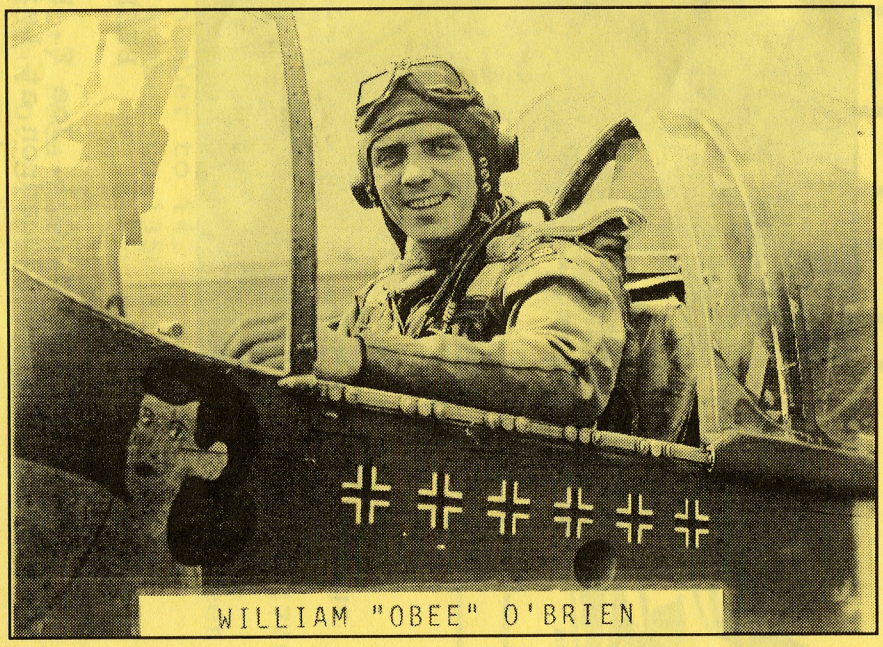
CHUCK YEAGER LEISTON 1944



ERNEST C TIEDE



DONALD H BOCHKAY



WILLIAM "OBEE" O'BRIEN



BEER PARTY

Officer is Lt. Col. Joe E. Broadhead, Squadron Commander. Others, the 362nd Fighter Squadron at Leiston Airfield.
Photo - Merle Olmsted

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