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Bob Carter

Stories 36 thru 40)

OPTION # 2

(O.K. to Check-out but not to be copied)

Dear Andrea and Jason,

July 5, 1998

36

The next chapter in my World War 2 Odyssey "My First Mission".

After arriving at Knettishall, England, Captain McNeeley disappeared and the rest of us crew members sat around keeping very quiet. In the war, the Germans were being hard pressed. The Soviets were advancing from the east, and the English and U.S. troops had liberated a significant part of France and were pushing on from the south and the west. The Germans were making a desperate bid in trying to break through the allied lines to the south. They had forced a withdrawal of the allied forces creating a bulge in the line separating the opposing forces. Guess that is why it was called the battle of the Bulge. Even if the Germans had broken through the allied lines, it probably would not have changed the eventual outcome of the war, but it would have caused heavy loss of life to the allied forces, and probably lengthened the war. In any event, it was a very serious and frightening situation.

The tactical part of the Army Air Corps was hard pressed to provide enough aid for this serious situation. They were strafing truck convoys, freight trains and any other likely targets they could find. The next step was to add the support of strategic part of the Army Air Corps. So the 8th. Air Force was assigned to bomb targets behind the German lines to disrupt their supplying their troops at the front lines. I was ordered to fly as co-pilot in a crew whose co-pilot was ill.

This was a maximum effort, so every flyable plane was prepared for this effort. Practically all of the planes in the 388th Bomb Group were B17Gs. For this mission a B17F was made available, and that is the plane we were assigned. One of the distinguishing features of the B17G was the chin turret with twin 50 caliber machine guns. The B17F had a single 50 caliber sticking out the nose. Another difference not noticeable to the casual observer was the prop pitch control. The "F" had a hydraulic prop pitch control system, and the "G" had an electric control system. The electric system gave a more precise control, or the "F" that we flew had some mechanical problems in it. We flew "F" models in training, and I don't remember any significant problems in adjusting the prop pitch.

I don't remember the pilots name, but there is no unpleasant memories about him. I do remember trying to balance the RPMs on those four engines. When all the engines RPMs are synchronized, there is a steady humming sound. When they are not synched, there is a repetitive "thrumming" sound that slowly drives you out of your mind. One of the co-pilots chores is to alter the prop pitch controls to bring the RPMs into Synch. I remember the four prop pitch control knobs were not in a nice neat line, but one was forward, another was back, and two were someplace in between. The damned noise still sounded. The pilot and the engineer both tried with no better luck than I had.

Another memory of my first mission was that this was the first time I had ever encountered anyone trying to cause me great bodily harm. A bloody nose in a school yard scuffle was the only prior damage to my body, caused by others, that I can recall. With no prior experience in order to judge the intensity of the action against us, I came to the conclusion

that we were damned lucky to still be alive after bombs away. Fortunately after the mission I kept my mouth shut. It was then I heard the other crews talking about what a break it was to have such an easy mission. That did not give me a warm fuzzy feeling about my future.

One advantage to that first mission was that it was short - perhaps 3 1/2 to 4 hours. There were some crews that flew two missions that day. One way to get in the required 35 and go home.

The next two missions we encountered far greater animosity than the first mission. Fortunately I was not aware of all of this until we were back on the ground in jolly old England, but more of that another time.

I am copying Scott and Jack on these letters so that they can keep me honest. No telling where my memories might lead me without some control

Love.

Grandpa,

CC:

Jo and family
Lynn and Jeanette
Scott and Lillian Payne
Jack and Virginia Rutherford

Dear Scott and Lillian,

May 23, 1998

37

The following was sent to my children and grandchildren, so forgive the primer on WW II airplanes. Any inaccuracies are mine and due to a fading memory of events half a century in the past.

We took our dog to the Vet's Thursday for the removal of a small growth on top of her head, teeth cleaning and toe nail clipping. At the pre-op discussion with the Vet she stated that the growth looked benign. However when we went to pick her up in the evening, the Vet said that when she started to excise the growth, it looked more threatening, so she cut out quite a bit of the surrounding tissue. Results on the biopsy of the growth will not be available until Monday, so we are keeping our fingers crossed. She missed breakfast that morning, and I think from her perspective that was the most traumatic event of all. The news following the surgery was the most traumatic event for Nelle and I.

There appears to be more and more items in the papers about "The Good War". I agreed with most of Carl Heintze's article "History's about to repeat itself", but he did not cover one aspect of the 2nd World War. The United States was attacked on December 7, 1941, and there has been no conflict since then where we were attacked. The feelings of everyone I knew and talked to was that we should fight, and all those of an eligible age felt that they wanted to participate. The thought of our land being overrun by the enemy was intolerable. There hasn't been the preponderance of support for the U.S. participation in any conflict since then. Heintze seems to ignore that aspect. Heintz and I do seem to agree with General Sherman that "War is Hell".

I am enclosing a copy of the Heintz article and an article by Mark Springer. I am also adding another one of my remembrances of that era. Hope I am not repeating myself. Please yell if I start to do that. This seems to be a common practice with us old timers.

This event occurred on one of my early missions. After the bombs had been dropped, the lead plane kept the power setting the same, but trimmed the plane for a slight nose down attitude. Since we were in group formation, all of us followed along with the group lead plane. The power setting and the planes attitude resulted in an increase in airspeed, and I think that all of us agreed that this was goodness. As we approached the channel, we headed toward a large bank of dark cumulus clouds. I don't know why we maintained the group formation, but into these clouds went the entire 388th Bomb Group (about 30 planes - the full complement would have been 36 (12 per squadron and three squadrons), but I don't remember us ever being at full complement). There was quite a bit of turbulence, and visibility went to hell. We had trouble seeing the plane on which we were flying wing, much less trying to fly in formation with it. As I recall Major Dennis was the pilot, and since we were flying squadron deputy lead (on the right wing of the squadron lead plane) Dennis peeled off to the right and dove. How some 30 airplanes in such close proximity avoided smashing into each other boggles my mind.

We broke through the clouds at about a thousand feet, and descended another 500 to 600 feet so that anyone else coming out of the clouds could see us before touching us. We were somewhere over Holland, and to the west we could see the water of the Channel. We

could also see lines rising from the ground into the clouds. These lines were cables holding barrage balloons hidden in the clouds - hazardous to the health of airplanes trying to fly through this. We were circling to give the navigator a chance to determine where we were, and to direct us around the obstacle to the west. There was a Dutch farmer working in a field below us, and he was waving at us and directing us to head southwest. We did this and were soon over the Channel heading to England.

Major Dennis was evidently a frustrated fighter jock, because on our trip over the Channel he was flying very close to the water. When we were flying over a trough in the water it appeared as if we were heading directly into the next swell, but Dennis would pull the column back to bounce over the swell and then push the column forward to go down into the next trough. The wings of the plane were flapping like a bird with these gyrations. (note the next to the last sentence of this paragraph). After we landed at Knettishall, I looked at the belly of the plane and it was white from salt of the ocean water spray. I had also noted a small hole in the top of the right wing while we were flying. Looking at the same area under the wing there was a much larger hole. We later heard that the main spar supporting the right wing had been hit and damaged. Someone was watching over us that day to keep that wing attached to the rest of the plane, and I hope that Dutchman knows how much he was appreciated in being a friend in that unfriendly area.

Best regards,

Bob, Nellie and all

#38

Dear Andrea and Jason

Aug. 21, 1998

Another chapter in my World War 2 Odyssey - "A Pair"

The time was approximately January or February 1945. I was assigned to a crew that was close to completing their tour of 35 missions, and would soon be rotated back to the states. I have a feeling that the co-pilot had been killed, but am not sure of that.

The locations of the German Antiaircraft installations were quite well known and plotted. The route that the 8th Air Force bomber stream followed very carefully avoided flying over these installations. In most cases (In my experience - all) flak was avoided until we flew over the target area. It was a very impressive sight to see bomb group after bomb group as far as the eye could see all in a line streaming toward the German bomb target.

On this particular mission things were progressing without incident. We crossed the channel, flew over part of liberated France, and then crossed the battle lines, and into the air space over the German occupied territory. A short while later the intercom sprang to life with a lot of chatter about being attacked by bandits from the rear. All of the gunners on our plane were calling out the position of the attacking planes that they could see to alert the other gunners where to look for targets. It was a mixture of ME109s and FW190s, and they flew through our formation very close to our planes. I heard that one of our 17's had been damaged and was dropping out of formation. Off to my right I saw a FW190 fly past, and I could see the head of the pilot pointed in our direction. I had the feeling that we were looking at each other, but I do know I was looking at him. They made just one pass, and then took off. Our friendly little buddies in their P51 Mustangs were probably galloping up for our rescue.

Recently I have been reading accounts of the bombing missions over Germany, and they would be described as German fighters flying through our formations as the German flak bursts were popping all around. This did not correspond to my experience. The fighter jocks, friend and foe, were a wild and crazy bunch, but they were certainly no dummies. They made a point of staying away from our bombers when we were being shot at by the antiaircraft guns.

I flew 16 missions from December 1944 until the end of the war in Europe in May 1945. On three of those missions we were hit by the German fighters. On one of the missions when we experienced German fighter attacks, they made two passes through our group. The other two times they made just a single pass. As I recall we always lost at least one plane on each pass they made. Very frightening

I was very happy not to have experienced the enemy fighter action that the 8th Air Force encountered in 1942, 1943 and early 1944. By 1945, the German air force had suffered significant losses, and the German manufacturing capability for replacement aircraft had been seriously impacted by the allied strategic bombing.

After the fighter attack things calmed down until we hit the Initial Point of Attack. At this point the group lead plane would take a heading toward the target, adjust the heading for wind, trim the plane for straight and level flight, and the pilot would then turn on the auto-pilot. This was all to create a "stable bomb platform" as I remember them referring to it. The bombardier of the group lead plane would then have control over the direction of flight of his plane, and thus the direction of all of the planes in the group. This control was by means of a hook up between the Norden bomb sight and the auto pilot. Most of the heading adjustments that the bombardier made with the bomb sight were relatively small as he refined the tracking toward the target.

Very shortly after we had started the bomb run, the pilot of our plane asked me to take over the controls. After I had assumed control of the plane the pilot stated he was going to the rear. Walking around in that environment was not a trivial task. Besides the seat belt and harness, the flak vest, and parachute, you were attached to the plane by the electric cord for the heated flying suit, the audio radio connection, and life sustaining oxygen. The walk around oxygen bottle had a five minute capacity as I recall, and then you had better be near an outlet to recharge the bottle. Without connection to the electric system for heat, you just got cold until you returned to your station, and cold it was with it being freezing on the ground, and minus a whole bundle of degrees at 24,000 feet or there about. I have no idea where the pilot went, but he did not return to the cockpit until after the bombs had been dropped.

Flying in formation for me was a very nervous experience, that demanded total concentration. I was aware of what was going on around me, but was so intent on not smacking into the element lead plane on which I was flying formation, that I was able to ignore most everything else. As I mentioned earlier, with the group flying straight and level and only minor heading changes, flying in formation was not that tough - but still totally absorbing. As we approached the target, with the pilot where ever he was, I started to catch glimpses of puffs of smoke and then flashes of light and puffs of smoke as the flak was popping around us. There was not a hell of a lot I could do about the flak, but I could keep us from hitting that plane to our left. I concentrated on that, and accomplished that goal.

An aside. I have watched the Blue Angels, and the Thunderbirds fly their planes in formation. The closeness of their planes in formation, and the speed of their aircraft is somewhat different than what we did in the B17s in 1945. They were/are damned good.

After the bombs had been dropped, the pilot of the group lead switched off the auto-pilot, made a fairly sharp turn to the left, trimmed the plane for a slightly nose down attitude without changing the power settings (this resulted in a very gradual loss in altitude, but (the nice part) an increase in air speed). Those actions were known as "getting the hell out of there". Keeping in formation with that action was a bit more challenging, but there was the advantage of knowing we were getting out of the flak, and we were still in one piece.

The next mission I flew was with the same crew, and exactly the same thing happened. I have no idea where he went or why. I initially thought that he was answering the call of

nature, but the relief tube was in the bomb bay, and the bomb bay doors were open on the bomb run. Talk about cold and wind, that was it. I think in that environment relief is close to a physical impossibility.

So what was he doing. I considered that he took a break during the time when flying in formation was so easy (give the new kid a break), but after bombs away the maneuver was probably the sharpest we made during the entire mission. Another thought was that he didn't want to be in the cockpit where he could see all the "Stuff" they were flinging at us, but if he were flying the plane he would be as absorbed as I had been, and only note a fraction of the total "Stuff". I didn't tell anyone about this, and I didn't ask anyone on the crew about this strange behavior. Some of the later missions, I wished I had had the option of flying the plane in formation so that I couldn't see what the hell we were getting into.

CC: J. A. Byers

F. G. Carter

L. R. & J. Carter

✓ Scott Payne

Jack Rutherford

Dear Andrea and Jason,

Sept. 24, 1998

39

This chapter is titled "Scrubbed". Another facet to the constantly varying life of air warfare.

The time is about 4:00 AM, the lights are turned on, and a very unpleasant voice encourages us to rise and shine. After a shave and other early morning necessities, we put on our flight suits and wandered through the dark drizzle of an early English morning to the mess hall. A quick and not too appealing breakfast, and then on to the briefing room, where we are told the details of the days mission. Those details are no longer available for recall, but much of the detail of the rest of the day still lingers.

After the general briefing and the specific briefings for the pilots, navigators and bombardiers, we are off to the planes, and the very potent coffee the crew chief offers. That is the final wake up tonic if the briefing didn't do the job.

We go through the pre flight checks, start the engines, and get in line to taxi out for take off. The weather is still yukky as we go down the runway and start our climb to flight altitude. We start a standard rate turn to the left, which accompanied by increased altitude results in a spiral pattern. Because there are so many 8th Air Force bomb groups in that part of England that some discipline is required to keep the planes from colliding. The time spacing of the planes in our own group keeps us separated from each other, and the spiral pattern followed by each group keeps the planes of the different groups physically separated. The air bases were about 10 mile apart, and even though the winds pushed the planes, they were all pushed in the same direction and about the same distance. There was no master traffic control that we see today in commercial aviation, and I assume in the military also.

As we are flying through the soup waiting to break into the clear and assemble in formation, we get the radio message that the weather had worsened, and the mission was being scrubbed. The clouds had been increasing in height, and now were higher than the 17's operating ceiling - making formation flying damned difficult. In addition the ceiling had lowered over that part of England, and we could no longer safely let down beneath the cloud cover to find our airfield visually. There were no radio or other electronic navigational aids available to lead us to our bases.

Our instructions were to fly to northern England or southern Scotland where the ceiling was high enough to allow us to locate air bases there visually. So away we went. We took up a heading given by the navigator, and started a very gradual descent. A short time later we flew into some prop wash that was the most severe that I ever encountered. On rare prior occasions we had been cut off in the traffic pattern and had flown through prop wash a few seconds after the other plane had crossed our path. That days bumping indicated that we had missed hitting another plane by not too much. How many more were there around us? Flying blind in that day and age was spooky.

We found an RAF base in northern England. It was a fighter base, and the runway was not as long as we were accustomed to. In spite of the short runway, the bomb bay filled with bombs, and the petrol tanks still almost full, we landed without incident as well as 8 or 10 other 17's. A couple of B24's also tried to land there, and both went off the end of the runway. The 24's had the narrow thin wings - low lift, low drag which gave them greater speed than the 17's. I think the wing was called the "Davis" wing.

The RAF base was staffed by Australian and Canadian personnel, and we were treated royally. We were given bunks and bedding for sleeping, dinner that night, and breakfast the next morning. Since the only clothes we had were our flight clothes (We did not pack overnight bags), we were loaned British uniforms to wear (no rank designation). We were escorted to a nearby pub that evening for a little beer and wild war tales. In addition to not having any casual clothes for a night out on the village, we also had zero funds. All of the evening refreshments were provided by our generous allies.

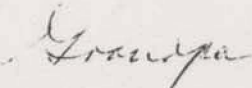
The British military personnel had mixed feelings about the Yanks (that's us - the good guys). One of the comments attributed to the British about their attitude toward the Yanks was "They (that's us the good guys) are overpaid, over sexed, and over here (Here being England). After the short visit with the Aussies and the Canucks, the only difference, if any, between us (the Yanks), and them (the Aussies and Canucks) might have been in pay scale. We never discussed pay, but the action in the pub, and the conversation at our table indicated that in spite of the different origin of our births, we were all quite similar. The Australians did talk funny though.

It was a very memorable break in our routine, and they made it quite pleasant under adverse conditions.

The next morning our hosts had taken off on a mission, and we were busy trying to get our plane ready to fly back to Knettishall. They removed the bombs to lighten the weight of the plane for take off. I don't remember if they drained any of the petrol out of the tanks.

The weather had cleared, and we flew to our base with just scattered clouds, and even had the joy of seeing the sun. The trip was uneventful, and thus ended our non-mission.

Love,



CC: J. A. Byers

E. C. Carter

L. R. & J. Carter

1 S. & L. Payne

J. & V. Rutherford

Dear Andrea and Jason

June 15, 1999

#40

I am being bugged to finish this off, so hope you can stand a couple more of these meanderings of the past. Scott Payne is sending copies of these to the Dyersburg Army Air Corps Historical group. Evidently I am not the only one who is now talking about those days. Wish I could go back there to see the collection, and refresh all those memories.

The title of this is "A Piece Of Cake"

All was not gloom and doom in those 1944/1945 days. One late March or early April in the pre-dawn morning (the roosters were still sleeping, probably dreaming of the days workload ahead of them) we trudged from the barracks to the mess hall for powdered eggs, powdered milk, fried spam and other gastronomical delights. I knew that something strange was going on because the sky was filled with stars. This was a trifle rare for that time of the year in England. It was a quiet breakfast. The time of day was a significant factor for the subdued atmosphere, and pre-mission hours did not contribute to light hearted chatter.

After breakfast we were off for the briefing of the days mission. At first it started off in the usual apprehensive state, but then the mood changed as the details of the mission were presented. First there would be NO enemy fighter activity, NO flak en route, and NO flak over the target. The ceiling and visibility would be unlimited for the entire mission. The target was a small island in the Mediterranean Sea off the south coast of France.

The flight plan took us over the channel, and southeast across the liberated area of France, and a short distance over the Mediterranean, and then return. The German fighter planes didn't have that kind of range, and even if they could fly that distance, they would be heavily out numbered.

Perhaps my mind was dwelling so much on the lack of anticipated enemy action that much of the details are gone from my memory. As an example, I think it was our Combat Wing (three bomb groups) that hit the island, but it could have been just the 388th. We did bomb in squadron formation rather than group formation. In addition, since the island was not defended by anti-aircraft guns, we bombed at a lower altitude than the usual 23 to 25 thousand feet (15 to 16 thousand feet as my faded memory recalls). Another unusual factor, I have no recollection of why we were bombing this isolated bit of real estate. Usually the briefing covered the significance of the target, and the reason we should risk our lives to destroy the target. Since the danger was minimal, perhaps they just ignored that aspect.

The day was beautiful, the scenery was great (we might have seen more at a little lower altitude), and the formation was a bit loose with no threat of enemy fighters. The formation was tightened for the bomb run. All in all this was like a Sunday drive in the country. I would have loved to see that area from the ground - perhaps in my next life.

One unusual occurrence on the mission was that the bombardier of our squadron did not drop our bombs on our first pass. I don't remember if this was equipment malfunction or human error, but the squadron made a big circle, and we made a second and successful pass over the target. With no flak the bombardier escaped the wrath of the squadron members.

At any rate, this mission was treated the same as the ones that were gut twisters. When we returned to Knettishall, the Red Cross poured hot chocolate for those that wanted that, and the Medics poured shots of bourbon for those of us that preferred that. An air medal was awarded for every five missions, and that little island gave me 20% of an air medal. The 1st Lt. silver bars were passed out after 10 missions, and the little island gave me 10% of my silver bars. A weird war, but then aren't they all.

An aside on the subject of Air Medals. Scott Payne's plane was shot down on his fifth mission. He never received an Air Medal. I guess in the strange ways of the military, if you don't bring the plane back you don't get credit for the mission. My Air Medal was on my bunk when I returned from my fifth mission. Maybe your Air Medal, Scott, was tossed on your bunk, and somebody filched it. Definitely not fair.

Grandpa,

CC:

Jo Ann Byers
Carroll Carter
Lynn & Jeanette Carter
Richardson & Mary Harvey
Scott & Lillian Payne
Jack & Virginia Rutherford