

TRIBUTE TO A FRIEND

He was about twenty years old, of medium height, five feet eleven inches, and weighed about a hundred and forty pounds. With sandy hair cut in the military manner, it still managed to look unruly and never achieved a neat look at all.

His face seemed wolfish, and when he laughed, his lips curled back in the same way. He didn't walk, he loped, and could be spotted along way off by looking for the head bobbing up and down as he went along.

The clothing he wore, while it should have looked exactly like ours, managed to achieve a state of confusion that was always funny to see. His pockets jammed full of apples, oranges; or anything edible, lumped up and down his uniform, and there was always something torn, like a pocket, or seam that had let go because of what it had been forced to endure.

He was involved in every scurrilous activity on the

base from his nightly meetings of Texas Jack's Poker Club, held on his bunk, to flying down the main streets of the local towns with some of his friends in formation, with their props in low pitch, to guarantee to rattle the teeth of the local inhabitants.

I was part of this group of friends. We drank together, chased the girls together, and generally laughed at life together. It would probably be a short one anyway.

I saw him die one shiney day in the clear blue sky over Germany. In a flash of fire, followed by the dirty smoke and the debris falling out of the sky. There were no chutes.

To this day it bothers me that I never told him how much his friendship meant to me, and how lucky I felt that he had dropped by my life for a while.

John R. Weaver Jr. (KS)

RELIVING THE BRAVADO, FEAR OF AIR WARFARE

ONE LAST LOOK. By Philip Kaplan and Rex Alan Smith (Abbeville Press Inc., \$47.40).

By: Donald J. Sorensen (92nd BG)

After 40 years, even the terrifying experience of fighting in an air war loses most of its trauma.

Forgotten are the rude 2 a.m. awakenings to go on a raid over Germany. Faded away are the memories of English girls and pleasant times that relieved, for a spell, the fear of battle. Bicycle rides along quiet country lanes; anxious moments sweating out the return to base; the bravado that masked the scared feeling in the pit of the stomach during the briefing to learn the target for the day. All these, and more, are but distant, blurred memories of long ago.

Then along comes "One Last Look" to bring it all into focus again. Billed as a "sentimental journey to 8th Air Force heavy bomber bases of World War II in England," the book is all that — and more. The authors spare nothing in recreating the atmosphere, the danger, indeed the complete picture of 8th Air Force activity. Their "Last Look" will take readers who served in that critical period of World War II back so vividly they will feel they are there again. But for more than veterans of the Eighth, the book would sustain any interest in the history of air warfare, giving a glimpse into the kind of life U.S. airmen lived in England.

Coffee-table-sized, the book holds photos of the English countryside, air raids, hastily put-together airfields, air crews, shot-up planes and other scenes of the times. Experiences of airmen as heroes facing death, as prisoners of war and in other roles pack its pages. It depicts the danger, the humor, the heroics, the philosophy of youths thrown into the war they may remember as the greatest in history.

It sent me back to the diaries I kept as a bombardier in the 92nd Group based in Podington, England, which is mentioned a few times in the book. I was stunned again as I read about my first mission, a raid on Berlin on Sunday, May 7, 1944.

"The only thing that marred the whole mission," I wrote, "was the engineer who was killed by a piece of flak. One of two pieces that hit our ship. Wasn't scared until I saw him lying down. Wasn't a very pretty sight."

It was a grim reminder that this was for real. From then on, my sleep became more fitful and my prayers longer.

Personal feelings of the airmen appear throughout the book. In the briefing room where the target was revealed, if the mission happened to be a long one "there would be hoots, and jeers and catcalls, and someone (quoting a well-known civilian conservation slogan) was sure to call out, 'Is this trip really necessary?' But underneath the catcalls and nervous badinage, there was fear that clutched like a cold hand at one's vitals. 'You'd think, oh boy, I'm not going to go on this one. This one will kill me,' remembers Ray Wild, 'but you'd go anyhow. Pride made you go.' "

Combat made young men grow up in a hurry. There was John Miller, all of 17 years old. One day his group sent out 18 ships and only two returned. Suddenly Miller found himself the oldest gunner in his squadron. "Everyone I knew was either killed or taken prisoner that day," he said. For 15 days, he was alone in the gunners' hut, but he survived to complete 35 missions.

Pride, a sense of duty, that quality of personal immortality that makes a person feel it will happen to someone else and not to him, are some of the reasons mentioned that prompted young men to volunteer for such hazardous service, the kind of duty that prompted a navigator to observe, "Mathematically there just ain't any way we're gonna live through this thing," when the average life of a bomber and crew was 15 missions.

"Combat is never comfortable, of course," write the authors. "But aerial combat is probably the most frightening warfare of all, because for man the air is an unnatural habitat through which he travels uneasily at best. Regardless of other distractions, he must keep his airplane moving and under control or it will fall. In case he is hit, he cannot just park it somewhere while making repairs or attending to the wounded. And worst of all, he cannot run and hide. He is simply *there*, marooned aloft in an aluminum capsule that seems to creep as slowly across the hostile sky as a fly across a wall, nakedly visible and vulnerable to all who wish to swat it down."

Kaplan began research for the book in 1965, spending hundreds of hours interviewing veterans of the Eighth and others associated with their adventures. The result is a book that will last.

The Sunday Oregonian Magazine, March 25, 1984