

Continued from June Issue

The follow-up story of the YB-40 Saga which appeared in the June issue of the Newsletter was very interesting.

As I read the article, it combined with the initial story, brought various incidents, albeit sketchy and vague, to light as my mind wandered back in time attempting to remember names, dates, places and happenings which occurred in 1942-43.

While I did scribble quite a few notes from the time we left Presque Isle, Maine on May 2, 1943 until I completed 27 missions as a gunner in the 407th (notes I had not glanced at for over 40 years), I began to wish I had taken copious and meticulous notes jotting down names, addresses, places, dates and events. But then, how many of us paused long enough to think about keeping a record of what we were doing, where we were doing it, with whom, and even why?

I always thought there was someone in each squadron and every group headquarters who was the designated historian responsible for keeping detailed records about everybody and everything that occurred. Indeed, that appeared to be the case at the time, or at least we thought so, because whenever you "fouled-up" they never forgot it and never lost the record. Now we know that apparently no detailed accurate record was kept which listed every member of every crew for every mission that was flown. For those of us who flew our missions with different pilots and various crews it is impossible to reconstruct the chronology of our missions in detail. I know what the target was on each of the missions I flew but I'll be damned if I know the names of more than a couple of the individuals who made up the various crews.

Let me endeavor to contribute what little I can to the story from the prospective of a noncom gunner.

I recall completing gunnery school at Las Vegas, Nevada and armament school at Salt Lake City, Utah in 1942. My next recollection is being somewhere around Geiger Field, Spokane, Washington assigned to the Ben Smotherman crew. I seem to remember that the facilities where we were housed were not very accommodating. We lived in small huts located in an out-of-the-way-area. The food was terrible. The latrine may have been an open ditch or was that at Montbrook??? Whether shower facilities were available I do not recall but they might have been because young ladies in town did date us. To top it all off constant inclement weather kept us grounded during our entire stay. At the time, rumor had it that we would be assigned to submarine patrol duty.

The next leg of the journey found us somewhere in the desert around Blythe, California. It's official name escapes me. Hell!!! I probably never knew it in the first place. We slept in tents. The days were unbearably hot. The nights were bitterly cold. If memory serves me correctly, an additional problem at this "paradise" was the condition of the runways. Apparently, due to the daytime heat the runways became too soft for B-17's to takeoff and land. I forget how long we stayed at this luxurious facility but do remember that we were there during Christmas, 1942.

The next move found us at another prize piece of real estate known as Smokey Hill Army Air Base located somewhere in the vicinity of Salina, Kansas. Memories of

the stay at good old Smokey Hill have also dwindled down to a precious few but I do recall that we did a lot of flying. Of significance was the seven day furlough which was to be our last before receiving final destination assignments.

Not much time to spend at home if you lived in Pennsylvania, New York, Massachusetts, California or Florida. There was much grumbling about the limited time allotted and then someone came up with the suggestion (whether an officer or enlisted man, I do not know) that if a large enough number of men did not return until ten or fourteen days had elapsed, any reprimand meted out would be minimal. Some of the men planned to get married, those already married wanted a few extra days at home and fellows like me who had not been home after about two years in the service threw caution to the winds and said, "I'll go along". The penalty assessed to me for the extra time I took was loss of rank from S/Sergeant to Sergeant. What was meted out to the others who took extra time escapes me, but I do remember that I was far from the last one to return.

From Smokey Hill it was, as I recall, down to Biggs Field, El Paso, Texas where we picked up the YB-40's. Then down to Florida and glorious Montbrook. On the positive side of Montbrook is the memory of a lot of fun buzzing the Florida beaches on practice flights and constant poker games.

From Montbrook it was up to Presque Isle, Maine where the poker games continued and then on to Great Britain. Complete ten man crews were not used to fly the YB-40's overseas. As a result, some of us were fortunate enough to be ferried overseas by the Air Transport Command arriving at Bovingdon before those who stayed with the aircraft.

As things turned out, once we arrived at the 92nd, crew assignments were changed and some of us never flew a mission in the YB-40 but did them all in a B-17. Fortunate for some, unfortunate for others. Still the YB-40 memory lingers.

If the truth be as McGrew quotes Bogard, i.e., that we were, "the crews the Air Force believed it could do without", then the extra furlough incident may have played a part in the selection of the YB-40 crews. However, knowing the military mind-set, I am inclined to believe otherwise and think the thirteen YB-40 crews were selected before the furloughs were granted and that the selections were made on the basis that we were the best they had at the time. Indeed, it must be so or why else did they wait for us to come back if the project was of such special significance and classified "Top Secret".

Accordingly, while I might have to plead bias, I could agree with, "They thought we were the best they had and didn't know nuttin" (emphasis added) as a plausible answer. Then again, those of us who are egocentrics would unquestionably prefer to adopt the quote, "You were an elite group", as spoken by the Curator at the Air Force Museum. Hell!!! Why argue with the gentleman who is the recognized "Authority" when it comes to "blowing smoke" about the 8th Air Force.

Very truly yours,
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