

4/6/98

To: Joan Craig

Re: your Apr. 1 letter/forms re the V.O.H. Project

My history of service in WW2 was probably very different from any of the other vets you hear from so I think I had better give you a report that will include some editorializing, for want of a better term. And that part comes at the very beginning of 4 yr. period that began in 1941.

I was drafted in August of '41, which was 5 mo. before Pearl Harbor (which was when for all practical purposes we got into WW2). I was drafted in Wichita, Kans., then was put on a train to Ft. Leavenworth, Kans. where my actual "swearing in" took place.

At the Ft. Leavenworth center, they had big posters on the walls inviting those who wished to , to sign up for the U.S. Army Air Corp---for a 4 yr. hitch. Those who signed could take their choice of several training schools that were located different sections of the country. I signed for the simple reason that it was my judgement that the war in Europe was going to last for 4 yrs. anyway, so why not learn a good trade in the service.

I chose to study for and A & E (aircraft & engine) license and a few days later I was on a train to Chanute Field, Rantoul, Ill. I've never forgotten my first night at Chanute. I had come down with a severe sinus headache on the train trip and when we got to our tents (there were 6 of us to a tent) the weather had turned wet & cold/raw. Each cot had a mattress and the latter was soaking wet with puddles standing in the center---obviously we had a very leaky tent, and, this was the first indication we had, but not the last, of how totally unprepared the USA was to fight a war(which we weren't even in yet).

Another aspect about Chanute: we were told to "hit the books" hard for our gov't was shortening our training period from 1 yr. to 3 mos. And we had to rotate serving K.P. once every few days. At the tail end of our training came Pearl Harbor. (Years later upon reading reports on the investigation of responsibility for that great tragedy---and remembering the hard push on us at Chanute, it began to make sense to me that (1) our gov't was pretty certain that we were heading for war, but never told the public about it (2) there was sloppy communications between Wash. D.C. and Pearl Harbor which may well have been caused by mis-management in both places---and we paid a horrible cost).

After finishing at Chanute, a group of us were "trained" to McDill Field, Tampa.. for a short time , then to "open field" training in Sarasota. In neither location were we even close to an airplane. Shortly, we "trained" to Ft. Dix (N.J.) then on to the QE (Queen Elizabeth ship) to England. We were packed into bunks, 6 to a "stateroom" in the dead of night and the memorable part of that trip was the shaking of the ship one night as we "fish tailed" our path on our way, due to the threat of subs.

The QE docked in Glasgow Harbor (Scotland), but long before we could see land, we saw the barrage Balloons in the harbor sky. These balloons were like a small dirigible and tethered to the ground by steel cable. They were a defense mechanism the British were using to deter the Jerry (German) aircraft from bombing/strafing their targets on the ground, the idea being that if enemy aircraft ran into the cable(s) the latter would disable the aircraft so much as to make it useless/crash.

These balloons were shown in news film in theaters all over the USA long before we got into the war. There was no such thing as TV at the time. When we saw those balloons, we knew we were "at war".

We were now "trained" to the Peterborough area (90 mi. N. of London (this area, in due course, became the location for all the B-17's (Fly Fortresses, heavy bombers) that was to become the 8th Air Force---no longer the U.S. Army Air Corps).

My outfit was now called the 340th Bomb Squadron of the 97th Bomb (Heavy) Group---there were 3 other Squadrons near us---except that us ground personnel had to wait for weeks before our B-17's arrived. Our B-17's made bombing runs over Rouen, France, ---we were the first US aircraft to "hit" the Jerries, well before the 8th Air Force was activated. (Our flight crews had to take communications and signal training from the British staff of the RAF (Royal Air Force) who had been through a lot of combat against the Jerries).

A Word about the civilian life of the British. We found they were a wonderful people. They had lived through very rough times long before us "Yanks" teamed up with them. Blackouts every night, strict rationing of food, gas, etc. (90% rode bikes---they couldn't afford cars to begin with, and with gas rationing, severely, what was the sense of having a car?).

Now, the 97th was taking a shipping convoy to N. Africa. We were stationed at the edge of the Sahara, but before we got there we were, temporarily set up at an air field where we put up our pup tents---it was the rainy season and we all slept in water for several nites (where have I heard that one before) and on the train to the Sahara, whenever we stopped, there were Arabs selling us tangarines and we "ate" plenty of them---not a one of us got a cold from the "wet nights".

Our time near the Sahara was short-lived. The sand storm (sirocco as they were called) got sand into our aircraft engines and made them worthless. So we were moved back up north into the Atlas mountains, where we got into a bit of snow now and then. Militarily, while we were next the Sahara, we got hit by Jerry Bombers "too often" and we got reminded of how short on supplies and equipment we were because we didn't have any searchlights nor ack-ack guns. Our defense: our Armaments group set up 3 machine guns at 3 different locations to form a triangle of fire---and our warning of an impending raid was 3 rifle shots only minutes before the action would start.

Next: The Jerry ground forces were pushing our way. Our B-17's were now to be used in place of fighter aircraft (we had no fighters available) NO bombs could be used for these were low level flights for strafing, so the air crews would man their

Machine gun stations (there were 5 on ea. B-17) and strafe the enemy in low level flying. The problem: in relative terms the B-17 was a slow, ponderous aircraft that was good for high altitude bombing runs, but very vulnerable at low levels. We got lucky and didn't lose any plane or personnel.

We always followed the 5th Army in this theatre and now the invasion of Italy started.

We couldn't move in until the Jerries ^{were} knocked out of southern Italy. Which brings up the battle of Anzio beachhead. The 5th Army was tied down there for weeks because the Jerries had big cannon emplacements in the hills surrounding and clobbered anything that moved---and the 97th couldn't help much for fear of dropping bombs on our own troops.

Attrition finally drove the Jerries north and we moved into the flat land around the town of Foggia, well southeast of Rome (which by now had been declared an Open City--neither side was to fight in Rome)

From Foggia we flew a number of missions bombing the oil field of Ploesti (Roumania) then ^{the} pilots would fly on to Russia (they didn't ~~have~~ have the fuel capacity for the return trip to Foggia) to land. Our air crews told us, upon return, that the Russians had their technicians all over the B-17's copying our designs & equipment.

Re the Italian civilians. We were heroes to them. They hated the Jerries who had abused them so much, and Mussolini, had long since gone the way of all arrogant, pompous leaders.

I could say more, but enough.

Bob Matu

To: Library - Joan Craig

Re: Vets Oral History

I thought you might find it interesting that all these months later additional thoughts have come to mind re my WW2 experiences. Some as a result of re-tracing the sequencing of those experiences, while others have been jogged by conversations with other people, and vets.

Just this a.m. I was told by a close friend that he had initiated an oral history program at his library in Maine, where he lives 6 mos. of the yr.---this as a result of my telling him about ours in Natick. By chance, a close friend of both of us, got in on the conversation for I had mentioned about all of us US troops being transported on the various British ships. From N.Y. to Glasgow on the QM, then in a very slow British convoy from Liverpool to N. Africa. (The QM & QE always "went solo" for they had the speed to outrun the German subs---the convoys were a different story, they could move no faster than the slowest of the lot)

Our third party, one George Blood of Wayland asked me how we liked the "grog"/rum the British served on their ships. I looked at George in amazement and said: we never got any rum---and he insisted that rum was a staple on British ships and he had seen the rations of same passed out on British ships he had seen in port (in Halifax, N.S.) I blew my stack: I said George, I don't question what you saw, but you shouldn't question my experience, for we never saw any rum---all we got was mutton, mutton, mutton---and it didn't take us long to get seasick on the convoy and we fed the fishes, standing in long lines to do so. (We were given some canned good in a small sack before we left Liverpool and were told to save in case our ship was sunk and we had to swim to shore---they never explained to us how we were to swim all those miles to shore---anyway we couldn't take more than one meal of mutton, so ate all our canned food before the end of the first day.).

George's attitude on the rum is all too remindful of trying to apply peacetime standards to war. I told him there were 6000 of us on the QM to Glasgow and the word we got from additional troops in N. Africa was that the QM was carrying over 22,000 troops on a run after that---that a lot of rum.

Subject food: I met up with a former British Navy officer when I lived over there. He told me of his experiences of, as liason officer, being on US Navy ships in the North Sea during the war. He said: I really looked fwd. to my visits on the US ship---I ate like a horse for your food was so much better than ours. Also, a few yrs. ago I met with a wife who had immigrated, with her technician husband to a new life in Worcester. Within the first week they were here, they had some of our chicken and she was euphoric. Our chicken had much more meat on it, and the taste was so much better than in Britain.

While I didn't try to explain this "superiority", the fact is, the animal husbandry aspect of our agricultural colleges in our farm belt (from whence I came) have been doing research on our food chain for a long time. It shows.

Regards
BM

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