



Flightline



Newsletter of the 78th Bomb Squadron of WWII

March 2011

A look at base life and getting mission-ready **Settling in at Pantanella**

by Cleon S. Moore

The enlisted men lived in tents at the airfield. Our tent had a stove made of a cast iron barrel with a pipe going straight up from it. We filled the stove with bricks and ran a copper tube from a gasoline tank into the stove. We had a 50-gallon can of aviation gasoline outside the tent, and it was high off the ground so it ran into the tent by gravity. The gas dripped into the stove and burned. The stove had a valve so we could turn the gasoline drip on and off. L.D. Moody, our waist gunner, would throw his cigarette butts into the gasoline bucket that collected the gasoline drips. The first time I saw Moody do that, I jumped and moved away quick. But Moody said, "It won't catch fire. You need a flame to catch the gasoline on fire." He was right about that. When the snow was 12 inches deep outside, those bricks inside the stove would get cherry red with heat.

The tent had a hole for a window, which was covered with camera film so we could shut it. Inside our tent we had a light bulb. It was run off a generator that the camp operated from 5-9 p.m. After 9 p.m., we used a kerosene lamp.

We were allocated two packages of cigarettes a day from our PX, which cost us five cents per pack. A local Italian man came by the tent each day and I left him one package of cigarettes each day and he left six quarts of sweet port wine, a hunk of cheese, and sausage. I was the only man in our tent who didn't smoke. We drank the wine after the missions. I didn't eat



Cleon on his bunk in the enlisted men's tent. Recognize the pin-up on the wall? On the desk is a framed photo of girlfriend Peggy Wade. Cleon and Peggy have been married for more than 64 years. On the shelf above Cleon's head are 55mm shells, each one inscribed with the date of a completed mission.

at the mess hall very much because I had the local food.

We hired a local man to build a wall halfway up the side of the tent. The building material he used was Tuffa blocks, sort of like our concrete blocks, which was quarried locally and hauled with Army trucks. The Army brought in the Tuffa blocks, but we had to buy cement on the local economy. We paid the man nine packs of cigarettes to build the wall. The cigarettes cost about \$90 on the local black market. He made the door for the tent out of engine packing crates.

In winter, I wouldn't take a shower because it was too cold, but I did shave each day using my steel helmet with water heated on the

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Your Letters

(emails and phone calls, too)

John McParland called to say he has a new address. He's now living with his son. John and I had a nice chat, especially about the pronunciation of the word *laundry*. Here's John's new address in case you want to debate *soda vs. pop*:

John McParland
15 Nicoll St.
Washingtonville, NY 10992
(717) 755-5667

Jack Bentley is now receiving his mail at the following address:

Jack Bentley
c/o Fairview Manor
900 Manchester Rd
Fairview, PA 16415
(814) 838-4822
(814) 833-8536 FAX

Former Treasurer Ashby Nelson forwarded the thank yous he received on behalf of the squadron from The Collings Foundation and Paralyzed Veterans of America. Per the by-laws, the squadron donated half its funds to charity upon its disbandment. The other half are keeping *The Flightline* running as long as possible. Here is what they wrote, in part:

Collings: Thank you for your donation on behalf of the 780th Bomb Squadron Association to the Collings Foundation. We appreciate your support of our B-17 and B-24 and our Wings of Freedom tour. During our 22nd year we're looking forward to meeting old friends and greeting new ones. We hope to see you sometime during the year.

PVA: On behalf of the members of PVA I want to thank you for your generous gift. Your contribution will go a long way to help support PVA's programs to serve paralyzed veterans.

Let's Meet in Abilene

The fun and camaraderie continues!

Members and family of the former 780th Bombardment Squadron Association are invited to Abilene, TX, for a casual get-together. We'll meet September 15-18, 2011. Kim McLaughlin, daughter of co-pilot Gayle McLaughlin, is our host.

Our hotel is the Hilton Garden Inn in Abilene. A block of 20 rooms has been set aside. Rates are \$89 for a standard room which includes a free breakfast buffet. This special rate has been set aside for the 780th until **August 14**, so book now.

Kim also has arranged a special rate of \$139 for a larger jacuzzi room. If someone is willing to book a jacuzzi room and will allow the squadron to use it as our hospitality room, the Abilene Convention Bureau will pay the difference over the regular rate. Let Kim know if you are willing to book this room.

A local private school has requested that one of the veterans talk to their students. The talk would be for Friday, Sept. 16. If you are interested in volunteering, let Kim know.

Meals will be casual at nearby restaurants. If you have any suggestions about a more formal banquet/Saturday dinner, please let Kim know. Her email address is: mclaughrn@yahoo.com. Her phone number is (325) 370-0593

The Hilton Garden Inn in Abilene has created a website for the 780th. You can make your room reservation by going to the hotel's 780th website or by calling the hotel's toll-free number: (877) 782-9444. The 780th's booking code is **BSR**. Type this url into your web browser: http://hiltongardeninn.hilton.com/en/gi/groups/personalized/A/ABIABGI-BSR-20110915/index.jhtml?WT.mc_id=POG

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stove. The latrines were open to the sky with wooden stools set over a hole. The stools were lined up next to each other. It was a long walk to the latrines in the snow at night.

Moody and I liked to shoot pistols in the swamp near the airfield, usually shooting at snakes. One day, I saw a snake about one inch in diameter on the bank. Lt. Frank Berry, our pilot, and four other officers saw us, and Berry told the other officers that Moore could shoot the head off a snake. He took 10 Lira bets and the four officers participated. I shot the head off the snake, and all the officers laughed at that, saying they couldn't believe I had done it.

My First Mission

On our first mission, each member of my crew was assigned to fly with veteran crews. On December 4, 1944, I flew my first mission to the marshalling yard at Villach, Austria, with the Colonel Joshua H. Foster Jr. crew. Col. Foster was also the Group Commander. I was nose gunner in the lead plane of the formation. During that mission we got shot up, and the crew chief said we were losing gas. Foster said he couldn't see any gas coming out of the plane. We had enough gas in the right tank to make it to Visz, Yugoslavia, for an emergency landing. If we could make it to Visz, the cargo planes could pick us up and fly us back to Pantanella. When we flew over Visz, the gauges showed that we had no gas in the left tank, but the gas level in the right tank hadn't changed. So the commander decided not to land in Visz. If we could make it as far as the Adriatic Sea, we could bail out and ditch the plane. The commander did not want to abort the mission because he had to set an example to the other crews that were flying in the formation with him.

We continued over the Adriatic and returned to Pantanella. Trucks met the crew at the landing strip, and the crewmembers reported to the crew chief describing what was defective with the plane so repairs could be made before we flew again. Afterwards, we found out the aircraft received 75 hits.



Peering through a window of the half-built Tuffa wall for the enlisted men's tent. Cleon is in the upper right.

The first plane to land reported to the American Red Cross. The Red Cross ladies in the hospitality tent gave us coffee and donuts, and then we went to a briefing room to give a report on the kind and number of planes that had attacked us. We also reported which enemy planes we had shot down so the gunners would get credit for the shoot-down. After the flight debriefing, we went through the medical tent where we could have two ounces of bourbon.

I flew 22 missions before the war in Europe ended. I flew four or five missions as a substitute. On our days off, a few of my friends and I would show up at the 4 a.m. briefings when the day's missions were planned. If any members of the crews that were supposed to fly that day were sick, they would get substitutes to join the crew for the mission. Pilots would ask for me to substitute for their crews. They called me the "Blue Nose Gunner." The pilots did not know my name, but they knew my reputation. I had done some training as a bombardier - all nose gunners did - so I could replace the bombardier if he got killed or was disabled.

Why did I volunteer to go on missions as a substitute? I wanted to get in my 35 missions so I could go home. Also, I was young enough so that I didn't know any better.

**What's Your Story?
Send it to *The Flightline!***

Granddaughter Continues *Flightline*

by Kathy Le Comte, editor

It crossed my mind (to be truthful, it crossed someone else's mind first) that I should introduce myself to those of you who don't know me. After all, I'm sure a few of you have been wondering just who this lady is that is continuing *The Flightline* - and why. The answer to both questions begins with my grandfather.

S/Sgt. George J. Le Comte was a replacement of a replacement. He joined the 780th on December 2, 1944. He was transferred from a bomb group with the 8th Air Force in England. This seemed unusual to me. I was able to find one other man who transferred from the same bomb group to the 15th Air Force. When I asked him why they were transferred he explained that gunners in the 15th AF were "dropping like flies," and that replacements from the states were not coming fast enough. The 8th AF apparently could spare some of their men. This should stoke some more of the gentleman rivalry that exists between the 8th and 15th!

When he arrived at Pantanella my grandfather was assigned to the Vern Larson crew as their third tailgunner. I'm not quite sure what happened to the first two. Vern's co-pilot was Gus Calabrese. The other officers were Herbert Cohen, navigator; Robert Wilson, bombardier; Thomas McKnight, engineer; and Leslie Davis, radio op. The gunners were Edwin Pratt, Edward Wilson, Edward Orpikowski, and my grandfather. There was an eleventh crewmember for at least one mission: a voice interceptor named Erwin Meyer. He monitored German radio traffic to ascertain how many fighters they were sending in, and any other intelligence.

On 11 December 1944, just a few weeks after arriving at Pantanella, my grandfather as part

of the Larson crew participated in a mission to bomb the Vienna South Ordnance Depot. They flew Red O, the *Mission Belle*. Ten minutes before bombs away the aircraft was hit by a shell under the flightdeck, and flak throughout the mid and tail section. The co-pilot was killed instantly.

Larson couldn't control the aircraft so he ordered a bail-out. Half the crew managed to bail out and was taken prisoner near the Danube (one man's chute didn't open). The other half were killed on the aircraft, including my grandfather, before it crashed. It was my grandfather's first mission with the 780th. He left a widow, age 20, and a son, my father, age 2. It is estimated there were 185,000 American children orphaned after their fathers were killed in the war. My grandmother has never remarried and continues to live in the Chicago suburbs.

I was lucky to talk to some of the crew about ten years ago (Larson died in California in a flying accident in the 1950s) but none of them knew or even remembered my grandfather. I'm not even sure my grandfather had moved into their tent.

I started researching my grandfather's WWII story in 1991. I discovered the existence of the 780th Bombardment Squadron Association via the Internet, and attended my first reunion in 1998.

Unfortunately I have never met anyone in the 780th who knew my grandfather, and only a few vaguely knew the other men on the Larson crew. But I have learned so much from all of you about what it was like to be a tailgunner, flying missions, living in Italy, and more. You all have become my surrogate grandfathers. So it is because of him - and you - that I continue *The Flightline*. If you knew the Larson crew or flew on the 11 December 1944 mission to Vienna, I would love to hear from you.



S/Sgt. George J. Le Comte



Here's some fun. This picture of the squadron appeared in the January 1982 edition of *780th News*, the forefather of *The Flightline*. See if you can place the name with the person. Thanks to Gene Koscinski for sharing back issues from his collection.

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Flightline

WWII JOKE BAG

Some gems from Bob Hope:

London, 1943: "*Fellows, the folks at home are having a terrible time about eggs. They can't get any powdered eggs at all. They've got to use the old-fashioned kind you break open.*"

At the Midshipman's School at Notre Dame, May 29, 1945: "*Now I know why they call this Notre Dame. There's notre dame in sight.*"

"*I asked one pilot how many successful parachute jumps he's made, and he said, 'All of them.'*"

"*The USO has taught me to say 'Kaopectate' in seven different languages.*"

In Naples, Christmas, 1963: "*The last time I was in Naples, I entertained on the USS Forrestal. They put that in mothballs ... while I was onstage.*"

This one is unattributed:

A World War II pilot is reminiscing before school children about his days in the Air Force.

"In 1942," he says, "the situation was really tough. The Germans had a very strong air force. I remember," he continues, "one day I was protecting the bombers and suddenly, out of the clouds, these Fokkers appeared." At this point, several of the children giggle.

"I looked up, and right above me was one of them. I aimed at him and shot him down. They were swarming. I immediately realized that there was another Fokker behind me."

Now the girls started to giggle and boys started to laugh. The teacher stands up and says, "I think I should point out that 'Fokker' was the name of the German-Dutch aircraft company."

"That's true," says the pilot, "but these fokkers were flying Messerschmidts."