

Ferrying Toward Combat

December 1943 - February 1944

Two crews did not get planes, although we were part of the original group and squadrons - the 20 men of the 2 crews were distributed among the other planes for the trip. Our co-pilot, Harold Brooks, and I were assigned to "Leakin Deacon" (number unknown). I don't recall seeing any orders, so I don't know if our shipment number was 90389. I also don't remember any stenciled temporary numbers.

Regarding deployment ... the other crews picked up their planes at Willow Run, Michigan and other assembly plants and we all staged at Mitchell Field, Long Island for about the month of December 1943. We then began to proceed individually to Morrison Field at West Palm to start the overseas trek. Leakin Deacon left Morrison Field early Dec 25 (Xmas) morning arriving at Borinquen, Puerto Rico for a box lunch and gas and then on to Port of Spain, Trinidad for Xmas dinner and a stay overnight. The next day, December 26, we went to Belem, Brazil on the Amazon River for an overnight. The next day, we went to Fortaleza, Brazil.

The plan was for the planes to go to Natal, Brazil prior to the trip over the Atlantic, but because of bad headwinds and fear of gas starvation over a big ocean, the planes were being held at Natal and were bunching up so the overflow were sent to Fortaleza. We left Fortaleza very early right after midnight, December 30, 1943, to fly through the night so as to arrive at Dakar, French West Africa (now Senegal) in daylight on New Year's Eve. We did so without incident.

On arrival at Dakar, we were assigned to barracks and we all rushed to the showers to get ready to go to town to spend New Years Eve whooping it up in town. However, on leaving the field at the exit gate there was a large sign posted:

WARNING-THIS TOWN HAS BUBONIC PLAGUE!

True or not, we headed back to the barracks and to the sack ... a very quiet New Years Eve was enjoyed by all. The next morning, New Years Day, we flew to Marrakech, Morocco, and this time we intended to make up for the missed celebration of the night before. For excitement we found only an inter-country soccer match going on at the city arena between the British and USA forces. We watched for a while, then took a walking tour of this wonderful, exciting city. Somewhere I have a photo of Brooks and myself posing with a teenage Arab selling cookies from a bowl balanced on his head. That night we let it all hang out

by illegally entering the Medina, also known as the Casbah, which was off limits to all US personnel.

Leaking Deacon's officers, and Brooks and I, hired a fiacre French for horse and buggy with a convertible roof. We all got down on our knees on the floor of the carriage and the driver rolled the top over us, and although the French and American MPs at the Medina entrance gate must have heard our drunken giggles, they let the buggy through. He took us to an alleged hotel which was nothing more than an apartment in a large scruffy building with allegedly pretty mademoiselles. Some were no doubt left over from WWI and I'll forgo further details of that visit!

We had paid the driver to wait for us and of course he didn't. So, there we were, early in the morning, abandoned in an off-limits part of town, and had to walk out without even knowing the way out. Well, no matter what some people feel about the French, I'll always feel indebted to them. Two red-tasseled sailors appeared singing French songs as they drunkenly zig zagged down the narrow street. We joined them, and our only French consisted of FREREJACK, which is of course not a French song but Canadian French. We hoped they were leaving the Medina and we tagged along. Our group taught them FREREJACK as we went. After a lot of meandering, we got to the gate all singing FREREJACK, and luckily only Senegalese MPs were at the gate, so we gave up all of our cigarettes and were allowed to hail a horse cab and got back to the Hotel Mamoulian where we had started the night before. It was the best hotel in Marrakech.

Later, we returned to the field. Leakin Deacon had fuel pump trouble and we stayed at Marrakech for two or three days in unheated tents at the base. Although people probably think of Morocco as hot and near the desert, Marrakech is in the Atlas Mountains and probably even higher than Denver. It was winter - January. Let me tell you I have never been so cold in my life before or since. I slept fully dressed in my sheepskin pants and jacket with leather boots and leather helmet in 6 GI blankets on a cot and shivered all night. Don't ask what I had to do to answer the call of nature in the middle of the night!

We weren't allowed to go to town again. Apparently, the overzealous officers of the flight crews had just about destroyed the interior of the very deluxe Hotel Mamoulian over the holiday. And we were all restricted to base. The mechanics jerry-rigged a repair of Leakin Deacon's fuel pumps and we flew to Djedida, Tunisia where the group was to stay a while to fine tune formation flying and other practices. New fuel pumps had to be shipped to Leakin Deacon from the states and the crew, along with Brooks and myself, were allowed to go to the nearby large city of Tunis. We checked into a hotel called "LUTETIA". The hotel was just off of

the main drag, and near the entrance to the Medina. We took walks around town (not in the Medina) and played Hearts and spent the evenings visiting the local hot spots. The "ack ack club" was a beer and gin joint primarily catering to the Brits, but they allowed us in as guests. There was a small arcade of stores and theaters nearby, and the theater was called "la petite chanson" (the little song) which had the greatest belly dancer I have ever seen named RHOOHIA. The theater was loaded with Brits, Australians, New Zealanders, South Africans and US forces (all English speaking). As might be expected, the audience didn't spare the sexy innuendo in their calls to her, but a British officer came on the stage and warned us she lived in England and the States for a while and spoke perfect English. The audience then calmed down and just enjoyed the show.

few nights later, a USO troupe came to La Chanson with Marlene Dietrich as the star, and Danny Thomas as her lead-in, to warm up the crowd. That was like seeing a friend from home. I had been a regular on Friday nights to see Danny Thomas at a local nightclub in Chicago the whole year before I joined up in October, 1942. I knew his whole routine and could have given every punch line, but I kept quiet. I just enjoyed the experience. Marlene was "indisposed" and never showed up at the theater - some said she suffered from a "liquor illness". But I was happy with Danny Thomas. After about a month in Tunisia, the group flew to Cerignola, Italy arriving in early February 44. The ground contingent had arrived by boat in late January and had set up a makeshift field for us.

But more on the 455th Bomb Group at war later.