

Grand Adventure

by

James Smith

December 1943

Over the past few years, I thought that I should put down on paper some recollections of my relations with the 455th Bomb Group (H) and my squadron the 741st. I am a two-fingered typist, getting old, and deaf. But I have a vivid memory of these times in 1943 and 1944. Luckily, I still have my Air Corps Form 5 from this period. In this record I am able to get dates and flying times to back up these recollections.

So bear with me as we go back in time and relive December 1943.

I was a new 2nd Lt. graduated from AAF flying School August 30, 1943. Joined the 455th Bomb Group (H) in September. James Hannaford Smith 689388 After training day and night at Langley Field, Virginia since late September, our unit (composed of four Squadrons - 740th, 741st, 742nd, and 743rd), was about ready to move overseas.

We had been flying B-24 Bombers - Models D and E. These were the older planes with the transparent noses, a couple of .50 caliber machine guns stuck out of sockets in the nose. Most of these planes had been used as submarine patrol ships, flying out of England, Bermuda, and North Africa. To say the least, they were pretty worn and weary. Each crew had gotten around 100 hours flying time in these old birds, and we thought we were pretty darn hot. We did a lot of over-water flying, formation flying, practice bombing, and a great amount of VERY LOW buzzing! During the night of November 26th, 1943, we heard a lot of planes coming into Langley Field. As we went down to the flight line the next morning, the whole ramp was covered with NEW B-24 H MODELS!

These babies had been flown down from the huge B-24 factory run by Ford Motors at Willow Run, Michigan. This was the largest airplane factory in the whole world! The H model had a new nose turret, power operated, with two .50 Caliber machine guns to discourage head on passes by enemy fighters! The other guns were a top turret gun with twin .50s, a ball turret in the belly, with twin .50s, a tail turret with twin .50s, and two waist guns with flexible hand pointed .50s. The plane looked like a porcupine bristling with machine guns!

Each squadron was to be assigned 16 of these new planes, as there were 16 crews to a squadron. Our crew was assigned Plane # 476. This number was the last three

numbers of the plane's serial number. We were in the 741st squadron commanded by Maj. Horace W. Lanford. Our crew was composed of the following men: 2nd Lt. Eugene L. Hudson, Pilot, California; 2nd Lt. James L Smith, Copilot, Texas; 2nd Lt Humphrey M. Hosmer, Navigator, Massachusetts; 2nd Lt. Sam Bakanauskas, Bombardier, Massachusetts; Tech Sgt. Francis E. Beeler, Engineer, Texas; Tech Sgt. Karl J. Muse, Radio Operator, Massachusetts; Staff Sgt. Melvin Wolfe, Tail Gunner, Kansas; Staff Sgt. Marvin Wolfe, Ball Gunner, Kansas; Staff Sgt. Wayne Elliot, Waist Gunner, Kansas; Staff Sgt. Harold R Hamilton, Waist Gunner, Arkansas. We were a very closely-knit crew, and we worked together like a well-oiled- machine. Our future was certain ... we were going to war and SOON! We spent the next few days drawing overseas equipment, mess kits, pistols, sheath knives, field equipment of all types. The load we had to carry was unbelievable, parachute bags, duffel bags, B-4 bags, barracks bags, shelter halves, and a blanket!

Things started getting serious! We were told to get ready for overseas shipment. Any person with dependents living near the base was told to kiss them goodbye and get them packing. Gene Hudson was the only fellow with a wife nearby. The whole crew had helped him get set in a converted chicken house in nearby Phoebus, Virginia. This room was about 150 square feet, including bath and kitchenette. We had borrowed army cots, chairs, mattresses for the Hudson's to set up LIGHT housekeeping! Gene put his wife on the train for a long ride back to Los Angeles, California. Most of the groups dependents had gone by November 29. All personnel were restricted to base.

Several days were spent in classes, training day and night on the new model B-24Hs. No flying was done; we just studied, going over the plane. On the 29th the planes were loaded. Large luggage racks were put in the four bomb bays of each ship, and most of our gear was stowed in these racks. In addition to our 10-crew members, we were to carry with us Tech Sgt Gilone, and 3 of his mechanics. 1st Lt John Van Lent, squadron S-2 Officer, and his section chief were to ride with us, giving us a net passenger list of 16 officers and men. It was a real load, with some quite bulky toolboxes etc.

The luggage racks were arranged with soft baggage on top. This gave us room for eight people to take turns stretching out in the racks. This was a very noisy dark location, but the most comfortable seats in the plane!! No view at all, but soft. Beat an aluminum floor hands down. The night of November 30, we had a briefing for the next day; the whole group was to fly up the coast to Mitchell Field, Long Island NY. Since we had not practiced with 64 planes in one formation, we were to fly in squadron boxes "Vs" of six ships in line. The group got off about 10:00 AM in good shape, carrying the aircrews and critical ground crews.

The people in the ground compliment were not so lucky! They were trucked to Norfolk, Va., put on slow ships in convoy. They were on the ships about 25 days. We flew up the coast, sight-seeing like a bunch of hicks. We could see Washington in the haze to our left, Philadelphia came a bit closer, and Atlantic City, and Lakehurst, NJ were directly under us. Our course took us out into the Atlantic, and New York City was just a smear in the haze. The whole east coast in November was hazy. We made low altitude approaches in formation, peeling up to traffic altitude landing at Mitchell after a 2:20 flight from Langley.

Mitchell Field was another fine old Air Corps Field, on Long Island, close to New York City! Our people were assigned to wood temporary barracks. These were not as nice as the ones we had at Langley, but we were comfortable, and the plumbing worked. The whole group had dinner in a large mess hall, officers on one side, and enlisted men on another. We were told that we had a few busy days ahead - Processing for Overseas Shipment. Also, we were restricted to the base, and not allowed to use the telephone! Our mail address was an Army Post Office number, but we should expect no incoming mail at Mitchell. We were escorted to the barracks, after a long day the sack sounded pretty good.

Up well before daylight, all were lined up for roll call, and we jogged a few blocks before breakfast. This brought out a lot of bitching, and groaning from us all, but it called for a good breakfast, then back to the barracks before a 7:30 meeting. After the meeting, we spent the day filling out forms for insurance, pay data, and each of us had to have a will made out. We spent the whole day doing paper work. They turned us loose about 5:00 PM, and on the way to our quarters, some good observer noticed that there was big hole in the wire fence alongside our building. This hole entered onto a narrow street, and just down the street was a station on the Long Island Railroad line.

It did not take us very long to check out the guard situation, finding none, most of our squadron officers got out of our OD uniforms, and into our green blouses and pink pants. This was a very fine uniform combination, it was said that the gals really liked them!! Through the hole in the fence we went, sneaking through the shadows, the station was ours!

Off to NEW YORK CITY we went!

After about a thirty- minute ride to the center of New York, we were there! Due to the dim out restrictions along the whole east coast, Manhattan was not as bright as we had been expecting, but it was a sight for an old guy from San Antonio! Our first stop was to be the Stork Club. Most of us had heard or read about the place.

Four of us hailed a cab at the station, and we were there. As all were in uniform wearing wings of some sort, the cab driver would not let us pay him. We were amazed, as cabbies in NYC were a hard bunch.

The Head Waiter at The Stork, took us in & got us a great table. He would not take a tip, but he did ask us to try and finish dinner by 9:00 PM. Since it was not seven, we told him that would not be a problem, as we would be in the Junior Officers Club by then! The menu was breath taking, as I was used to the Night Hawk, and the Tower at home. I settled for steak sandwich and beer. This was around three dollars. We were getting a super amount of pay! The base pay for a 2nd Lt. was \$150.00 a month plus flying pay of \$75.00. This was a fortune, as a lot of people were working for much less. A dollar an hour was REAL PAY.

Before we left, people insisted upon picking up our checks. We felt like royalty! Leaving the Stork we went to the Commodore Hotel, and The Junior Officers Club. Here were beautiful (but well chaperoned) girls by the dozens. There was a live band playing in the ballroom, punch, sandwiches, cookies, and cake loaded the tables. The girls were around 19 to 21 they were students, career girls, budding actresses, and models. Very well dressed, and all charming. The ladies of New York society had gone all out to entertain the Officers. We danced, visited with the girls, got some telephone numbers, consumed a great amount of the refreshments. As we had to be up for roll call early in the morning, we left the club around midnight. We were all floating on clouds, but none of us were tight. A beautiful evening, a free cab ride to the station, back through the hole and bed. 6:00 AM came around too soon, but it was a wonderful evening!

Our days at Mitchell Field were very boring. There was still a lot of paperwork for us to go through. Lectures on every imaginable subject, and some unimaginable filled our days. The men had to draw new clothing. The Officers' clothing had to be checked out. We had our good dress clothes, but we had to buy a great number of items. High top GI shoes, OD wool shirts and pants, three sets of new khakis, and of all things, complete sets of OD shorts, T-shirts, OD long underwear tops and bottoms, and above all good wool OD socks. These items were supplied to the Officers through supply for a very nominal cost. It appeared to be overkill, but we were really thankful later on!! The main problem we had facing us was, how were we going to carry all of this stuff. Each Officer had been issued a B-4 Bag. This was a neat folding bag that could be hung up. When carrying the thing, it was zipped up. Fully loaded, the weight was around 75 pounds, and was pretty clumsy to lug. Each member of a flying crew had a parachute and flight gear bag. This bag was about 3 feet long, 2 feet high, and 2 feet wide. In it was carried our parachute, heavy sheepskin and leather pants and jacket, oxygen mask flying helmet and

goggles, Mae West life jacket, and spare summer clothes. I think that this bag weighed around 80 pounds.

Each man had a small bag called a "musette" bag. This was part of an Army Field Pack, but we used it as a light travel bag, toilet items, clean underwear, socks, maybe a shirt, reading and writing materials were carried in this bag. In flying from one stop to the other, we would not have to lug the B-4 bag. Overnight essentials were carried in one hand or with the shoulder strap on this bag.

Late that afternoon, we made another trip into the city, via the hole in the fence. This, time we decided to make a tour of the joints. We could always go back to the Junior Officers Club, but we thought that we would make a run on cigarettes, whiskey, and wild, wild women! None of us had any idea as where to start, so we went to the Commodore Hotel, and started checking out bars around there. There were plenty of stops, and plenty of drinks, and gals of all types. We latched on to three girls ... they were not exactly the type found at the Jr. Officers Club, as the booze flowed, they got better looking! There were four of us officers, and only three gals. One old gal said she would call a friend, and even up the party. We told her to go ahead and call. Pretty soon, our addition arrived. She was a real sharp-looking, tall, dark-headed girl. As I was the tallest of our group, she became my date!

My main problem with these girls was I could not understand much they said. The Brooklyn accent was very pronounced, someone suggested we all go to Greenwich Village, and my date told the girls in her raspy voice. "Rosalie! They Vant To Go To The Villich" To the Village we went, and the evening started getting a bit fuzzy.

Around one in the morning, Gene Hudson declared we had better get back to base, so we took leave of our Wild, Wild Women. A kindly cabbie poured us into his cab, gave us a free ride to the station, and we got back to Mitchell in pretty sorry shape. A notice on the bulletin board told us to get the planes loaded on Dec.7, as we would depart on the morning of the 8th. This was early morning of the 7th. We had a pretty good hangover to celebrate Pearl Harbor Day!

We got all of our gear aboard #476 after lunch on Dec 7, 1943. The whole group went to a briefing that afternoon. Departure would start at 8 AM on the 8th; our flight route was straight down the Atlantic Coast to, Morrison Field, West Palm Beach, Florida. The Group CO, Lt. Col. Cool, told us not to get excited about visiting Palm Beach, as we were to be restricted to certain areas of the base, under tight security! We would be lucky to get to a PX!

Lt. Col. Kenneth Cool was our group commander. He was about 40 years of age, from Cleveland, Ohio, tall, slender, an ex-Eastern Airlines pilot, smoked a pipe, was very soft spoken, a great pilot. Even at this early stage of our unit he, was respected, and admired by all of us, Officers and enlisted men!

Our last evening at Mitchell was spent in the barracks, with all our baggage aboard the planes. We had our OD uniforms, shirts, pants, tie, the great A-3 leather flying jacket, and our hot pilot garrison caps. The "musette" bag came in handy. The area was covered with discarded stuff, as most of us had to throw some surplus away. In the hall downstairs, I found a small portable radio. The case was broken, there were no batteries, but the tubes were in place. Since I had fooled with radios for years, I found a cigar box, and carried the works with me. This radio turned out to be real handy later on.

We were called out about 6 AM for breakfast and roll call, and quick stop by the barracks. Air Crew Members had long ago developed a good habit of using the john early in the morning, as the opportunity may not present itself during a long day! On the flight line, pre-fighting of the planes was carried out. This was an extensive check out of the plane. The engines were pulled through by hand, gas and oil was checked, flight controls, electrical and hydraulics checked, crew and passengers were checked for parachute and life jackets, as we were not going to altitude, oxygen and masks were not checked for this flight. This whole process took nearly an hour, as our squadron was slated to takeoff at 8:30, we just got all on the plane for the start engines signal.

Mitchell Field to Florida

At take-off things were pretty hazy, with a light drizzle, so we could not see very much. Visual flight rules required 3 miles of visibility, and a ceiling of 1000 feet. We were right at this minimum, but things should clear as we went south down the shoreline. As usual, with forecasts, our visibility did not improve for over 2 hours, near Charleston, S. Carolina we could see for several miles. Along this coastline were several ships that had been torpedoed and run aground, near Florida. There was a tanker still burning near the shore. These were results of the German U- Boat war off the coast!

The weather was clear, and quite warm. We were looking forward to landing so we could get our khakis out and enjoy the tropical weather. Touch down at Morrison was around 3:30 in the afternoon we logged 7 hours in the air today. All crews and passengers were picked up by trucks and taken to transient quarters. These trucks took officers one way. Enlisted men went another. This was the beginning of the

Air Transport Command or ATC treatment of combat crews over the world-wide system. It was efficient, but very irritating to the crews. All of us were set up with temporary quarters, we officers had small rooms in a barracks, and the rooms were hot and stuffy. Open bays would have been cooler, as the john rooms and showers were all in a common end of the building. Mess halls were about the same, two lines, one for officers and one for the men. Each officer of the crew was assigned a duty with the crew for our trip overseas.

Being a Co-Pilot, I was Finance Officer, and Medical Officer. The finance office issued me \$500.00 in gold seal \$10.00 bills. These were put into a cloth money belt, and I was supposed to guard this belt under my shirt, and around my waist. The money was to be used only under extreme circumstances, so if we were forced down in some out of the way place, expenses could be covered. I had never seen so much money in my life! The Medics issued me a kit of medicines: aspirin, laxatives, nose drops, eye drops and such. The big box was something again, there were four cartons in white cardboard each about 6 inches square. Each carton had 144 condoms, or 578 condoms for the 16 people aboard the plane.

It looked like we were slated to have a good time somewhere! Actually, the condoms came in handy. We used them to put our wallets and other valuables in. We would be flying through the tropics, and rain showers were pretty heavy. B-24s were put together pretty fast and had a lot of leaking joints.

The crews were scheduled for departures; most of these were to be at night. As our first stop was to be Trinidad, planned arrival was around noon or bit after, as ATC wanted us on the ground before the heavy rain showers built up over the islands. The flying time from Florida to Trinidad via Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands was around 9 hours and 30 minutes. There were hundreds of planes to leave Morrison, scheduling departures was a real art. All planes were to depart as individuals at five- minute intervals. This timing depended upon the speeds of the various planes. B-24 cruised at around 160 MPH. Our crew was told to be at operations at 12:30 am Dec. 11, here we would be briefed and given sealed orders as to our destination. We loafed a lot went to a couple of movies, had a big supper around 10 pm.

The 12:30 briefing was very well done, we were given a complete weather profile covering the entire route, aerial photographs of all the checkpoints and airports en route. A detailed layout of the airport on the east side of Trinidad, with all the terrain features, completed the plan. Our pilot Gene was given a sealed envelope. This was not to be opened till we were out an hour enroute.

Morrison Field to Trinidad, December 11, 1943

After briefing, there was no way any of us could sleep! We all went out to the plane and really checked it over very well, we did assign positions in the plane. The crew was to be in their assigned positions, but not in the turrets. The passengers were to stay on the flight deck, and in the waist for takeoff. They could then get into the luggage rack bunks after takeoff. Being dark, there was not a thing to see so they may as well get some sleep. Take-off time was to be at 4:00 am, so we had a couple of hours to kill. Some went back to the mess hall to get a snack. Hudson and I snoozed a bit in the pilot seats; they were the only good seats on the plane! Hosmer the navigator, and Backanauskas, the bombardier had a little room in the nose for a nap. Hosmer knew that he would have to be awake all during the coming flight.

At 3:30 AM, an operations jeep came by telling us to start engines. As preflight had been done earlier, we got all four running promptly. The tower told us to taxi to the runway and get in line for takeoff. We had three ships ahead of us, and several more coming up behind. Each plane took off at 5- minute intervals, and the tower gave us the go ahead at exactly 4:00 AM. This field was really organized! Taking off to the east all lights on the ground disappeared, and we had a black climb over the ocean after breaking ground. I think we climbed to 6000 feet on a heading of 120 degrees. After about 30 to 40 minutes flying, we could not wait any more to open our sealed orders! Hudson pulled the envelope out and read the destination over the intercom for all to hear.

"You will proceed without delay, via the South Atlantic Route, to Chateau dun Du Ruhmel, Algeria".

Hosmer, the navigator, scrambled through his map case, none of his charts went as far east as Algeria! At least we knew that we were not going to India, China, or the South Pacific! I was to stay awake while Gene Hudson took a nap. I think that Hosmer and I were the only ones aboard not catching a bit of shut-eye.

After a few minutes, Sgt. Julius Crilone our ground crew chief came up to my seat and, in a soft voice, suggested that we transfer some fuel from our outboard "Tokio" tanks to the 4 main engine tanks. I told him to go ahead and transfer the fuel. He moved some switches on the panels, while I gazed out the window of a dawn sky in the east.

All of the sudden, all hell broke loose!

All four engines started to surge back and forth making a terrible noise and then they all stopped. The wind of the descending plane and the whine of the instruments was all to be heard. I hollered as loud as I could, "SGT GILONE PUT EVERYTHING BACK LIKE IT WAS" !

He did and the four engines roared back to life. I can assure you that there was not a man of the 16 aboard that was not wide and wild eyed awake. Gene Hudson, I, Sgt Beeler, and Sgt Gilone decided to wait until BRIGHT DAY LIGHT and get the book out and do some serious studying on the fuel system on the B-24 H!

After good daylight, we had a great trip through the Antilles. Our course took us just to the south of Puerto Rico, over the Virgin Islands, and down the other small islands owned by England and Holland. The weather was wonderful, and visibility was unlimited. Green islands, beaches with coconut trees, beautiful blue and green waters. We all wished that we could land on one of these islands and get lost for a few years! The islands that belonged to France, Martinique, Guadalupe, and other smaller ones, we were instructed to stay ten miles away from them. As Vichy France controlled these islands, and Hitler controlled Vichy, they did not enjoy the base building frenzy. As a result, they missed out on all of the jobs going on in the Caribbean building bases for The Yankee Dollar!

We had eaten all of our cold Spam sandwiches from Florida. Some of us went as far as to break open some "K" rations. These rations were about the size of an old Cracker Jack box. There were a great variety of snacks in them. My favorite was a can of cheese, and a round can of crackers. The fruit and nut bars were ok, but the tropical chocolate bars were terrible. They would not melt in your mouth. There were instant coffee, chocolate, tea, and lemon powder packets. As we had several gallon thermos jugs with water, cold tea was not too bad. Tea and lemonade mixed with water was pretty good.

Navigator Hosmer came on the interphone announcing that Trinidad was dead ahead, and we all were glad to get on the ground and stretch a bit. As forecasted, there was a giant thunderstorm over most of the Island of Trinidad, luckily the field was on the eastern tip, and it was clear. Gene Hudson made a slick landing as we shut old 476 down, I logged 9 hours and thirty minutes from Morrison. It had been a long day! Trucks were brought out to the ship, and we loaded up. Officers were to go in one truck, and enlisted men in another.

None of us carried big bags off the plane, as we were to be here just over-night. This is where the little "musette" bag came in handy, as they carried a change of socks, and shorts, as well as a towel and toilet articles. Our shorts were baggy

cotton boxer shorts, served as sleeping shorts as well. I don't think I ever saw anyone with pajamas anywhere overseas. The trucks dropped us off at a "Transient Officers BOQ", and we were assigned a cot. The BOQ was next door to the Officers Mess and Club, and all of the officers from about 15 crews of our group bellied up to the bar for a couple of quick "Cuba Libres. "

15 cents each. What a deal!

The most popular song on the Juke Box was The Andrews Sisters singing "Drinking Rum and Coca Cola". This song was about Trinidad where "Everyone Was Working For The Yankee Dollar" As we were all pretty tired, and the "Cuba's" were strong , an early dinner was called for. We had a great Tropical Dinner, GI Canned Hash and canned Fruit Salad, with lemonade. We were all so tired after a twenty- hour day, the bunk was the only thing we could think of. A shower in tepid water and to bed felt wonderful. Our wake-up time was 5 AM and departure briefing was at 6 AM. The beds were hot and muggy, we could have slept on the roof or the runway, as it had been a long day. I did not hear the heavy thunderstorm overhead a few minutes after lying down!

Trinidad to Belem, Brazil. December 12,1943

Briefing was to be after breakfast. We were out of bed around 4:30 AM, a quick shower and shave, button up the musette bag, check in sheets and pillowcases as we left the transient BOQ. We were introduced to the old standard military breakfast, powdered eggs hard scrambled, hot cakes and syrup. This was to be almost a standard menu from now on! It was filling, but not like Mother used to make!

At the base operations briefing room we were given a wonderful and very thorough check of the route to Belem, near the mouth of the Amazon River just south of the Equator. From the island of Trinidad, it was just a short distance to British Guiana on the South American Mainland. Our route took over Dutch and British Guiana, and we had to go deep inland to avoid French Guiana (home of the penal colony Devils Island). The weather was forecast to be quite wet with rain and thundershowers all the way to Belem. Once in a while we had a break in the clouds, and we could get a glimpse of the solid jungle canopy of trees 100 feet tall. The fellows at briefing told us, if we went down or bailed out, it was just TOUGH. They had no way to find anyone downed. The few people lucky enough to get out had been brought out by Indians.

The rain came down in sheets. Visibility was non-existent. There was a radio beacon at Atkinson Field, British Guiana. We held an outbound heading from this beacon, and it was in range less than two hours. This did give Navigator Hosmer and the pilots a chance to get a rough check on wind drift, allowing us to be near the desired heading. The B 24 was not too well sealed around the joints, rain poured in at every crack. The pilots, and Navigator were soaked, as rain leaked in all around the nose and cockpit Plexiglas. I went back in the bomb bay to the luggage racks, and dug out raincoats for us up front. We were getting soaked! The rain was so hard the engine head temperatures were low, and I had to close the intercoolers and allow a bit warmer air to the engines. We were quite lucky, as the air turbulence was not bad.

There were 16 fellows aboard, all wide-eyed and white-knuckled. The noise of the plane plowing through the heavy rain was deafening. We were a wet, cold, and scared bunch after about 6 hours of rain. Hosmer announced that we were about to cross the equator, and we should have a crossing celebration as done on ships. He volunteered to act as King Neptune, but Hudson told him to keep busy on the maps and navigation. Soon the clouds started to break a bit, and some rays of very welcome sun appeared. The next thrill was the Amazon River. There was no main channel we could see, just many branch rivers some of them a mile or so wide. I had no idea that there was so much water in the world!

As we were picking up the radio beacon at Belem, we started to relax a bit. That flight over the jungle with the heavy rain was hard on all aboard. No one wanted anything but some food, a shower, and bed! The view of Belem from the air was just a big town on a big river, with rusty tin roofs on everything. The landing at Belem was smooth. Flight time from Trinidad was 7:15.

The air was hot and muggy, and the smell was one I always remembered. It was the smell of swamp water and rotten vegetation, mixed up with a bit of wood smoke. After we got parked, the trucks picked us up and hauled us to the transient BOQ. These were individual small cottages, with six cots per room. The rooms were screened in on all sides and had thatch roofs made of banana leaves. The latrines and showers were in back of each row of cottages. There were young Indian girls there to clean up the rooms and baths. Their dresses were thin cotton, and I think that there was nothing under the dresses. These girls were small, less than 5 feet tall. They were constantly chattering away in some Indian language, sounded like monkeys. We got a shower and shave. These little girls were working around, but they seemed to pay no attention to these naked Americans. I guess in the villages they were from, no one wore any clothes, so nothing was new. We went to the mess

hall, skipped the club---too tired---had a typical GI meal of canned hash, canned green beans, and fruit cocktail.

As we were leaving the mess hall, I ran into a fellow named Tom Bunn. He has been a neighbor some years back on Craig Street. Tom was a Captain in the Signal Corps. His job was with Airways Communication, and he had been at Belem for almost two years. Tom said it was a very boring job, and they all suffered from various types of jungle rot! He said that he sure wished he had been a pilot, and he could get out of Belem. We got to bed just at dark, the various noises from around the jungle sure did not keep me awake, but some of the fellows had sleeping problems.

Belem to Natal, December 13, 1943

5:40 flight time. We were up an hour before dawn, a quick powdered egg breakfast, and another great briefing for Natal, Brazil followed. We were out of the rain belt, and the country became more open and dry. The flight to Natal was to be a "piece of cake", and we could do some sightseeing! There was not much to see on this leg, as we were inland over country that looked a lot like South Texas. There were a few water holes or lakes and quite a few cattle. There was only one town; the rest of the flight was pretty dull. As we approached the field at Natal, the South Atlantic was just a short distance away from the field. The water was blue, and the beach was beautiful. The City of Natal looked pretty squalid, but there were a few trees and plazas.

The tower cleared us to enter the traffic pattern from the ocean side, and there was a LOT of Air Traffic. Natal was the major departure and arrival point for flights to and from the USA, and to and from Africa. The field had many runways, and the parking areas were covered with hundreds of planes. There were B-24s, B-17s, B-25s, B-26s, C-87s, C-54s, C-46s, and C-47s all over the field. We were led to an area covered with B-24s, all new planes headed overseas.

It took about two hours for a truck to pick us up, and take us to the barracks for transient crews. Old "Rank-Has-Its-Privileges" reared it's ugly head. The Officers trucks had a canvas cover over the bed, and the enlisted trucks were open topped. We, the members of aircrews did not care for this treatment of our crews at all. There was nothing that could be done as the OLD ARMY RULED. Our Officers took about two hours for transportation, whereas the men took about five hours. All air crews were squeezed into very crowded one-story barracks, with the bath and toilets in detached buildings. Bunks were double decked; this was unusual for OFFICERS! The men were jammed up much more than we were. The mess halls

and PXs were huge affairs. They were open 24 hours a day and were jammed at all times. We were issued meal books for three meals a day. You could have 3 dinners a day if you wished, but I can't imagine why. If you wanted breakfast at 2 PM you got in the breakfast line.

The whole base was nothing but a bunch of lines!

Air Transport Command people had special passes and did not have to spend as much time in lines as Transient Crews! I ran into many people that I had known in school, at home, or in flying school. A great number of my Cadet Classmates were there-Co Pilots headed for war! Ran into Lawrence Wood from Refugio, Texas. He was a pilot with Braniff on duty flying a C-47 for the ATC. He had a pass! The Officers Club Bars were something again! Usually 6 men deep, smoking Lucky Strikes, hollering for a drink that cost 25 cents. The jukebox was wide open with the Andrews Sisters.

One evening Hudson and I were on the porch at one of the bars, sipping rum and coca cola, and a tall fellow sat down with us. He was Jimmy Stewart, the movie star, piloting a B-24 headed for England. He was a very nice, quiet fellow, and we enjoyed his company on a couple of evenings. He and Hudson knew a lot of spots around Los Angeles. We kept checking with operations, trying to find out when we would be leaving this mad house of Natal. We were told that our plane was grounded, as it had an inverter inoperative. It was grounded waiting for a new inverter. The next day, we scouted around the B-24 area. Near our ship was an identical model as ours. This ship had two engines needing changing. That night, we got Sgt Gilone and Sgt. Beeler with tools and flashlights, and went over to the 24 needing engines. We took off the inverter and put our bad one in its place. The next morning, we got engineering to check-off our ship as OK. Both inverters worked fine. Engineering told operations that our ship was ready for the hop to Africa! We made one last PX run, and all bought a pair of Mosquito Boots. These boots looked pretty good, and cost around \$15.00 a pair.

Natal to Dakar, December 18,1943

We went to a very thorough briefing the evening of the 17th covering the flight from Natal, Brazil to Dakar, French West Africa, departing at 3:30 AM. This was by far the most complete detailed briefing of the trip. We were looking at a flight of 10 to 11 hours duration, all over water. Needless to say, the whole crew was very alert and concerned about this flight! The pilots, navigators, and radio operators were the ones most concerned and involved with this information. I was very impressed with quality of the information presented. We were given a complete

route profile with the FORECAST winds and weather. This covered cloud make-up for the entire route. The weathermen kept bringing up "The Inter-Tropical Front". This is a front that moves back and forth over the Equator. At this time of year there was not much turbulence involved, just a lot of clouds and rain.

We were told to be on the lookout for any ships sighted, particularly any ships with submarines alongside. The Germans were still using "Mother Ships" to service subs in the South Atlantic. We had no ammunition or bombs aboard, but if we saw anything, we were to report by long range radio using Morse code. We should expect to be past the worst of the Inter Tropical Front two or three hours past daylight. We were assigned altitudes, and each plane would depart Natal 10 minutes apart. One other note was very interesting to us. As we neared the African Coast, we should make landfall South of Dakar. Upon hitting land, turn left up the coast to the field. If we flew to the left or North of Dakar, we would run out of gas south of Gibraltar, never seeing land!

At about 3:00 AM, an operations jeep came by, and told us to get engines started. They would come back and get us into the takeoff line at the runway. All was running and everything checked out, and we were led to the takeoff line. There was a jeep at the runway with a spot lamp checking plane numbers and moving the line. A flashing green light told us to run the pre-takeoff check, and a steady green meant to roll out onto the runway and take off. At our steady green light, we rolled onto the runway and applied TO power. As we started to roll, our clock showed 3:30! That place was really organized! Leaving the runway, out over the ocean, was like flying into a black hole. The procedure was for the pilot to keep a lookout for planes, and the co-pilot would hold the plane on instruments at a steady climb and heading. We did this till we got our eyes accustomed to the darkness, and cockpit lights (such as they were) adjusted. There was overcast, no stars or moon were visible, it was DARK. Navigator Hosmer gave us a heading and we were off to AFRICA!

About an hour and a half after leaving Natal, we ran into moderate rain. It was still black as a pit. Hosmer came up on the flight deck, and told Hudson and me that he really needed a celestial (star fix). Could we climb up on top of the overcast so he could see the stars? Hudson said yes, but we had no idea of the tops. I applied climb power to the engines, this woke all aboard up, any change of power or speed was pretty scary to the men aboard. We got to 12,000 feet, and still no break in the clouds. We were not supposed to climb above 10,000 feet without oxygen, at 12000 feet it started to get pretty cold. Hudson decided to go back down, and I sure did agree with him! Our assigned altitude was 7,000 or 8,000 feet, and we were still in the clouds with rain. Hosmer came up on the flight deck, telling us that he

really need to make a wind drift check, and could we let down to where he could see the water, as it was daylight by now. I set the engines to cruise descending. Down we came at 300 feet a minute as the altimeter unwound past 2000 feet, we all started looking out the windows for the surface. At 500 feet indicated, Hudson decided not go below 300 feet. Since we had not gotten an altimeter check since take off at Natal the real altitude could be off by a hundred feet or so!

At 300 feet, we applied climb power back and up we went still in the clouds and light rain. Navigator Hosmer was concerned, as we had been in the air over eight hours and did not have a good fix. Our radio operator, Sgt Muse had been checking in each hour on the long-range Morse code networks, and was getting a good signal from Dakar. We decided that Muse should try for a QDM (Position Fix) from a couple of the stations in Africa. With two ground stations copying our signals, they could determine a rough position fix for us. Sgt. Muse got us a fix and Hosmer was more comfortable with his navigation and gave us a heading for the shore about 100 miles south of Dakar.

A little over 9 hours into the flight we descended to 2000 feet, still in light rain but seeing the surface of the ocean white caps. We all had a great feeling of joy, knowing that we were so close to landing. The radio beacon from Dakar started to come in on our radio compass, this always makes the pilots happy! Sam Backanauskas the Bombardier woke up from his 9-hour sleep, and spotted the shoreline ahead. With a new heading we followed to shore almost due north. Still in light rain we landed at Dakar after a 10:10 flight.

The tower instructed us to taxi to a parking spot, and a parking jeep led us in. Shutting down the engines we started climbing out and got under the wing out of the light rain. Standing at attention in the rain was a Black French Colonial soldier guard. When he saw that several of us were officers, he snapped a rifle salute to us. We returned his salute, and his face was all smiles with white teeth showing. His uniform was great, on his head was a red Fez, his jacket was water-soaked cotton khaki, his pants were ballooned out like riding britches, wrap leggings on his calves and BAREFOOTED! He was at least six foot six in his bare feet!

Africa, HERE WE ARE!

Open trucks picked us up in the light rain, and took us to quarters. The base at Dakar was a pretty sorry sight. It was all red mud, with no grass or trees. We were not allowed to get off the base to see the town. All the local troops told us there was nothing to see, and NO one was allowed off base. The town of Dakar was off limits for all. Every disease known and some unknowns were there! We had a

couple of drinks at the club bar as we waited for the mess hall to open for an early dinner. Dinner was all GI canned stuff; but it tasted pretty good. Sure did beat the K Rations we had on the plane.

We were roused out about 6 AM, checked our bedding in, and had a hearty breakfast. Fried Spam with powdered eggs and GI French toast. We would have a 7-hour flight day ahead of us so we filled up. At briefing we were checked out on the next leg, Dakar to Marrakech, Morocco.

Leaving Dakar, we headed north and had to stay east of Spanish Morocco, as Spain was neutral! Most of the flight would be over the sub-Sahara, and then the Sahara. As we approached the Atlas Mountains, we were to spot a big black rock sticking up in the desert. From this rock we were to fly a heading directly into the mountains below the peaks. If we were on the right heading, and the wind was as forecasted, our course would take us through a pass in the Atlas Mountains, Marrakech was just on the other side! The briefer told us that they DID LOSE a plane now and then going through this pass! I think that they got a kick out of this. Those poor fellows stationed at Dakar. They had to have some entertainment!

Dakar to Marrakech, December 20, 1943

We got off the ground about 8:30, the light rain stopped about 20 minutes north, and the route was CAVU (ceiling and visibility unlimited). We could see for miles, but there was NOTHING to see. We flew over a place called Atar, an emergency strip and radio check in station, and a French outpost. Tindouf also a radio check in and emergency strip. At about 2:00 in the afternoon we spotted the black rock dead ahead! Passing the rock, Hosmer gave us a course right into the mountains. It looked like we were going to fly right into a 13000-foot mountain! Sure enough, thru the pass we went, and snow-covered mountains loomed on either side of us, walled fortress like villages were built on the steep slopes, trails went to these forts. We could see the opening on the north side of the mountains, and as we approached the edge, ahead of us loomed the oasis and city of Marrakech!

As we got closer it was an impressive sight. Groves of citrus trees lay around the city; a blood red wall surrounded the "Old City". The modern French city was out side of the walls. On the south of the French City, the big airport spread over a huge area. Upon landing, we were trucked past some nice-looking permanent housing belonging to the French Air Force. Our tents were the standard GI pyramidal type with a wood floor and eight folding canvas camp cots. Showers and latrines were in temporary buildings nearby.

The weather was great about 75 degrees, and clear as a bell. We had been told to bring our blanket from our baggage, as none were to be had. We cleaned up, put the blanket on a cot with our musette bags, and headed for town. The French or modern town was within walking distance, through orange groves full of ripe fruit! On the edge of the walled town or CASBAH was a great hotel. This was the world famous Mamounia Hotel. A world class hotel, exquisite grounds, uniformed waiters in Berber Dress.

John Van Lent, squadron Intelligence officer, was with us. He was a newspaperman from Muscatine, Iowa, was well read and kept us advised of all the sights, as he knew that this hotel was where Winston Churchill spent a few weeks each winter. Churchill loved the light and color of Marrakech for his paintings. We went to the main desk to see if we could get room for the night. The clerk was very polite, but informed us that what few rooms they had were for "Field Grade Officers Only". This was for Majors up! He did tell us that the dining room was open to all OFFICERS, and we were welcome to have dinner. We felt like we were Winston Churchill, the waiters were wall to wall. Hump Hosmer looked at the wine list, and ordered a couple of bottles. He had traveled through Europe as a college student, so he was much more knowledgeable than the rest of us. The wine was local but we poured it down like Coca Cola.

After three bottles, the headwaiter suggested that we have dinner; he was right, as we were getting a bit loud. The menu was very short. We ordered chicken, French fries and a salad. The whole of North Africa was very short of food, we found out later. The helpings were quite small, but we made up with more wine. The service was wonderful, but I think the dining room was very glad to see us stagger out the door, even after a heavy tip! At the hotel front we hired a horse drawn carriage with two seats facing each other. We piled in, told the driver to show us around town.

The hotel grounds were on the edge of the old city walls; the gates into the Casbah had large signs posted. They were written in English "OFF LIMITS TO ALL ALLIED PERSONNEL" "DO NOT ENTER" "VERY DANGEROUS TO ALL" "EVERY KNOWN AND SOME UNKNOWN DISEASES" "VIOLATORS WILL BE JAILED" "SIGNED THE PROVOST MARSALL" This information was very appealing to we five drunken American Officers. Humph Hosmer had use of a little French. The driver spoke French; so here we went, back around to the southeast gate of the Casbah. Only caravans of camels coming to town from the Sahara used this gate. Also, no military police were stationed at these gates.

Our driver had some old rugs; using them he covered us up as we hunkered down in the carriage seats. Away we went, in the long tunnel of the gate with camels,

sheep, donkeys, and people. I think we all started sobering up as we realized just what damn fools we were but were at the mercy of our driver. He told Hosmer that he was taking us to "The House Of The Seven Veils". Here we would have coffee and see a strip show, from there we would go back out to the French City. We thought this to be a great idea; so on into the Casbah we went. Sights: peeking from under the rugs, sounds, weird music, singing, and above all smells, cooking food, smoke, open sewers, and no one knows what else. There were no electric lights, just torches and flickering oil lamps.

We were back in time a thousand years!

This was a long way from Houston Street in San Antonio! We pulled up to the gate of "Seven Veils", got out and huddled against the gate to the house. The driver announced that he would collect his fare NOW and he would come back and get us later. This went over like a lead balloon! We told him to wait and we would pay him an extra fare when he got us out of the Casbah. He squalled but we held firm and told him we would just get back in the carriage and go back to the hotel. I think that he was going to get a kick-back from the Veil House, so he agreed to put his carriage in the big door of the Veil House. We all walked into the place through a smaller door, through a parking courtyard, and up some stairs to the performing hall.

In this hall there were flickering oil lamps in niches in the walls for a little light. Around the room along the walls were cushions and hassocks; a couple of flimsily dressed girls seated us. Over in the corner four of five fellows started the music, flutes, whistles, drums, and cymbals, just like the movies. The two girls brought out trays with brass coffee pots, and small brass cups. Each of us had a cup of this coffee; All the while the musicians kept up the squeaky clanky tunes. There was curtain over a wide door at one of the rooms, the music got louder and the curtain opened, and out came five girls with a lot of filmy veils covering them from head to toe. The girls wiggled and slithered around the room, the music got louder and faster, the veils started coming off!

The room got warmer. All the wine we had seemed to take hold of us! Looking back, we are pretty sure that the thick sweet coffee we had been drinking had keef or hashish in the mix. The veils were swirling, the girls were whirling, the room was turning, and all of a sudden, the veils were gone, and these nude girls were putting the make on us all. What a show. The girls were not too thrilling, they had varying shades of skin from light brown to jet-black. The most amazing sight was that girls were clean-shaven around the pubic areas.

We all played a little grabbo, and the girls did the same. But none of us had any intercourse with them. We were all in the same room together, and I think that Van Lent was a stabilizing factor. Also, all of those condoms were still in the airplane. We bid the veil girls goodbye, leaving a good contribution for them and the musicians.

Downstairs, our non-paid driver was waiting. We crawled into his old carriage, he covered us up and went back out the gate we had come in by. We were all sound asleep as soon as he started off. We had too much wine and too much of that funny coffee. The driver took us all the way out to the air base gate, and the gate guards had to wake us up.

Some night, but it was not over!

The night was clear as a bell, the stars were shining brightly, and our breath was frosting as we exhaled. It was cold, near freezing. This was a typical desert condition-warm balmy days and freezing nights. We staggered out to the olive grove where our tents were, took our shoes off and fell in bed. The canvas cot and one blanket made it feel colder, we put the GI blanket on the floor as it was a bit warmer that way, than the air circulating under a canvass cot. At about 3 in the morning we could not sleep at all, the wine and coffee was wearing off; and we were miserable.

Gene Hudson got up, and went to a vacant tent behind us. These tents had wood plank floors, and Gene proceeded to tear up the planks. He told me to get the front of our tent rolled up as he piled the floorboards up in front of our tent like a good boy scout. With the help of an old newspaper, he got a good fire started just in front of our tent. We crawled back on the cots, pulled up the blanket and were almost comfortable and asleep, when up drove a fire truck with a bunch of MPs. They put the fire out and took us to the guard house. The guard house was in a building, and we rolled up in our blanket and dozed off for the rest of the night. We almost thanked the MPs for the accommodations.

The next morning (Dec 21), the MP captain gave us a real royal ass-chewing. He was old army and was good at his trade. He did not care at all for smart-assed Air Corps Officers. He got some coffee for us, took us to the mess hall, had a guard watching us while we ate breakfast, (powdered eggs and French toast). As we waited around the mess hall, the MP captain came back with a Lt. Col., and we had another good eating out. Since our various crews were scattered all over North

Africa, there was no way that we could be written up without our Headquarters unit. The Colonel made us chip in \$5.00 each to pay for the burned boards, and then took us to a real nice house that belonged to the French.

There were beds and a big bathroom with a bidet yet. (none of us knew what a bidet was). Hosmer came through with an explanation. Since we were pretty tired, we just hung around the base and the house. We got the officers from Miles Walters' crew to share the luxury of the house. The base PX had little to sell, we did get a couple cartons of Lucky Strikes, and some Beech Nut chewing tobacco. The Wolfe brothers, gunners on our crew, were never without a chew of Beech Nut, any time we saw it available we got them some. How they wore oxygen masks, sitting in a turret having to spit, I will never know.

We all got well rested from our night in Marrakech. The next morning, December 23, as there were about eight 455th crews with planes at Marrakech, we got together with Base Operations. Here they told us that the field we had orders for, CHATEAU DUN DU RHUMEL, was closing down. The Air Transport Command promised that they were trying to find someone in the Air Corps knowing where we should go. Marrakech was crowded with new bombers, but most of them spent just one night before going on to England and the Eighth Air Force.

The 455th bunch decided to hell with it, and we went back to town to see some more sights. The French town was a very nice place; we had lunch, with a lot more wine in a neat sidewalk cafe. A piece of chicken, potatoes and one slice of bread was all they could serve us, but there was plenty of wine. A nice-looking Frenchman, with good English, and a licensed guide, asked if he could take us on tour of the on-limits part of the Casbah. We said that sounded like a good deal, just as long as he did not take us back to the Veil House!

Our first stop was a palace in the walls of the old city. This was a beautiful place, gardens in patios, lots of fountains. Screens of carved wood, and stone between areas, delicate arches with marble columns. The whole place was breathtaking. The building was now a national treasure. The king no longer lived in this thousand-year-old building. Next, we went to the Open Air Market! This area was about the size of four football fields. The old city wall enclosed one side of the area; this wall was about 50 feet high, 30 feet deep, and red-brown in color. The story is that in building this wall around the city, water was a very scarce item, so the king ordered the workers to use blood in mixing the mortar! Animals, and many humans furnished this blood. Life was cheap and water was scarce, and the king's word was law.

Buildings and narrow streets were on the other side of the market. A large mosque, and the palace we visited were at the other end. The open area was swarming with people: vendors, fortune-tellers, sword-swallowers, flame-eaters, snake-charmers, letter-readers and writers. I could go on and on describing these characters. I was quite taken by the water vendors. These fellows had goat-skin made into a bag, with water in the skin. The front legs had a colorful rope tying them together; this rope had a strap on the vendor's shoulder. One rear leg had a plug that was removed to fill the skin. The other leg had a small brass nipple with a plug. This plug was pulled, water was squirted into a brass cup tied to the belt, and the customer drank from the cup. One cup per coin!

Most of the folks in the market were dressed in a great variety of clothing. The people from out in the desert or mountains wore a vertically-striped, heavy wool robe complete with a head cowl. The cowl was worn behind the neck, and a belt or rope was around the waist. This robe was called a 'Burnoose" I bought one from a shop off the square, paying about \$25.00 US. It came in handy later on cold nights, even if it barely reached my knees. The merchants and businessmen wore a robe similar to a burnoose but of lighter material, and were white. Some did not have the head cowl. I think these were called dejabellas, or something like that. Most of the town women, wore gray robes with a head and face shawl. The mountain women were not veiled and wore very colorful skirts and blouses.

In all, the market was a sea of sound, sights, and color, with many smells thrown in! We all bought leather slippers, wallets, hassock covers, brass letter openers and other tourist stuff. I brought some of this stuff home, but it has been lost in time. The burnoose was around till about 1960, and I wore it to a costume party once or twice. The carpet beetles got into the wool and ate it up!

The next day was Christmas Eve, so we visited the shops and bars in French Town. There was not much to buy, but the shops were nice. Back to the base that evening for supper, we saw the mess cooks preparing turkeys for Christmas Day! We went back to our house to clean up and get dressed for midnight mass at the base chapel. Someone had a radio in one of the houses, and we listened to Armed Forces Radio. Programs were transmitted from all over the world with Christmas Greetings.

President Roosevelt was on the air with a talk in which he announced a reorganization of the army in Africa and England. General Eisenhower would leave Africa and go to England to take command of the forces in England. The Ninth Air Force would transfer from Africa to England. A new Air Force would be organized, based in Italy. This was to be the Fifteenth Air Force, a heavy bomber

force. This was great news to us as we thought we were headed for the Ninth Air Force.

About 10 crews from the 741st squadron, 455th BG went to the base chapel for midnight services. Getting there, we saw several hundred airmen standing around. There was no room for anyone in the chapel. About ten of us officers went to our house, got out some wine to toast Merry Christmas. As our party got to rolling, a jeep rolled up to the house. A major and a Captain with two sergeants, carrying orders walked up. They declined our offer of a drink and announced that ALL 455th crews and planes were to take off at 8:00 AM. Destination was Chateau Dun Au Rumel, Algeria.

What a Christmas Present!

No Turkey, No Dressing, No Cranberry Sauce, No Mince Meat Pie. We had one last drink, and climbed into our beds. I dreamed of Mince Meat Pie the rest of the short night.

December 25, 1943, Marrakech to Chateau Dun Du Rumel, Algeria, 7.5 Hours

We got up, cleaned up the house, took a shower, and went to briefing. The trip was to be almost direct via Algiers to Chateau Dun, about 100 miles west of the Tunisian Border. The weather would be so-so with some clouds and restricted visibility. We were to fly over the cloud cover to the City of Algiers, and descend to a lower altitude, follow a railroad to Chateau Dun Airport. There was a paved runway about 5000 feet long there.

After briefing, we went to the mess hall for breakfast, and it was a bedlam. All personnel were busy cooking Christmas Lunch. We had lukewarm Spam and powdered eggs, with cold bread and bad coffee. The trucks taking us out to the planes off-loaded four cases of K-Rations, and a big sack of oranges at each plane. Our water jugs had been filled, not with coffee, but plain nasty-tasting water.

Our flight leader was to be 1st Lt. Lawrence Liberty, the assistant operations officer of the 741st squadron. Our crew was to be on his right wing as next-in-command. I think that Lt. Liberty knew that we had the best navigator, and he wanted Hosmer to keep us in line! The planes were mostly from the 740th, and I think there were about twelve in all. We got all the ships started and taxied out together. The tower gave us permission to come back over the field in formation for a fly-by. We got into formation east of the field. Liberty took us right down on the deck, with takeoff power, and we roared across the field at a bit over 250 MPH. The tower

was screaming bloody murder, as we turned back from west to east and gave Marrakech a real Christmas farewell!

The planes stayed in a very loose formation order, but not too close to each other. This was at cruise power around 160 mph indicated, it was a cool day and I suspected we were doing 180 to 190 mph over the ground. We approached the city of Algiers from the southwest, and Masion Blanche Tower told us to stay well south of the harbor. The ships in the harbor were very jumpy, and they shot at almost any over-flying planes. The navy was good at this. They were poor shots but liked to throw lots of shells up!

We could not see much of Algiers, but it was a very large city covering hills around the harbor. As we flew east, the clouds above us started lowering, and visibility got poor. At about seven hours from Marrakech, we all became concerned as to just where we were! Our navigator, Humph Hosmer, told us that we had flown over a railroad a few miles back, and he was pretty sure that our destination was along that railroad. Hudson called the leader Liberty and told what Hosmer had said. We saw some rough hills looming ahead, and we knew that Chateau Dun Field was in a level area.

Liberty agreed and asked Hosmer to get us back to the railroad, and be quick about it. Visibility was dropping, the sun was low in the west, and we had better get on the ground. We turned back on a western heading, started calling the tower at Chateau Dun. Its code name was OVERCOAT. In a few minutes we saw the railroad and saw green flares coming up dead ahead. A very weak and scratchy voice from OVERCOAT started coming in. We were told to land to the east with the sun to our backs. These words were good news to all of us.

We found the asphalt field between a road and the railroad just as Hosmer had said. There was very little to see, just a few tents, and a small tower, but it was a field, and we were very glad to be on the ground. The tower told us to park around the field on hard-pan parking spots, and an officer would come out in a jeep to lead us. Each parking spot was several hundred yards away from the other. We could care less, because we were parked, and it was getting dark ... and cold. Lt. Liberty called on the radio, telling each pilot to walk to Liberty's plane, but the rest of the crew to stay in or around the planes, until he could find what was what!

After about a half an hour Hudson came back to the ship, and we all huddled around him for instructions. There were no tents for us on this field, and no mess hall or tent for us to get supper! The killer was that for tonight we were to sleep in the planes, or on the ground under it. The field was closed down, and the few

fellows still here were to tear what little there was down. They were to move to another airport about 30 miles to the east tomorrow! The only good thing was that they were to bring us a water tank truck, and a load of army "C" rations. We could build gasoline and dirt fires away from the ships, and warm up the "C" rations. We all had mess kits and canteens, so we would not starve tonight! Also, there were straddle latrines around the parking pans, and we did not have to dig latrines! As the water truck and the rations arrived, we all got some fresh water in our canteens, and filled the gallon thermos jugs with the better than Marrakech water.

As we were all hungry, we got some fires going, and warmed the meat and vegetable hash up, opened some cans of fruit salad, got some crackers and coffee out of our "K" rations, and tore into chow. After the meal we scrounged through the "K" packages, got some cookies and fruit bars, and were quite comfortable.

Now came the big deal --- Where to sleep?

Each of us had one GI blanket, along with fleece lined leather flying suits and a raincoat. Several of us elected to sleep on the ground under the plane, with the raincoat on the ground, the clothes we had on plus the fleece suits and boots. The blanket went over the top. We scratched the dirt a bit so our bones fit the ground better. It was not a real good sleep, but I think it was better than the cold metal of the B-24. During the night, it got colder, and a slight drizzle started. All during the night I could hear fellow ground sleepers, and particularly those in the plane tossing and rattling about. I do think we on the ground were warmer. A ground pad would be a great help as a cushion, I thought about the canvass nose and engine covers, but I was not sure just where they were. It was as dark as a pit. The overcast prevented me from seeing the Star in the East!

The next morning, it was cold and drizzling, a bit of ice had formed on the B-24. We were a hungry, cold bunch. The gas on the ground fires helped warm us, and we could heat water in our canteens for coffee. We had no idea that burning gasoline could be so sooty, but we saw a lot of that soot in the next few months. About 8 AM, the few troops with a truck showed up with some GI pyramidal tents. They showed us all how to set them up, the main center pole held up the center, and six shorter poles held up the four corners and the door opening. Our crew got three of these tents. Five officers shared one tent and the men set up in the other two, and we had them up and staked down in less than an hour.

Nearby was a hay field, and we carried hay into the tents. We made our beds on this hay, the hay sure smoothed out the bumps on the ground. The fellows from the field set up a cook tent, brought in three cooks and a couple of cook stoves, and we

had a hot breakfast, hot cakes and powdered eggs with syrup and coffee! They fed the whole bunch of us- around 160 men, an amazing job. They set up garbage cans for us, one for leftovers, one with boiling water and soap to scrub our mess kits, and the third was just boiling water to rinse our mess kits off. Heat for this water was provided by tin cans of burning gasoline under the cans. This was to be our style of eating for many months to come, and we had very few cases of the trots!

Late in the morning, Lt. Liberty called us all together. We were told that he and another fellow would try and go to an active field about forty miles away, hoping to get some word as to just where in North Africa we were supposed to be! We were told to keep guards on the planes and tents, get our own tents in good order, and help the guys still on the field. Some of our men got to do Kitchen Police, and some got around the clock guard duty. There was a bit of grumbling on part of the flying crew sergeants, but they all pitched in. I got to talk to a Warrant Officer in charge of the detachment. They were Air Maintenance people they had been put together at Kelly Field and he was from Cuero, Texas. They had been in Algeria since November 1942, and had serviced a B-17 group on this field. He said that at one time there were almost 4000 men on this field. The group had moved to Tunisia several months back, and he and his crew was to clean up the place, and then to go to the nearby field, think it was known as Telegrama, it was a repair depot for the Twelfth Air Force, but changing soon.

There was a lot of junk around, and in a gulley nearby there were all sorts of junk. One of the men showed us how to make a stove for our tents. First, we got a 25 gallon drum, cut a hole in the top for a smoke stack, the top used to be the bottom. Vent holes were punched around the base; one hole was big enough to get a hand into, carrying a lighted wick. A tin can was open at the top, a hole to accept a 1/4" tube was put near the bottom of the can. The metal tube would run from the can under the edge of the drum, under the dirt to the outside of the tent, a can to hold gasoline with a fitting for the 1/4 tube with a shut off pet cock at the gas can. The gas flows from the gas can past the petcock under the floor up into the tin can with sand in it. The 25-gallon drum is set over the can, the 4" pipe goes up from the stove along the center tent pole, through a tin flashing. Fill the Gas can, open the petcock slightly, look into the stove, take a wire with a burning wick, and light the gas. With a WHUMP the stove is lighted! If there is TOO much gas the WHUMP much bigger, the smokestack shoots into the air, and the Lighter gets his eyebrows singed.

By evening, ALL of the tents were set up with stoves of this type, and they were really appreciated, as freezing rain set in after supper! We heard nothing from Lt Liberty or the other fellow, so we assumed that they had found some booze or wild

women or both! And were inside somewhere, out of the rain. We slept very well in our tents, the straw on the floor was almost soft, and the stove kept us all almost comfortable. During the night we heard a couple of very loud WHUMPS mixed with loud voices and profanity. When a stove got too much gasoline, it started roaring usually followed with an explosive WHUMP. This told us that the stove had exploded, and the fuel had to be turned off at once!

We had no sort of lighting in the tents, but we all had issue flashlights, and Zippo lighters. The Zippos were a great substitute for a flashlight. We all had Zippos and kept them loaded with aviation gas, whether we smoked or not. At mid-morning, Lt. Liberty came dragging into camp, looking quite bedraggled. He had no news for us at all, as to where we belonged. He had left word at every field or camp he had seen. Also, we heard that he had left word in several joints in the city of Constantine. Every bar and cat house in eastern Algeria was aware of the "Lost Squadron". The Warrant Officer in charge of our field came by in a 6X6 truck. He told us he was going into the town of Chateau Du Rumel to buy oranges and eggs. He let several of the officers climb aboard, and we went to town.

The town was not much, a couple of paved streets, a movie house, some shops with no merchandise, and a market much like Mexico. We all bought a few eggs, and some sacks of delicious oranges, and some almonds in the shell. We were going to divide the loot up with our crews; the North African Oranges were a real treat; our crew ate the whole sack in a few minutes. The almonds were not as popular as we were all used to toasted and salted almonds. After supper, the five officers from our tent gathered at Miles Walters' tent close by. Walters' navigator, Bill Stroman, had bought a carton of wax candles when we went into the town. Bill was an avid reader and read in the tent by these candles. We put Stroman's bed in the corner of the tent, spread a blanket on the floor and got a blackjack game going. We all had a pocket full of French Francs, and the game was on a cash basis. After about half an hour, we heard a funny roaring noise. Someone raised the door flap.

OUR TENT WAS ON FIRE!

The five of us almost knocked Walters' tent down getting out to our tent! The fire was really blazing; the hay and gasoline had set the tent walls on fire, and down came the center pole. The five of us put gloves on and started grabbing bags and clothes out of the flames. Some of us got well scorched tossing our stuff out of the fire. It was a hell of a mess, as everything we owned except for the clothes on our backs was in that tent. One side of my B-4 bag was burned, I lost my class "A" summer blouse, and some of my summer clothes in the B-4 bag. The worst loss for

me was my prized A-2 leather jacket, my .45 auto pistol was badly burned, as well as a blanket and GI raincoat, and a pair of low quarter shoes, also the mess kit, canteen, and cover was ruined. We went back to the game next door, as there was nothing we could do. The tent was just a mound of smoldering ashes. Some of us lost more and some less. We were thankful that we had put our parachute bags, containing a lot of stuff, back in the plane after we got the tent. We split up, crowding in with the fellows in other tents, and slept fairly well that night. As usual, I lost about \$5.00 in the game.

After breakfast, the Warrant Officer got a driver and a 6X6 truck and took us to Telegrama. This being a depot, we got most of our losses replaced. The canteen and mess kit were a very necessary item. The pistol was not available, and the summer clothes were not at all necessary. I bought another pair of GI shoes, as they were the most practical shoes. Also, some more long underwear, wool shirts and heavy socks. Africa was colder than we had expected it to be. On the way back to Chateau Dun, we stopped by a natural hot spring, in the side of a mountain beside the highway. We had no towels or soap, but we decided to get in. There were some tables run by natives, and they rented a type of towel, also a basket to put our clothes in. As shoes and clothes were a hot item to steal, we had half of our group guarding the baskets, as the other half got into the water.

It was wonderful, the first time we had been really warm in some days. As we got out, we put on our new heavy long johns and socks, and it was great to be warm and clean! Back at the base, after lunch, a B-24 from our group landed, and we all gathered around to get the poop from group! The Group Executive Officer, Lt. Col. Phil Johns, from San Antonio, a Lebanese fluent in Arabic, gave us the word! The group, after being scattered all over Algeria, was to gather at a field 15 miles west of the city of Tunis, in Tunisia. The German and Italian armies had been defeated in April and we were to be based at a rebuilt German field at Dejedia. This was west of Tunis about 15 miles and was very near the ruins of Carthage. Gas trucks were on the way, and we were to take off in the morning, December 30th, for Dejedia !!

We had a pretty good supper prepared by the Service Squadron, some of them had gotten some local wine for us. We all had half of a canteen cup of this wine, tasting a bit like gasoline. But we toasted and thanked the guys from the service squadron, they had been wonderful to us of the Lost Squadron. They went out of the way to help; the Warrant Officer from Cuero was one nice man. I have been sorry for years that I did not write his name down. We spent an hour or so putting our stuff in the planes, after a good breakfast with the Service fellows.

We all gathered near the runway, and Lt. Liberty told us he would be leading the squadron again; we were to form in 3 ship flights in line. He was to bring us back over the field in formation at METO POWER (max except for take off) as we headed east for Tunisia. We were a real sharp flight the planes were around ten feet apart, and really making noise at 2400 RPM. We came right over the mess tent, and all were out waving at us. Into the morning sun we went, eager beavers all!

There was not a lot to see enroute, the country was rolling, and quite green. As we neared Tunisia there a lot of wrecked airplanes on the ground, also some areas with bomb or shell holes. The closer we got to Tunis, there was more wreckage on the ground. The area around Dejedia was covered with wrecks and piles of ammunition, crates and boxes were thick. Approaching the field there was very good communication from the tower. They gave a clearance to come in low and peel up to the landing pattern. The runway was nice asphalt one about 6000 feet long; there were taxi ways on both sides of the runway, paved hard parking stands were all over the field. Neat rows of tents were already put up for us, and there was a stovepipe in each one ... what a deal!

As we landed, a jeep led us to our parking areas, the tower told us to shut down, and all personnel to go to a big tent nearby, leaving all our bags in the plane. We were told in no uncertain terms to stay ON THE PAVEMENT on the way to the tent. All of the land mines and booby traps had not been fully cleared from the grassy areas! In the tent we were greeted by all of our squadron officers and the group staff. We were the last of the wandering group. Planes that arrived at Marrakech after Christmas were sent directly to Dejedia.

Chateau Dun, Algeria to Dejedia, Tunisia, December 30, 1943, two hour flight

Our group Commander Col. Cool spoke a few minutes, telling us that our field in Cerignola, Italy was not ready. He said that we were lucky to have some time in Tunisia. We were to practice formation flying every day that was flyable, keeping a good tight formation would save a lot of us when we got to flying combat. The German Air Force loved sloppy formations, and would shoot them to pieces, and he wanted us not to be a target. Col Cool had flown a combat tour out of England, and he knew the bloody facts. We all were a bit less eager and loud when we got out of that meeting. After a long wait, trucks took us to tents. Each crew of four officers had a tent to themselves. These tents were standard 12X12 or 144 Square Feet. The stove, made out of a 55-gallon drum took a good amount of space out of the center. These stoves were built a little better than our stove at Chateau Dun, and we all appreciated that.

Lt. John Van Lent moved into a tent with squadron non-flying officers, he still spent a lot of time with the four of us; he said that we kept him young! The living tents with latrines- (no running water) were on the west side of the runway. The mess and briefing tent was on the other side of the field. It was a long walk around, but we were not to cut across. A couple of trucks were always coming and going so rides were available. There was no running water; we kept a Jerry Can full of water near our stove, and another one outside. There were plenty of Jerry Cans (German Water Cans) available. In our tent areas there were water trailers that we could fill up from. To shave or do a spit bath, we got warm water from the stove Jerry Can, put into a small tin can, heated this water on the stove. We were all clean- shaven (regulations), but our hair was getting a bit shaggy after a month on the road. The food was strictly GI, but I enjoyed most of it. For breakfast, once in a while, we had French toast. This was made with water dissolved powdered eggs. Good syrup and salty bacon made a good meal. We still ate all of our meals out of the mess kit, once in a while there was room at the officers' table to sit down. Usually, we just squatted down like cowboys to eat out in the open. We were getting accustomed to eating in the open. If it was raining, we could take our food back to our tents and eat inside with the stove for warmth.

The morning of December 31, word got out that we would not fly on New Years Day. We all started thinking of a big party. Since a great many of our people had been at Dejeida several days, the word got out that there was a monastery nearby, and they had a good supply of red wine! The various crews got together with the motor pool guys, chipped in some cash. The truck men would take our money and bring in a lot of wine for New Years Eve. As the truck got back loaded with Jerry cans with wine. There must have been over a hundred gallons for our squadron alone! The orders were no one was to drink until after supper! We made an arrangement to have open house at several of our tents. The tents had taken the name of the crew's pilot. Our tent, men and officers, was Hudson's. Near us was Walters, Condra, Wurtz, Nangeroni, Iocatelli, Jordan, Slater, and Callen, all from Chateau Dun. With 4 officers per crew, there were 36 lieutenants in 9 tents; enlisted men had the same tent names, and were nearby, with 6 men to a tent. Each squadron was in an area to itself.

There were a lot of people, and a lot of tents. The cook and mess men did not fix much for dinner, as they too, wanted to party. We had spam sandwiches and coffee! Hudson and I brought a bunch of sliced spam from the mess tent, we liked to fry it on our stove. This was a lucky break, as we had more in our stomach than most other people. At about 7 PM the order was to Tap The Kegs, or Open The Jerry Cans. Red wine poured into an aluminum canteen cup, but it was not too good. The

wine was very strong and acidic. It also put your teeth on edge! After the first cup, it seemed to go down better. By the third cup, we were getting DRUNK, soon we were all staggering drunk! I am sure that the noise of singing and yelling could be heard in Tunis, some 15 miles away. We visited several of the crew tents, with cup in hand, wishing each and all Happy New Year. I have no idea as to how much wine I drank, but I had enough sense to stop about 10 PM.

I got my shoes off and climbed into my bed fully clothed, dead to the world. I think it was at midnight, I heard a lot of shooting! The aircrews were shooting their .45s to usher in the new year. My pistol was burned- up; my body was out, so I did no shooting. I guess I missed a lot of action. In the morning I felt pretty bad, the wine had a terrible effect. I was lucky, as many of the fellows had been sick all night. I walked to the mess tent, ate some bacon, oatmeal, and coffee. This helped my headache a lot. Walking back to the tent, it was a common sight to see the men outside the tents throwing up. That was some party. Here it was January 1, 1944 in a strange country, looking at unknown future, flying a death -dealing plane. The trip of the past month was exciting, and very interesting. It was amazing to be with a group of fellows with so little flying time, bringing 64 huge bombers all this way without one lost or damaged plane.

We had to be DAMN GOOD!

Now we had to really practice to be THE BEST! I guess that 1944 would be the greatest challenge of our lives, and unfortunately for some of us OUR LAST.

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