

THE BEGINNING

The 506th Bomb Squadron was formed on October 8, 1942, at the newly constructed base near Pueblo, Colorado. The original cadre consisted of 19 men. Included were Captain James C. Beam, Commanding Officer; 1st Lt. R. J. Dunham, Squadron Adjutant; 1st Lt. Greene Benton Jr., S-2 Officer; 1st Lt. John Swanson, Operations Officer; 2nd Lt. Gene A Nelson, Mess Officer; 2nd Lt. C. A. Sandoval, Communications Officer; 2nd Lt. James E. Miner, Engineering Officer; 2nd Lt. Albert A. Gill, Asst. Engineering Officer; 2nd Lt. Jerald Lowenthal, Trans. & Supply Officer; 2nd Lt. Ira C. McKee, Armament and Ordnance Officer; S/Sgt. Orr, and 8 other enlisted men.

During the next week 42 enlisted men and eight combat crews moved from Wendover Field to Pueblo. I was a member of one the combat crews. As a note of interest, my flight record shows that all of my October, 1942, flying time was logged as local flights with the 356th Bombardment Squadron around Wendover. About mid-month we moved by train to the new base in Pueblo.

In late October my grandfather died and I was given a three day pass to return to Michigan to attend the funeral. With a three day extension I was able, without my Commanding Officer's permission, to find the time to marry the girl back home.

A Squadron roster for October 27, 1942, shows I was on leave. Other individuals on that roster are highlighted in the Appendix. There were 379 of us.

Immediately after my return to base, the Squadron moved back to Wendover. My records show November flights were out of Wendover with the 506th Bomb Squadron, 306th Bomb Group. Late that month we once again moved back to Pueblo.

This trip was by railroad troop train. Some of the personnel saw the Royal Gorge for the first time. The train stopped in the bottom of the Gorge and the men were allowed to detrain and view the scene when looking up.

It was about this time that Erwin Strohmaier and Dana Tobey were transferred into the Squadron from Photo Training School. They were preceded in the Photo Section by Lt. Harvell and Sgt. Rowell. Joe Pribonic soon followed. However, Pribonic was hospitalized and he was replaced with

Bartus.

Erwin Strohmaier recalls the day he reported for duty:

I was sent to a little office where there were two officers, Lts. Benton and Harvell. Harvell had a folding field desk. I was a real green soldier and did not know how to act, so I saluted the first officer that I saw in the office and told him who I was. It was Harvell.

I soon learned that as a civilian Harvell was a salesman for Agfa photographic materials. Lt. Benton had been an insurance salesman. I told them of my sales background and military training in photography. That broke the ice and we became good friends.

There really wasn't anything for us to do in the photo section at that time. I spent a lot of time visiting Pueblo and talking to the fellows in the orderly room. Occasionally I would try to help them.

One day they were having trouble bringing the Squadron Table of Organization up-to-date. The weather was cold and there was snow on the ground. Orders had been posted that personnel were to report for outdoor training on the erection of pup tents. I didn't like the idea of going to that training session. That is when I volunteered to design a system that would keep the Table of Organization current. However, it would be necessary to miss the pup tent training. They agreed.

I got Dana Tobey to help me and we went to work. We had all the Service Records in an empty room of one of the barracks. We started a card file. (We did get some pup tent training by watching it from our warm second story work room.) It took us several days to complete the card file. After we turned it over to the Orderly Room personnel it worked just fine.

One day Lt. Harvell came to me and said we should have some photo darkroom equipment and a camera. He was afraid that we would not have a darkroom overseas. I really couldn't understand how a photo section would not have a dark room, but nonetheless, I told him that I would make a contact printer and gather the materials for a darkroom.

When I said it, I had no idea of where I would do the work or get the materials. I did remember seeing a civilian

maintenance shop on the base, but it was off limits for military personnel. When I walked into the shop I saw a man near the door who was having trouble taking something apart. He said that he had been working on it a long time. I told him that if he would let me I would take it apart for him.

While I was quickly keeping my word, I told him of my problem. He promptly told me that I could use the maintenance shop and could have any material that I could find. He also introduced me to the other workers.

In a few days the contact printer was completed with the exception of ground glass, the electric sockets, switches and wire. I took the bus to Pueblo and walked around until I found an electrical store. When I told them what I needed, they donated it. Then, I went to a glass shop and talked them out of a piece of ground glass for the top. That completed our contact printer.

I talked with Lt. Harvell about our need for photo trays and other equipment for the darkroom. He had a scheme for me to go to the supply room on the base for these items. With a song and a dance I got what I needed and a 4x5 camera to boot. Harvell was delighted!

A few days before we were to leave the base, someone started to ask questions about why I was spending so much time away from the base photo lab. They found out about what I had been doing. The Provost Marshall told Harvell to return the stuff or go to the clink. Harvell returned the things.

He then came to me and said that he wanted to take my personal camera along when we went overseas. We had already been told to send cameras home since they were not allowed to go with the troops. Harvell reasoned that he was the Security Officer for the trip and that they would not search his bags. That is how my camera went overseas.

During the months of November and December Norm Kiefer logged 113 hours of flight time. I was also promoted to Corporal.

In December there was an incident that resulted in the Squadron's first decorations for heroism. As I recall, Lt. Frank Slough was flying formation on a practice bombing mission. While breaking formation, after bombs away, one of the B-24's suddenly came up from under and in front of

Slough's ship. When the ships came together, the tail assembly broke off and was lodged on the nose of Slough's aircraft.

Flight Engineer James E. Caillier remembers events aboard Slough's ship on December 23, 1942, as follows:

We had just been flying in formation and dropping "baby blues" (practice bombs). We had been told that this was the way that we would be bombing in combat. I stood between the pilot and the copilot and heard Frank Slough call the other two ships, as we were lead, and tell them we would break formation and fly single file to practice gunnery on the side of the canyon where there was a target. I saw the two wingmen break off as if to trail us. I thought that I had time to go to the back of the ship, as I often did, to check out the fellows and look around. One of the gunners was afraid of flying and sometimes talking seemed to calm him down.

All of a sudden, the aircraft shuddered like it had struck a brick wall. It knocked us all down in the back of the ship. The alarm was ringing and I helped two of the crewmen to their feet. We started for the bomb bay in order to hang from the bomb rack to jump.

While in the bomb bay, I could see the pilot in his seat and the navigator lying in the crawl hole shaking. I went to assist the navigator, but he was incoherent and couldn't jump. I helped him onto the flight deck.

The pilot saw us, but made no comment. I headed for the nose where I found the bombardier trapped with his leg outside the craft. He was almost sitting in a wind tunnel because the ship was cracked like an egg. Otherwise he seemed to be all right.

I went back to the flight deck to tell the pilot what I had found. His only response was, "Didn't you hear the alarm?". I told him that I had. He then told me to sit down and help him with the wheel. The aircraft was shaking badly. The pilot was cool, but was swearing a little about the chicken --- copilot.

We couldn't see forward because something was wrapped around us. The pilot was talking about cutting up the man in the tail turret. I put my head out the window and looked down to see where we were. It was then that I

realized that we were pushing the tail end of another aircraft.

We started to fishtail so that we could see a little ahead. Each maneuver was very dangerous since we were on full power, but we were just staying airborne. Nevertheless, we had to find the field.

As we approached the field, the pilot really came to life and started barking orders like I'm the copilot. I did everything that he asked and then some. Soon we were on the ground and rolled to a stop about halfway down the runway.

I jumped out of the aircraft with all of my flying gear and ran toward the control tower. A Jeep met me about halfway. I told the officer what had happened. It was the first that they knew that there had been an accident. We had lost our radio in the crash and could not contact the base.

The officer whirled the Jeep around and streaked toward the Operations Building. Soon a whole pack of equipment and people, including a doctor, were headed toward the ship. The doctor went inside the ship with the bombardier while a crew on the outside cut him free.

We were then taken to the Operations Building to recount what had happened. Afterwards, the pilot and I were put aboard another aircraft and ordered to fly for two hours. When we got back, members of our crew, who had bailed out, were waiting for us. All but one was found that day.

The next day, the missing crewman returned. Also, we found that the bombardier had only suffered a broken leg. The only other casualty on our crew was the radio operator who had broken his ankle when he hit the ground.

Two days after the accident, some big shots from Consolidated Aircraft were brought in to examine the ship. They reported that the craft was so badly twisted that it was incapable of flying. They could hardly believe that we had flown it back from the collision.

During this time, I learned why the pilot was cursing the copilot. When the midair collision occurred, he knocked everyone on the flight deck down in order to get out of the ship first. For that he was made a permanent PFC on

kitchen police for the duration plus six months.

What Jimmy Caillier didn't include was that he and Frank Slough were the first 506th members to receive the Distinguished Flying Cross. These decorations were given after these men had become members of the 506th.

The local newspaper, *The Pueblo Chieftain*, reported the incident as follows:

BOARD WILL INVESTIGATE FATAL BOMBER ACCIDENT

The missing bomber crewman who had been missing more than 24 hours after he bailed out of a B-24 bomber near Manzanola yesterday in a midair collision was found safe and unhurt today at a farmhouse in the region. He made his way to the house yesterday and spent the night there, being unable to reach a telephone until today.

Four of the airmen who jumped were located within a short time of the accident. Prior to discovery of the fifth man, airplanes from the Pueblo Army base, the La Junta base and the Pueblo civil air patrol had flown repeatedly over the area near the crash, in an effort to locate him. Searchers from the Pueblo base were on the ground all of last night and this morning.

Bodies of the four lieutenants and three sergeants who perished when the bomber crashed near the gunnery range are in a Pueblo mortuary pending funeral arrangements.

The accident occurred at 10:15 a. m. Tuesday when the two bombers were flying near the gunnery range of the Pueblo Air Base, which is west of the bombing range. They were in formation on a routine flight when one ship unexpectedly rose into the path of the other.

The tail of the ill-fated craft was sheared off and the bomber plunged earthward before any of the seven men in it could bail out. It burst into flames upon striking the ground.

Part of the tail of the ship was still on the front of the other bomber when it made its way back to the Pueblo base.

It was about this time that Captain Beam was promoted to

Major.

There were also some concerns about the state of readiness for some of the gunners and radio operators. You will recall that I was flying as a PFC and Cpl.

After graduation from radio school at Scott Field in July, 1942, I was shipped to Salt Lake City and then to Wendover Field. In late August I was told to report to a Lt. for an interview. The Lt. told me that a new squadron was being formed and that they were in need of assistant radio operators. He then asked if I was interested in flying. When I said yes, the Lt. indicated that the Asst. R/O also handled one of the waist guns. Therefore, I would have to be enrolled in a Gunnery School.

The Gunnery School turned out to be at Wendover. We learned the parts of a gun (rifle) and how to dry or bore sight a gun (rifle). We shot skeet, target practiced with 22 caliber rifles and a few times with 30.06 rifles. Twice we fired 30-caliber machine-guns, from butts, at a moving target. We then moved to big time and learned to tear down a 50-caliber machine gun. That was it! Time ran out.! I was not promoted since I had not had the opportunity to participate in aerial target practice. The first time that I fired a 50-caliber air-to-air was in combat!

A report at the time pointed out the lack of training problem. I recall how Mike Davis strutted around like a peacock telling all the world, and particularly all radio operators, how great the engineers were. They were not mentioned in the report.

For many of us this was the first Christmas Holiday spent away from home. Oh yes, there were Christmas packages and the mess hall went all out to provide a real feast. However, it just wasn't the same!

There was a bit of excitement on New Years morning! Everyone wasn't up yet when First Sergeant Orr came charging upstairs shouting "All combat men fall out.". When asked what was up, he indicated that we were going into town and clean up a card game. It soon became apparent that Orr had been in an all night card game that he didn't think was being run on the up-and-up. With "his combat men" he figured that he could get some of his money back. Well, he didn't have enough takers from the combat men so he then went to the ground personnel barracks.

Bob Struble recalls that eight men from the 506th went into town and did clean out the card game. They included Nick Popovich, J.R. Bell and Jack Edwards. Don Pryor (Sgt. in charge of the mess hall) went, but it was not known if he participated.

Mike Davis and Maurice Dobbins also caused quite a stir when they obtained Air Cadet jackets and wore them into town. No, they weren't impersonating officers! Just looking a little better dressed. It was pretty well established that Mike also carried a blackjack into town.

Erwin Strohmaier recalls:

While at Pueblo the officers and enlisted men all ate in the same mess hall. Lt. Stark was the Mess Officer. One day he bought dishes for us to use rather than the conventional mess trays. This lasted just a few days since no one wanted to wash the dishes.

Another time he thought the meat we were getting wasn't good enough so he got a better grade of meat. I'm not certain where he got it.

One day Lt. Stark got a case of ammunition and asked me to go to the butts and shoot with him. I told him that I didn't care to do it as it was too much work to clean the rifle. He said if I would go he would clean the rifle for me. Dana Tobey and I went with him for several days. We never thought of telling the Orderly Room where we were and they were about to list us as being AWOL. We met Lt. Harvell and he asked where we had been and then told us to go tell Sgt. Orr.

The second day that we went shooting, I was going up to the targets with a bucket of paste to patch the targets. When I was about halfway to the targets, Lt. Stark shot a hole in the paste bucket.

During the first few months after the 506th was formed there were a number of individuals who were transferred out of the Squadron. Included were Sergeant Bowden and Corporal Simmons.

Thomas Hobson recalls that the combat crews went to Salina, Kansas, by rail on January 6, 1943.

Included in the Air Echelon orders were Captain Olaf W.

Allison, Flight Surgeon; 1st Lt. James E. Miner Jr., Engineering Officer; and M/Sgt Gordon J. Dunaway, our lead aircraft Crew Chief.

Two soon to be members of the 506th arrived in Salina via a different route. Dave McCash recalls that he was with the 302 Bomb Group, 355 Bomb Squadron at Pueblo in October of 1942.

During this month the 506th was training on the base alongside us. It was at the end of October that we split off and were reassigned to the 330th Group, 457th Squadron. On the first of December, 1942, we were in Topeka, Kansas, when we were reassigned as the 333rd Bomb Group, 469 Squadron. Our crew was still the same, so our flight training progressed with little interruption, except for the weather, which cut our flights to 10 in two months.

On January 21, 1943, we were confined to base to await orders which came through on the 23rd. Three crews were sent to Salina, Kansas. While we were on the taxi strip awaiting our turn, the plane in front of us lost an engine on take off. It circled back, but turned into the dead engine and crashed in front of us. It was a sobering experience and I felt sorry for our pilot who had watched it happen and then had to shrug it off and ferry us to the Smokey Hill Air Base, Salina, Kansas.

While in Salina, the crews underwent additional physical examinations, received shots for overseas travel and were issued additional clothing and equipment that they would need for their overseas assignment. Each crew also received a new aircraft.

Dave McCash found on his arrival in Salina, on January 23rd:

The orders were changed once again. Instead of three crews, they now only wanted a navigator and a copilot. I was picked by a coin toss. Richard Jones was selected as the copilot.

Ray Marner noted in his diary:

Strong and Slough became members of the 506th while we were in Salina. (This must have been the reason for the change in orders for the crews that came with McCash.)

Thomas Hobson remembers that on the evening of January 24, 1943:

When my ship was next in line to take off from Salina, the plane ahead crashed. I do not believe that it was a 506th ship.

The author also remembers waiting on the taxi strip that evening while the emergency equipment was tending to the stricken ship. We took off while it was still burning. I also recall seeing "Shorty" Moran at some later point in time. "Shorty" was not leaving Salina that night. When the plane crashed, he rushed out to the crash site thinking that it was a 506th ship. When he discovered that it was not, he went back to his barracks.

Thomas Hobson also recalls:

On the flight from Salina to De Ridder the 506th aircraft encountered bad weather. Lt. Benjamin E. Angell crashed that night in a swampy area near Lake Charles.

With Lt. Angell were Lts. Edmond M. Haley, Ted Grezlak, and Wallace T. Moore. Also, Sgts. Donald E. Lathrop, Eugene E. Gaster, Jack W. Butterbaugh, and Foster W. Wilson were on the crew.

There was at least one survivor from that crash. On July 7, 1943, in a letter to my wife, I wrote:

One of the fellows that crashed in Lake Charles just walked into the tent. (I don't recall who that was.)

Dave McCash and Richard Jones also flew from Salina to De Ridder. They flew with an Operations Officer they did not know. Jones was copilot and McCash was navigator. They had an enlisted Engineer/Crew Chief. At some time in the flight the enlisted man told McCash that:

"The pilot is not really checked out on B-24's". This fact became evident when he landed at Barksdale by dropping the plane in from about 50 feet. We learned the next day that both wing spars were cracked.