

## IT'S OFF TO ENGLAND WE GO

### PART ONE-The Air Echelon

Dave McCash recalls:

On January 24th I met Nathaniel "Pappy" Graham and crew. The following day the crew took the plane to San Antonio Air Depot to "check it out". We all had our B-4 bags aboard. It was understood that if something would be found wrong with the plane, we would layover for a few days. Sure enough, when the wing tip tanks were filled for the first time it was discovered that they leaked. During the next two or three days Joe Young, bombardier and Graham visited their homes. The rest of the crew cruised around San Antonio. (Part of the cruising, by the enlisted personnel included a visit with Graham's Mother. She served us with cookies and milk.)

A very irate Lt. Colonel arrived with a brand new aircraft. This was our introduction to the ship that took care of us through a lot of missions.

We took off for De Ridder without delay. With the Colonel in the pilots seat, we climbed to 16,000 feet, even though the pilot was the only one with an oxygen mask. After a woozy trip, but with no real harm, we landed at De Ridder. We dropped off the Lt. Col., picked up our belongings and headed for Morrison AFB, West Palm Beach, Florida. I remember that there was a cold spell while we were there and I thought that I would never get warm again.

While Graham and crew were enjoying the pleasures of San Antonio, Thomas Hobson and his crew made a number of practice navigational flights out over the Gulf.

An Air Transport Command Unit arrived while we were at Morrison Field. It was commanded by a Colonel. It was a new unit that was going to fly the hump (carrying supplies over the mountains that are between Burma and China). The unit had been given home leave, but the men did not all return. Therefore, the Colonel was short of personnel. He decided that since he outranked our Commanding Officer, Major Beam, he would expropriate the personnel that he needed.

I was one of the radio operators selected for reassignment:

On a practice mission with the Air Transport Command our navigator became lost while over the water. We were very late getting back to base. I made up my mind that I would not leave the States the next day with that Unit.

That night I did everything I could to make myself sick (soap under the arm, laxatives, etc.). About midnight I went to the hospital and was declared unfit to fly. The next morning they threw my gear out of the aircraft just before the ship taxied out for takeoff. James Gerber, our tail gunner, was also selected to go with the Air Transport Unit. He left that morning.

Major Beam in the meantime had managed to obtain Operations Order #38 which protected most of his personnel. The Colonel's orders were to report to Burma with a Unit. Major Beam's orders, on the other hand, named specific individuals and aircraft that were to report to England.

However, Major Beam was not able to save two crews. Lt. William C. Lunt and Lt. John S. Powers had already departed Florida.

With Lunt were Lts. Glenn E. Jennings, Abraham D. Feldman, and Sidney Guzick. Also, there were Sgts. Eugene F. Messerly, Joseph H. Lamb, Robert A. Shadle, James H. McIlrath, and Omer W. Gobel.

With Powers were Lts. Desmond N. Fairbairn, Truman H. Elliot, and John F. Fogel. Also, there were Sgts. Nicholas Valko, John T. Moran, Paul Beasley, Harry H. James, and Howard S. Walton.

On February 4, 1943, we departed Morrison Field for Borinquen Field, Puerto Rico. Our approach to the field took us low across a rolling surf and a beautiful beach that lay at the bottom of a steep cliff. As our ship crossed the beach, certain crew members commented that this looked like a good place to spend the war. Nice weather, beautiful scenery, a swimming pool and nurses. Let's stay a while!

Dave McCash recalls:

We stayed there for a week waiting for the C.O., Major Beam, who was delayed by a maintenance problem in Florida. It was a great place to be delayed. The weather was

delightful, our quarters super, and the Club Bar had Planters Punch for 20 cents.

Regardless of Major Beam's problem, most of the crews wanted to stay. After all, our orders read that we were to report to England. They did not say when! Let's go swimming on the beach:

In the swimming party were Dale Maury, Richard Williams, and Lawrence Kallal. We had just nicely made our way down the cliff and entered the shallow warm water when we noticed someone on the top of the cliff waving his arms and shouting. We thought that was rather friendly and waved back. It was about then we realized that the beach did not have much sand. In fact it was rocky and had some sharp objects that were uncomfortable on the feet. Our new found friend was working his way down the cliff and still shouting. When he got close enough that we could hear, he did not sound so friendly. It seems that the beach we had picked to enjoy was off-limits and dangerous. That was the reason they built the swimming pool. We were told in no uncertain terms to use it.

During the week that we stayed at this base, we attempted to become acquainted with its facilities:

One night, a couple of the enlisted personnel found themselves at the bar of the base Enlisted Men's Club. However, they were not alone. Two of the officers had stripped off their bars and were drinking with us.

I don't remember how we got the word, but sometime that evening we learned that by the end of the next week the Club had to get rid of all of its hard liquor. They were selling it cheap. Now keep in mind that there were no taxes on that liquor. Therefore, it was dirt cheap.

Someone got the idea that we ought to take along a few bottles. After all, we did not know what was ahead of us. A few bottles, before the night was over, became a few cases. It happened that all of those cases were Old Crow!

A problem that then faced us was that it was a "cash and carry" transaction. One of the officers didn't think that this was too big a problem. He left us for a few minutes and then returned. He had "obtained" a Jeep which we promptly loaded.

With the appropriating officer at the wheel, we then proceeded to our aircraft. None of us were too concerned that the route he picked was straight down the main runway. This did concern the Military Police! We arrived at the aircraft before the Military Police caught up with us.

Now we were faced with another problem. Each of the aircraft had a guard. Now it so happened that the guard on our aircraft did not speak English. None of us spoke the local language. Thus, at about the the same time the Military Police arrived, our discussions with the aircraft guard had reached the point that he had thrown the bolt on his rifle and had a round in the chamber.

Needless to say it took some tall talking, but we did load the Old Crow onto the aircraft and drove away in the Jeep. However, the route this time was via the more conventional perimeter road.

The next morning we told the remainder of the crew about our new cargo and how we had loaded it in the middle of the night. That was when some one suggested a name for our ship. From then on she was the Old Crow. She didn't get her nose art until we were on base in England. What was the nose art? The label from the bottle.

It was about this time I had some thoughts about what the future held. Was this to be the last place that I would be able to sleep in white sheets and have a pillow case? To make certain that did not happen, one of my last acts at Borinquen Field was to strip my bed and pack the linen in my gear.

On February 11 the Old Crow left this country club after Major Beam arrived in Puerto Rico. It headed for Atkinson Field, Georgetown, British Guyana. The next day we went to Belem, Brazil. Dave McCash remembers:

Up until now I had flown just two or three times with this crew. I was still pretty much an unknown quantity to them. It was on this leg into Belem that I laid most of their doubts about me to rest. About 3 hours out of our destination, I had figured an estimated time of arrival (ETA). However, because most of the previous legs had taken longer than calculated, I arbitrarily added 13 minutes and gave this adjusted ETA to the pilot. When we split the field at Belem exactly on my ETA, my reputation

was made and I felt no need to explain how my calculations were arrived at.

On February 13 we departed Belem for Natal, Brazil. The next day we departed Natal for Bathurst, British West Africa (now known as Gambia). This crossing of the Atlantic was made at night. Numerous storms were encountered and we were tossed around quite a bit. It was later reported that some planes went down at sea. None of them from the 506th. In spite of the wild ride and the inability of the navigator to shoot the stars through the clouds, the Old Crow only missed its designated landfall by 16 miles. Maybe the new navigator will work out okay.

We stayed on this field until February 20, 1943, when we flew to Marrakech, French Morocco. As we approached the field, we were told to circle and wait for a herd of sheep to be cleared off the runways. This gave us our first good look at the wreckage of war.

The hangars and other buildings on the field had been bombed by the American Navy during the landings at Casablanca. Some of the French forces in Morocco had put up a stiff resistance. We later learned that the usable aircraft that were left on the field were never fully gassed up. Our Command did not want to take the chance that the French pilots would fly them over into German held territory.

Our quarters in Marrakech were large stone military buildings that you typically see in movies about the French Foreign Legion. The toilet facilities were a number of depressions and holes in the floor. They flushed into the sewer pipes when you pulled the chain that hung from the ceiling.

The dining hall was a huge building with wooden tables and benches. On the first night, while we were seated and eating, some American military police entered with a large number of German prisoners of war:

They were seated right behind us. Almost immediately, one of them, speaking in excellent English, started to harass us. He told us that he had lived in the United States for a number of years. He had been a taxi driver in New York. As a prisoner, he was now on his way back to the States. Did we have any idea where we were headed? He knew what his future held. Did we? Don't we wish that we could trade places with him? The military police kept telling him to shut up, but it was to no avail. He told them that

he knew his rights. We hurriedly finished our dinner and left before Mike carried out his threat to, "Give him a bust in the mouth."

Because the American Command did not trust the local French personnel, we were required to be armed at all times and were never alone. My partner was Albert (AG) Kerns. When we went into town the next morning, we soon found that the Arab population was also suspect:

While we were walking down a street we were approached by a little boy who asked for chewing gum. He spoke English and was not wearing the Arab robe. As "AG" reached in his pocket for a package of gum we were surrounded by a number of Arab children who obviously did not want us to have anything to do with the little boy. There was an old Arab man who joined the group. He could speak in broken English. He pointed to the little boy and said, "NO! NO! HE JEW!" When we looked to where the old man was pointing, we saw, pinned to the little boy's shirt, a Star of David. I looked at "AG" (Kerns) and he looked to me. We drew our guns and gave the little boy his gum. The crowd quickly disappeared. I have often wondered what happened to the little boy after we were gone.

On February 22, 1943, Old Crow departed Marrakech for St. Evals, England (near Lands End in Western Cornwall). At last we were in an English speaking nation and would no longer be bothered with a language barrier. Little did we realize that these people did not speak the same type of English that we spoke.

The Lands End area of England is a seaside resort. We were told that the nearest town of any size would be Newquay. I don't remember how it happened, but Mike Davis went into Newquay that night. He came back with tales of a town that showed no outside lights, bars that were called Pubs and they served warm beer that was called Bitters.

Mike also told of meeting an English girl that was thrilled that she had met a "yank". The girl had to be home at ten o'clock. She insisted that Mike accompany her and meet her mother. After the introduction, the girl's mother agreed that the girl could be out for one more hour. However, she admonished the girl to remember that, "this dashing Yankee Airman will be gone tomorrow. You must live here. Act accordingly!".

None of us can remember why, but Dave McCash knows that we stayed at St. Eval for five days. While we were there, he:

Went to a local restaurant owned by an Australian lady who loved Americans. She appreciated the presence of our troops in the Pacific area defending her country. It was Sunday and the restaurant was closed. However, she opened up for the "yanks". After ushering us in and seating us, she served a delightful brunch. Later we realized the eggs she served were a pretty scarce item in England at that time. In the not too distant future we would learn about powdered eggs.

This stop was cold and damp. I was wearing heavy clothing and a flight jacket most of the time. However, one day when I walked along the top of an ocean cliff, I saw below a group of English people enjoying themselves in the ocean surf.

Both McCash and I have an uncomfortable memory of this stop. It was here that they were introduced to the three biscuit mattress that was issued by the British military. The three biscuits would not stay together; even when I used my sheet to tuck them in. The biscuits were impossible to master and should be placed in the same torture category as the American issued all wool blanket.

The following 506th ships and crew members arrived in England at this time. Their fate is also indicated:

Cactus, with Lts. Virgil R. Fouts (KIA), Frank Navas (KIA), Joseph L. Brenner (KIA), Willard Michaels, and Robert H. Seaman (KIA)). Also, Sgts. Eldo A. Russell (KIA), Richard K. Nordquist (KIA), Edward W. Lindau (KIA), Jerry W. Wieser (KIA), and Clement C.L. Boulanger.

Ruth Less, with Lts. Frank D. Slough, Richard S. Jones, Henry W. Scott, and Lester Warner. Also, Sgts. James E. Caillier, Dan Kennon (KIA), Elwood W. Harbison, Herman Seigfeld, and Robert A. Griffin.

Earthquake McGoon, with Capt. John W. Swanson (POW); and Lts. Walter I. Bunker, Richard D. Butler, Henry E. Zwicker (KIA), and William P. Newbold (POW). Also, Sgts. Loy L. Neeper, Gerald D. Mason, Alfred M. Klein (Evadee/Returned), Warren K. Kooken, and Kenneth A. Klose (KIA).

Old Crow, with Lts. Nathaniel H. Graham, Harold J. Laudig,

Joseph J. Young and David E. McCash. Also, Sgts. Melvin H. Davis, Frank J. Juskowski, Maurice H. Dobbins (KIA), Norman C. Kiefer, and Albert G. Kerns.

*Baldy And His Brood*, with Lts. William H. Strong, Lyle S. Davenport, Thomas A. Flaherty, and Lloyd G. Fretwell. Also, Sgts. Edgar O. Hamel, Clarence W. Nelson, Lemuel B. Fleming, Vernon D. Haas (Wounded and returned) and Orville W. Kapp.

Lynn Bari, with Major James C. Beam; and Lts. William N. Anderson (KIA), Stanley F. Olson (KIA), Charles M. Shaw (KIA) and Ronald S. Allen (POW). Also, Sgts. Walter N. Goodson (POW), Allie T. Herne (POW), George E. Hartney, Oscar Ferkauff (POW), and Edward E. Coldiron (Court-Martialed).

*Wicked Witch* with Lts. James C. McAtee, Douglas B. Myers (POW), Sidney W. Bank (POW), and Richard L. Schiefelbush (POW). Also, Sgts. William J. Mears (KIA), Frederick T. Wolf (KIA), Joseph B. Duncan (KIA), George E. Christensen (KIA), and Stanley W. Glemboski (KIA).

*Mister Five By Five*, with Lts. George Rebich, Thomas B. Hobson (POW), Preston E. Vaden, and Thomas I. Hyde (POW). Also Sgts. Richard H. Williams (KIA), Richard E. Tuttle (POW), Earnest J. Cutshall (POW), Lawrence B. Kallal (KIA), and Dale W. Maury.

## PART TWO-The Ground Echelon

After the air echelon left, Erwin Strohmaier was one of the many ground echelon individuals who were given a furlough. He used his six days in late December visiting his parents, grandmother, and friends in California. However, he was back in time for the party that was thrown at the end of January. He recalls:

Prior to the party we were asked if we wanted a party with girls or liquor. It was decided that girls were wanted. There was a large punch bowl without liquor. The first person that tasted it thought that it was weak. He went out and got a bottle of hard liquor and added it to the punch. As the night wore on, others also made trips to improve the quality of the punch. Eventually, that was one powerful drink and the Squadron had both liquor and



girls.

I did not get to the party until it was nearly over as we were making personal photographs for Harvell. He took them from one of the planes before the air crews left. When I left the party, I took a bag full of sandwiches to eat the next day. When I took them out of the bag they were as dry as toast from the dry air.

About a week after the party, the ground echelon, consisting of 14 officers and 270 enlisted men, entrained for Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. They arrived on February 9, 1943. Captain Benton was the acting Commanding Officer.

Erwin J. Strohmaier recalls:

I don't know if it was his idea, but Lt. Stark had large boxes of plywood made to carry our food for the trip to Camp Kilmer. We ate well.

Captain Benton had Dana Tobey, another G.I., and I as peanut butchers on the trip to New Jersey. We set up shop in a mail car where we kept our supplies. We sold candy and cold bottled drinks. We made two trips through the train every day. When we were not working the three of us sat on captain's chairs and looked out the wide open doors. The weather was beautiful.

While in Kilmer, Captain Benton begged us not to run to breakfast on the ice and snow that was on the ground. He said that if anyone fell they would have to stay behind. Some ran and one fellow fell and broke a few ribs. He begged to go with the Squadron and was taped up for the trip on the ship.

The man with the broken ribs was one of the 10 officers and 237 enlisted men that were scheduled to leave the States at this time. The day selected for departure was Charleston Miller's birthday, February 27, 1943. Three officers and 30 enlisted men were left behind as the rear echelon.

Robert S. Struble wrote in his Log:

We left Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, Saturday morning, February 27, 1943. We entrained from there to Jersey City, and then by boat to a New York pier of the Cunard White Star Line. We were actually the next pier to where the burned out *Normandie* lay half buried in the water from

the Hudson River.

About noon, or a little thereafter, we boarded a boat named the Chantilly. The ship once belonged to the French, but the British took possession after it had been torpedoed in late 1940. All the guys pretty well knew where we were going when we boarded, but none knew for sure.

We left the pier about 5 P.M. and anchored just a little past the Statue of Liberty. At 4 o'clock in the morning we moved out to meet our convoy. I don't know what time we met the convoy, heading east, but by the time we arose we were in our position and under way.

Since this ship was run by British seamen, we lived under poor conditions for the whole voyage. Chow was indescribable. Between the stench from the galley and the Indian native crew, one often wondered how we could even taste the food.

The first days out most everyone was seasick. I was one of the fortunate ones who didn't become so. Some were sick the whole voyage and lost 15-to-20 pounds.

Sleeping conditions (hammocks) were very overcrowded. Everyone suffered together in rather good spirits.

The officers, due to English class traditions, lived, ate, and slept under "Waldorf" conditions when compared to the enlisted men. We often compared ourselves like cattle in the hold of the ship.

After four days out, the greasy mutton stew began to taste like steak. All of us bitched. The food improved, but not to any noticeable extent.

The Atlantic in winter is rough with rain squalls and strong winds. We did manage to see some whales and porpoises.

The third day out I was assigned to a gun crew. The gun was a British 12 pound antiaircraft weapon. I was the aimer. The gun crews (6 men to a crew) were on four hours and off 12 hours for the rest of the voyage.

On March 10, Ash Wednesday, at 6:25 P.M. we experienced our first submarine attack. This was later found to be

the only one--Thank God.

Everyone was immediately mustered on deck. It seems there were quite a few subs attacking on all sides of the convoy. Our information reported 60 ships in our convoy.

The first attack sunk three ships to our starboard. Later, around 11 PM, two ships were hit and sunk to our port side and one was hit immediately to our stern. Everyone was frightened of the unknown. It's one hell of a feeling to realize what's happening and one cannot do anything. You just sit there and wait, wait, wait. Two men were locked up in the brig as they became hysterical.

I was on duty from midnight to 4 A.M. that morning. It will be well remembered by me since two more ships were hit during my duty hours. One was a tanker carrying high octane gasoline. When first hit, it burned and became very bright. In fact we could have read a book on deck by the light given off from about 3 miles away. After a minute or so a huge puff of smoke and bellowing fire, with sparks shooting everywhere, shot up into the sky for 5-to-10,000 feet. This was climaxed by a tremendous, shattering explosion.

The official count was never given, but I counted eight ships sunk that night. For two days everyone slept by his boat station. We expected the worst, but no more attacks came.

This morning, March 11th, it was reported that our escort of Canadian and British destroyers, and corvettes had sunk three German subs and damaged a fourth during the night. This was why we escaped further attack. It was encouraging to know we got back at those bastards in some small way.

We remained on the alert for submarines even as we were approaching the port for disembarking. We dropped anchor in the Firth of Clyde, near Glasgow, Scotland on March 20 at 2 P.M. After spending one more night on the ship we went by train to Shipdham in England.

Erwin Strohmaier recalls:

While on the Chantilly, Lt. Stark kept looking for submarines with his binoculars. One day he grabbed me and asked me to look for subs for a few minutes. I expected

him to be gone for a long time, but it was not long before he was back and started looking through the binoculars again.

These same events were covered in Ray Marner's diary as follows:

February 27, 1943--Boarded the ship *Chantilly*, a captured French boat with English officers and a Hindu crew from Calcutta, India. Men in uniform from other countries were on board.

February 28--Pulled out to sea. A lot of fellows got seasick the first two days. I got by okay. This boat sure is a hulk. We're packed in like sardines. The food is the worst I have ever eaten.

March 9--Been on the boat for 10 days. Sure am tired of it. Have had some pretty rough weather so far. Lots of dishes broken. I can now walk on deck no matter how much the boat rocks. Old sea legs. Saw an aircraft carrier.

March 10 and 11--I'll never forget those dates. About 6:30 P.M. we heard an explosion and the muster bell rang. We grabbed our clothes and went on deck in time to see an oil tanker on our starboard side. It was split right in two. Two other ships were sunk at the same time. The torpedo that got the tanker was meant for us. It missed our bow by only 10 yards. That is official.

The Captain then started to rock the boat by zigzagging. I thought sure we'd capsize. The ship will take a 45 degree rock and he was rocking at 42. Two life boats were damaged and cut loose. Everyone was plenty scared and praying for his life.

About midnight we were attacked again by German subs. I think they got two more ships. We stayed on deck all night and just about froze while waiting for a torpedo to hit us.

About 3 A.M. we heard a terrific explosion and a munitions boat was hit. The flames grew larger and larger until they lit up the whole convoy. It was just like day outside. We were all perfect targets so a destroyer shelled the ship so it would explode. I'll never forget that sight. Flames shot thousands of feet in the air and died down quickly. All men lost their lives. What a

beautiful, but still horrifying sight.

English sailors aboard say it was the worst sub attack they've ever seen. They've been on the Atlantic for about 3 years.

Years later Ray recounted that when the first alarm sounded we headed up an open stairway for the deck. The gangway had railings on both sides and our barracks bags were stored below. Nick Popovich was directly ahead of Paul Keefe and myself. As we were going up, a bunch of the Indian crewmen were coming down. We could never figure out why they were heading down when it would appear that you should be topside. There was not room to pass so Nick just dumped them over the side of the gangway. When I think back it seems there must have been half a dozen or so go over the railings. If we hadn't been so scared I am sure we would have laughed. Afterward, Paul and I decided that whenever there was a hint of trouble we would always position ourselves directly behind Nick.

The diary entries continued:

March 12--Seven-to-twelve ships were sunk last night. We got three or four Nazi subs. We now find that if we had been torpedoed we'd have had to jump into the water because the life boats were jammed. Pleasant thoughts. We stayed on deck all of last night huddled up in coats and blankets. No attack.

March 15--Came into the harbor near Glasgow, Scotland. The people are really excited because the Germans reported us as sunk. They must have found the two life boats we cut away.

In a recent letter Ray Marner said:

In the submarine attack of March 10 & 11 the S. S. Chantilly was at the rear of the convoy. There were three ships positioned in front of and three behind. The next morning we were all alone at the rear, as all six ships around us had been sunk. We had fallen well behind the rest of the convoy and spent most of the day of March 11, 1943, trying to catch up. Luckily no more attacks were forthcoming.

Samuel G. Kelly, Captain, USN, Director of Naval History, reports that the convoy started out with 74 ships. The

convoy was subjected to attack by 12 German submarines on March 10 and 11. There were six convoy ships sunk, two badly damaged by internal explosions and two submarines destroyed.

Henry Fetherolf recalls:

The Chantilly was a British boat with the top speed of 12 knots per hour. The crew members, except for the officers were from India. The ship's Captain told the Americans not to let the Indians near the life boats as they would abandon ship at the first sign of trouble. Well, when the shooting started, we had to kick hell out of them to keep them from taking the life boats and taking off.

What does Henry remember about the actual attack? "Only I and the laundry man will really know how scared I was."

On the train trip from Scotland to London, the rails were bombed out and the troop train was diverted to a siding for a day and a half. There was no food. While doing some exploring, someone found an emergency supply in one of the cars. They did what comes naturally and then shared it with 1st Lt. John W. Stark, the Squadron Armament Officer. Stark and another 1st Lt. got into a row over the enlisted men stealing the food. Stark gave the other Lt. the prettiest shiner that I have ever seen. When the train reached London the other Lt. tried to get the M.P.'s to arrest Stark. It didn't work! Not one of that car full of enlisted men had seen a thing and thus there were no witnesses.

After having his memory jogged by reading Henry's account, Ray Marner remembered being hungry and finding a supply of C-rations.

Erwin Strohmaier recalls:

The subs attacked us about an hour apart. On the second attack the Captain said we were saved when he saw a torpedo coming and made a sharp turn to the left that kept us from being hit. I was in the front part of the ship, by the cargo hatches, with many others and got soaking wet from a wave that covered us due to this maneuver.

Prior to the attack there was much complaining about the food. We made so much trouble that one day all the NCO's were told to report for a meeting about the food. We said that we had our cooks along and would like to do the

cooking. The English Captain said, "He never heard anything like that before from enlisted men." He continued with, "The next thing we would want would be to run the ship." The next day was when the submarines attacked and everyone was so glad to be alive that there wasn't much bitching about the food.

The train trip to Shipdham was a long one. It was a little before 12 o'clock when we got on the train. We did not get any food until 7:15 when canned rations were passed out. We arrived at Thuxton Station at 4 A.M. in a dense fog. The truck that I was on got lost and we did not arrive at the site until 5:30 A.M. After the bad food we had on the ship, it was nice to get food that we could eat.