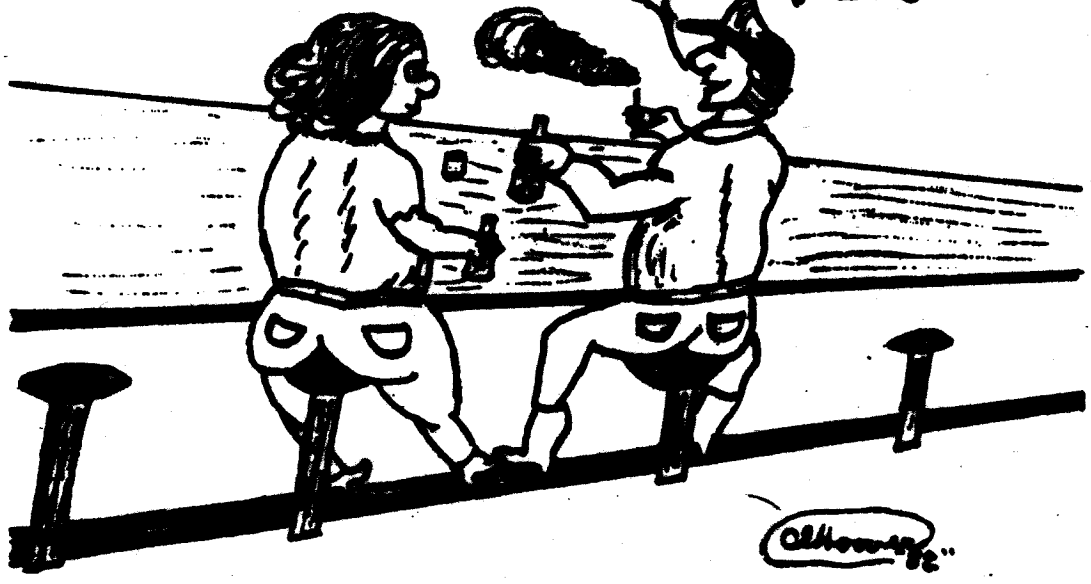


"and there I was."



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"THERE I WAS"

BY

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532nd Bomb Sq., 381st Bomb Grp., 8th AF

European Theater of Operations

Oct. 9, 1940 to Jan. 2, 1946

"For My Kids"

*To MARKS
from Chet Hoover*

In Memory

My days in the service,
were not all that great;
whether I came home,
was left up to fate.

Good times and bad times,
I remember yet;
Some friends I met there,
I'll never forget.

Some of us came home,
and some never will;
but they do remain,
in my memory still.

George, Orin and Pat,
Virgil, Clinton and Jack;
This, I dedicate to you,
Cause I did come back.....

THERE I WAS

CHAPTER ONE

Oct. 9, 1940 to May 1943

I think all American flyers of World War II had a "THERE I WAS", story. Mine begins in October 1940.

With World War II looming just over the horizon, I and two of my best high school buddies, Jess Baxter and Virgil Dean, decided to join the Armed Forces and save our country and the world from the evil Axis Powers. Mr. and Mrs. Baxter took us to Billings, Montana to enlist. The Recruiting Sgt. gave us three choices of the branch of service and locations. The Infantry in Alaska, the Signal Corps in California and the Combat Engineers in the Philippine Islands. Being adventurous types, we thought the Engineers sounded the most glamorous, but Jess's folks didn't want Jess to be so far from home. We didn't know then, how fortunate this proved to be. Fourteen months later, the Japs would attack the Islands, and kill or capture all U.S. troops stationed there. We chose the Signal Corps in California, and were sent to Ft. Missouli, Montana, where we were sworn in Oct. 9, 1940. A few days later we entrained for March Field, California, where we would be stationed.

After six weeks of boot camp, we were assigned to the 4th Aircraft Warning Company. Jess and Virg were placed in the Communications section. I was assigned to the Operations Section because I had so much difficulty with taking code. Virgil was transferred to Ft. Monmoth, New Jersey a few months later. This made me very despondent, as we had been very good friends since our first day of school. He was later drowned in a boating accident at Camp Crowder, Missouri, within a few days of the day I was shot down in Europe.

My first year in the Army was, up to that time, the longest and most unhappy year of my young life. I was homesick, and thoroughly hated the Army life. If it wouldn't have disgraced the family, I'm sure I would have gone over the hill, [deserted].

The first four months my salary was \$21.00 per month, then automatically raised to a whopping \$30.00. Now I could afford to smoke tailor-made cigarettes. After about six more months I was promoted to Corporal and drew \$54.00 a month. Now I made out an allotment to send a little home each month. In one year after joining I made Sergeant making all of \$60.00. Things were better now, I was almost happy with the Army

About the first of September 1941, a group of non-commissioned officers were detached to an address in Los Angeles. It was a six story building, located almost in the center of the city. At first

we wore civilian clothes and lived in hotels near the building. We were ordered to be operational by Dec. 1st and prepared for maneuvers. Our mission was to train about 2000 women volunteers to assist us in our duties. We weren't aware of it then, but we were setting up the Operations Center for the southern half of Southern California, in the 4th Interceptor Command. This was a system of defense against enemy bombers in case of air attacks. The English had developed this during the Battle of Britain. A network of civilian spotters were organized in an area from the coast inland to about a hundred miles, and extended from Canada to the Mexican border. Besides Alaska, an Operation Center was located in Washington, Oregon, Northern California and Southern California. The spotters were spaced about fifteen miles apart, and connected by telephone on a direct line to our Operations Center. When a flight was spotted, it was called in as single or many, the type [single or multi-engine], estimated altitude and compass heading. As the flight progressed, the next spotter would call the information in, etc. As this information was received in the Operations Center, it was then plotted on a huge map of the area that was surrounded by our volunteer plotters. They were all woman volunteers that we had trained from September to December, and numbered about 2000. They were required to work two hour shifts, but many would stay four and some even eight hours every day, for the duration of the war. As the flight was set up on the map, the Raid Clerk, [my job], would call on the balcony for identification. In the balcony was representatives from the Airforce, Marines, Navy, Civilian Airlines and any other people who might have a flight in the air. Any friendly flight that appeared on the map would belong to one of these representatives and quickly identified as friendly. In the event that a flight remained un-identified, it was assumed to be enemy, and labeled as such with a red flag. Now the Air Force would scramble their fighter interceptors, the Anti-Aircraft batteries of the Coast Artillery would spring into action and shoot the buggers down. This, at least was the theory of the procedure.

Only once, while I was at this station, did we ever have an enemy flight, and it still remains a mystery. An account of this incident is fully and quite accurately described in one of Eric von Daniken's books concerning UFO's and mysteries of outer space. I don't recall the exact date, but it happened in the latter part of December 1941. The flight first appeared with a call from a spotter on the Mexican border. It was about one hundred miles inland, and described as many, multi-engine, high and flying in a northerly direction. The time was about 2100 hours [9:00 pm]. Unable to identify the flight as a friendly, I ordered it to be marked red as enemy. Night fighters were scrambled and the Coast Artillery alerted. Suddenly, when due east of Los Angeles, the flight turned onto a 270 degree heading and was bearing on the center of Los Angeles. A black-out was called by the Civil Defense and the entire city went dark. The Anti-Aircraft searchlights came on and they started probing the night sky for a target. One battery thought they spotted something and let go a salvo, soon

other batteries joined in. For about thirty minutes all batteries were firing, but nothing came down except spent flak. No enemy planes and no bombs. The first battery to fire might have picked up a friendly fighter in their searchlight, and mistakingly took him to be a bad guy, so started the fireworks. I suppose the friendlies would have immediatly vacated the area after the first round was fired. The enemy flight terminated over the center of the city. No calls that it had continued on out to sea or anything. After about two hours the all-clear siren blew and the lights came on again. Some people were killed from the falling flak and numerous auto accidents. There was no answer then and none now. One unlikely possibility is that the "5th Column", as we called sabatage and espionage then, might have tapped into our communication lines and called in the bogus flight as a terrorist act. Another theory, although denied by the military, was that the Civil Defense deliberately staged the show as a dry run and to make the people aware that there really was a war going on. If this was true, I'm sure that by now it would be public knowledge. Perhaps Daniken was right that it was UFO's playing around.

Things were pretty much routine for awhile, except that my First Sergeant Yeoman and I agreed to disagree. I was becoming unhappy with the prospects of spending the entire war on 7th and Flower in Los Angeles. After the war, what kind of war stories could I tell my bar buddies back home? My affairs with the volunteer workers or battling the muggers and queers around Pershing Square?

I was searching for a way to get into a combat outfit, when my chance happened quite unexpectedly. The 1st Sergeant and I had a disagreement over some little thing and resulted in some insulting and some scuffling. Our Company Commander observed this little skirmish and severely reprimanded, insulted and informed us that we would be transferred out at the first opportunity. This opportunity was not long in coming. Cadres of NCO's for two companies were selected from the Battalian to go overseas. Naturally all selected for this honor were undesirables of their respective companies. I and 1st/Sgt. Yeoman were transferred back to March Field where the two overseas companies were making up. The additional personnel required to make up the company compliment, were chosen from draftees taking Infantry training at Camp Roberts. They were quite obviously selected by the same method as we NCO's, from the bottom of the barrel. These misfits were mostly illiterates, and a good mixture of nationalities. I was promoted to Staff Sgt. and took the job as Supply Sgt. of which I knew absolutely nothing. This put me on a par with Yeoman, neither of us knew anything about our job.

We were given dozens of shots, including yellow-fever, which resulted in the rumor that Trinidad was to be our destination

After about two weeks of preparation, we were sent to Camp Mason in San Francisco to join a convoy for parts as yet unknown.

As we were boarding the ship, I had just reached the gang-plank when the column was halted. The CO read off 21 names to fall out of the line. My name was called along with Yeoman's. The rest of

the company boarded the ship and we were left alone with a 2nd Lt., who explained that all of our equipment had not arrived yet and we would catch the next convoy if our equipment arrived. In the meantime we would be billeted on the famous rock out in the San Francisco Bay affectionally known as Angel Island. Second only to Alcatraz in hospitality, beauty and comfort.

Our barracks was located at the top of the rock and the mess-hall was down on the beach. In order to catch a meal, one had to line up at least two hours early and sweat the chow line down the mountain side. To add to our discomfort and miseries, it never stopped raining day or night for the two weeks I was there. I usually made one meal a day and felt that it was well earned. The rest of the time I subsisted on candy and cookies from the canteen that was also on the beach. Besides the Lt., we had 1st/Sgt Yeoman, Staff/Sgt Mason, Corp. Faulk [Arky] and myself as NCO's. The remaining sixteen were the draftee types from the Infantry.

After about a week, Arky and I decided that so long as we were here, we should see the city. Because we were overseas personnel, we were held under quarantine and no legal pass could be authorized. After some investigation and forgery we became permanent personnel and boarded the ferry-boat on a twenty-four pass. In no time at all, we found what we were looking for on Market Street. The next day we caught the ferry-boat back to the island, stopping at Alcatraz to drop off some mail. Just before docking Arky fell overboard and had to be fished out. We brought back enough liquid fortitude, so the next week went by pretty fast.

Finally, we were sent back to March Field. Our orders had been lost, and no one knew or cared who, what, or why we even existed. The 2nd Lt. and Sgt Mason disappeared, whether on orders or AWOL I don't know. It wasn't much of a loss at any rate. Yeoman and I continued to hate each other, but he found himself a girlfriend in Riverside so he wasn't around too much after that.

We were a Bastard outfit, sleeping in the barracks of one unit and eating with another. Arky and I drilled our troops occasionally, but most of the time we just lay around reading or sleeping. I was very liberal with 24 hour and even 3 day passes, as for once I could write legal ones. Arky was studying in the base library for the Aviation Cadet examination that was given in lieu of two years of college. He had taken it once before and failed. I accompanied him to the Cadet Board to see when the next exam would be given. The Cadet Sgt. told me about a new program that was just starting, called Aviation Students, and didn't require two years of college or the equivalent. This immediately interested me, but I let him talk me into trying the Cadet test first. Failing this I could fall back on the other program and still learn to fly. I had nothing to gain rank wise with the Student program as they graduated as Staff/Sgts and I already had this rating. In the Cadet program I would graduate with a 2nd Lt. commission. Jimmy Stewart, the movie actor got his wings through the Student program and later became a Group Leader as a Colonel in the 8th Airforce, retiring as a General.

I was greatly surprised when I passed the Cadet exam and was on

my way to wings and commission.

Now I must pass a physical examination. It was discovered that I must have a pilonidal cyst operation on my spine. I'd had this removed the previous August, but evidently some of the roots remained to grow again. While in the hospital, I heard that my 620th Signal Detachment had finally been assigned to a Signal Company and were no longer orphans. They were going to Alaska right away but I couldn't go as I was awaiting my call to the Cadets.

About this time, the news came through that the two companies that had gone overseas had landed on an island north of Australia, probably New Guinea, and been over-run by the Japs and all killed. Once again, I had been lucky enough to avoid the wily Nips.

Phil Arnett was stationed at Englewood, a part of L. A., and we had many AWOL passes together before he was shipped out to North Africa.

Finally my orders came in to report to Santa Ana for pre-flight in the Cadets. The next six weeks I would be given a crash course in higher mathematics, physics, meteorology, theory of flight, code and other associated subjects. We also had a very rigid physical fitness program that really put us in top physical condition. After pre-flight came six months of flying school at Ontario, California. Three months of Primary training in the old Ryan airplane, then on to Basic flying the BT-13. Upon completing these courses we would go to another school for Advanced Flying. Here we had a choice of single or multi-engine training. Naturally I planned on becoming an Ace Fighter Pilot, and would choose single engine and train in the AT-6 at Luke Field, Arizona.

I was assigned to a Captain Anderson as my instructor. My fellow students under Anderson were Moses Jacob Hoppenstein and Larry Houck. Our instructor was a good friend and a super pilot but he violently hated his job as Cadet Instructor. He didn't believe in discipline and was always in trouble with his superior officers. He was a graduate of Randolph and Kelly Flying School, the first, and for a long time the only flying school in the Airforce. His class-mates were all Majors or Colonels in combat units and he bitterly resented this fact. We knew right away that he was very dissatisfied and would do all most anything to get transferred to a combat Group where maybe he could overtake his class-mates. We would find out later just how far he would go to accomplish this.

After the dual time in the air, came the solo flight. I was having some trouble finding the ground on my landings, but so were some of the others, so didn't think too much about it. I found out later in Basic, when we were landing much hotter [faster], that my eyes were not right for this sort of thing. My depth perception left a lot to be desired. Thinking back to the flight physical that was more rigid than any other examination, I remembered the one test that bugged me. I stood at one end of a long narrow table with a cord in each hand. At the far end of the table at the end of the cords, two pegs about four inches high was attached. The idea was to pull on either cord until the two pegs were lined up