

Chapter 2 – On the Road to War

January – June 1943

January 1943

In early January, a pilot who was destined to join the 453rd Bomb Squadron arrived at Avon Park in Florida for advanced training. His name was Frederick J. Mingus.



Fred Mingus

“I was assigned to B-26s at Avon Park, Florida,” Fred Mingus said. “I came down in January of 1943 and did all my O.U.T. training [Overseas Unit Training] there...night missions, cross-country missions, and low-level missions. We skip-bombed all over Lake Kissimmee - cutting down stumps in the jungle - in the swamps in the back of Avon Park. And we lost a lot of good friends there because this was when the B-26 first came out. It had short wings and Curtiss Electric props which were prone to runaway – that’s what they called a runaway prop. The prop breaks, which held the prop in a certain fixed pitch – it was not strong enough and the props would spin and run away and become high speed on take-off. The plane never had a

prototype. The first plane that came off the line flew. There were no tests on it. They just took it out, fired it up and took off. Later, Martin modified the B-26 and added three feet of wing to each side and reduced the wing loading to 74.4 pounds per square foot. They took the Curtiss Electric Props off and put Hamilton Hydromatics on, which was a kind of paddle prop that made it operate a whole lot better.”

I asked Mr. Mingus about his background.

“I was born on August 31, 1920, in Green’s Run, Ohio, the first son of the 7th son...which old folklore has it as being a lucky son, and after only minor injuries in two coal mine accidents and my WWII service, I cannot dispute the old adage. I had two brothers and three sisters and liked fishing and hunting. During my years of High School we lived near Dad’s work place, Mine #355 in southeastern Ohio in Athens County. My dad was like most of his family - coal miners in Southeastern Ohio. I spent all my summers working for a farmer for a dollar a day and all I could eat with working hours from ‘can’ to ‘can’t’ – which meant from the time you could see to the time you couldn’t see. Many mornings started with a lantern to the barn to milk a herd of Hershey Cows. And after I graduated from high school at age sixteen with no chance for college, I was taken into the mine by my Dad as his partner. This lasted two years but after the mine accidents I told my Dad there had to be a better way to make a living; so I quit the mine and joined the 3C’s known as the Civilian Conservation Corps. This Corps was set up during the 1930s – deep Depression days. Nobody had any work at all. It was ‘make work.’ President Roosevelt had set up a system where he put young men to work building fences, digging ditches, cleaning forests. We built bridges, built dams, built everything. And I became part of the Forestry Division with a crew of thirty-six men, stationed at Worcestor, Ohio. My company was TSI, Timber Stand Improvement, and I was the leader – had thirty-six men and we went through the forest, cut out dead wood and improved the forest that way. We were cutting out Japanese Gooseberry which was causing White Pine Blight. And we’d have to cruise the fields, pull all the gooseberry bushes up and carry them out and burn them to reduce the Pine Blight.”

“This lasted three years from 1938-1940 and after that, I wanted to go into the service. I went up to Fort Hayes in Columbus, Ohio, in October of 1940. And the old sergeant up there – the enlistment sergeant, he looked at my school record and he said, ‘If you had one more credit of math, we could put you in the Air Force.’ I said, ‘Well, I can get another credit of math.’ So I went back home and I went to my high school Principal, Dr. Maurice Bryson. I had graduated in ’37 but he was still the Principal. I asked Bryson if he would teach me a credit hour of plain

geometry. He said, 'Of course.' And so I spent every weekend at his house learning plain geometry. I went back and enlisted at Fort Hayes in January of 1941. And my first assignment was down to Montgomery Alabama, to Maxwell Field."

"Then my Dad said, 'Well, you're going into the service and there are two things you want to remember. Keep your mouth shut and never volunteer.' I was twenty, so I volunteered for Mechanic School. I was transferred to Rantoul, Illinois, Air Corps Tech School. I spent six months going to Mechanical School and Graduated with the equivalent of an 'A&E.' After graduation, I was sent to Fort Slocum, New York, and then down to Panama with the 29th Materiel Squadron. They decided to open up a Tech school at Rio Hato, which was back up in the jungle, up in the midlands. And having finished tech school they sent me up there and I was teaching engines to crew chiefs on the V-18A when the war broke out."

"When the war broke out everybody was scrambling. They needed pilots so they sent out a memo saying that anybody interested in going to flight school should report to Allbrook Field on Friday, March 13th, 1942. I went before the cadet board and they flunked me. I didn't make it. I had three false teeth on a partial plate. I never did use those teeth to fly with (laughing), but that took me out of cadet school. But they said, 'You can be an aviation student. An aviation student would not be a commissioned pilot. If you graduate you'll be a flying Staff Sergeant.' I said, 'That's fine with me.' I came back to the States on May 9th, 1942, to the Port of Tampa and they shipped me off from there to Randolph Field in Texas in January, 1942. Then in August, 1942, I finished Randolph Preflight training at Kelly and from Kelly Field I went to Cuero for Primary Training. I flew the old Fairchild PT-19A. I graduated from that and they sent me to Basic Training which was up in Brady, Texas, which is in the heart of Texas, in November, 1942. I flew the old 'Vulte Vibrators,' the BT-13 & BT-15. I graduated from there and went up to Lubbock, Texas, and I flew the old bamboo bomber the UC-78 and the AT-9 [Advanced Trainer 9]. The AT-9 was an all-metal, twin-engined, trainer that was Ridley built and designed as a bomber for Norway."

"But it was a perfect ship to fly as a transition ship for going into the B-26s because it had much of the same flying characteristics – a hot landing, and you had to fly it from the moment you got in. A hot landing...150mph, otherwise it would stall out. My Primary Instructor, J. C. Scott, was a civilian pilot. I give him credit for most of my success as a pilot in the B26. He told me that there is just one thing I should always remember, 'Never buckle yourself into an airplane. You buckle it to you. You don't buckle yourself in. What you do determines what the aircraft is going to do.' That held me in good stead with the B-26 because you have to fly it from the time you get in it to the time you get out of it – it was very unforgiving. I finally finished up flight school and graduated in the top ten percent of my class on January 14th, 1943. And instead of being Staff Sergeants, they made us Flight Officers. A Flight Officer was not commissioned. It was kind of like being a Chief Warrant Officer. It's not a commission but it is a warrant."

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On January 14th Roosevelt and Churchill met at Casablanca in Morocco. There they were able to sit comfortably in a recently liberated area and try to figure out what to liberate next. They finally decided to invade Sicily after finishing the fight in Tunisia. Meanwhile Hitler hadn't given up trying to hold onto North Africa. It was said that his incompetence was worth many Allied troops. The Battle of Stalingrad was going full blast, but instead of sending his reserve troops there he sent them to North Africa.¹ On the 27th of January, 1943, Germany received its first bombing raid by Americans, when heavy bombers, B-17s and B-24s, hit the cities of Embden and Wilhelmshaven. The American air blitz of the Reichland had begun.

¹ Geoffrey Perret, *There's a War to be Won*, Random House, NY, 1991, 149.

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February 1943

On February 2nd, the German forces at Stalingrad surrendered – this was their first big defeat in the war. On the eastern front they would now begin to fight on the defensive, losing ground with almost every battle.

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When Gus returned from leave, things were buzzing at the base. “Then still another rumor turned into the real thing and the 323rd Group aircrews left for Baer Field, Fort Wayne, Indiana to pick up new B-26s.”² However, amid vivid world headlines, the 453rd would soon be completely stalled due to another B-26 supply glitch – the lack of priority in medium bombers was beginning to show. “At Baer Field “SNAFU” took over,” General Moench wrote, “and the men of the 453rd Squadron spent two months waiting for their aircraft which were still in modification at the Rome Depot in New York.”³

Tex explained, “We anticipated that we would only be at Baer Field a few days, but we ran into a snag and remained there almost two months. The self-sealing fuel tanks were leaking and repairs had to be made. Life was not too bad while we were there. We had no duties. Ft. Wayne was a nice city with a General Electric plant employing thousands of young girls and we had a liberal leave policy for the local area.”

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Officer air crews of the 453rd Bomb Squadron at Baer Field, Feb. 23rd, 1943.

1st row: Donald A. Nelson, Vincent J. Aducci, Richard J. Baker, William J. Heather Jr., Wayne E. Kachner, Mellville A. Erickson, Clifford D. Ghodes, Roger Morwood.

2nd row: Mark A. Sprague, Philip J. Hughes Jr., Leo J. Carbonneau, Saul Rubin, Roy I. Sparks, Roscoe R. Haller, Albert W. Satterwhite, Francis J. McGlynn, Anthony G. Van Antwerp, Straughan D. Kelsey, Jesse R. Swan Jr.

3rd row: Roy B. Pratt, John T. Walior, Clark T. Dean, James F. Hunt, Courtland V. Steen, Arnold Stern, William E. Hartnett, William E. Stevens, George P. Burnett Jr., Jack P. Voight, George J. Friesner.

(photo courtesy of Grace Ghodes)

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² Moench, *Marauder Men*, 29.

³ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 29-30.



Enlisted air crews and crew chiefs of the 453rd Bomb Squadron at Baer Field, Feb. 23rd, 1943 (Scrapbook).

1st row: Billy Williams, John Bull, Jack L. Boling, Ben Lasky, George Harris, Roland E. Clark.

2nd row: Harold C Gustafson, Bill Crowe, Bill Bos, Ralph E. Stevens, William M. McBride, Clarence C. Roy, Dell S. Benson, Kenny Class, James C. Bailey, Lucien W. Kidd, Michael Krizan, George D. Herrin, Howard Odom, James O. Mann, H. B. Harris, Cliff Burkhardt.

3rd row: Larry Nusser, Clifford Bell, Joe Casper, Lucien Blain, Fred W. Harrison, Cecil Turpin, Louis Tonis, Lewis G. Williams, Frank Wheat, Dan Towery, Robert Blossom, Raymond W. Reaman, Keith Bradshaw, A. Greenwood, Gaston G. Poulin, Jack W. Pippin.

4th row: Arthur J. Morlock, Don Showalter, James M. Smith, Walter L. Woods, James P. Berry, Charles Vacanti, Ray A. Gonnerman, Willis L. Brainard, Keith S. Seaman, Willis D. Diel, Joseph M. Hager, Samuel M. Findley, Erwin W. Krout.

5th row: Joseph L. Bothwell, William S. Broecker, Paul Stephens, James S. Siegenthaler, William P. Zipperling, William Beecher, George W. Clausen, Don Rekow, Benny O. Becker, Charles J. Ketchem, Bryce Ramey, Bill Archer, Dave Nattis, Dan McCornack, Eupene L. Pechon, James E. Hayes.

(Photo from Gus's scrapbook, names courtesy of Casimier V. Sochocki and Mrs. Mark Sprague)

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Gus apparently did not like Fort Wayne very much.

“First time I ever slept in a jail was in Fort Wayne,” he said.

“You were in jail?” I was curious.

“Yes, I was trying to get away from the M.P.s but I made a mistake and ran into the cops.

The thing was, we were supposed to be in by 12:00, or at least off the streets by twelve. See, you could be in a hotel, but off the streets. I was headed for a hotel when I spotted the M.P. car coming. I says, ‘Boy, I’d better get out of the way.’ I knew it was after curfew. They came around... they missed me, so I started to run off the other way. What did I run into? Cops! So in the pokey I went. Ha!”

“Were they afraid you might wreck the town or something?”

“I dunno. Think of that town... I wouldn’t give you 15 cents for it. Well, I ended up in the pokey, and boy, you talk about a pokey... holy mackerel! I’ll have to tell Henderson here (our local sheriff) that he’s got a nice jail in comparison to the one down in Fort Wayne. I had to call the Colonel [Thatcher] to get me out. Well, you take at 1:00 in the morning, he didn’t appreciate it. I don’t know why, but he did come down and get me out of that stinking place... and I mean stinkin’.”

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Just in case you think the officers were any better than the enlisted men, Master Sergeant Lewis Williams, a Maintenance Chief who attended the reunion, said, “I had a girl there in Fort

Wayne and she would go straight to Travis and get him to give me some time off to leave the base. She did that herself! One time we went into a bar there and Capt. Wood [the future group commander] and some of the other officers were there, having a few drinks. I don't know what happened, but she hollered to me, I turned around and she slapped ole' Woods and knocked him off the bar-stool. I didn't know what to do – pick him up, or kick him myself!"



Lewis G. Williams

Lt. Oran Begwin, a pilot who also attended the reunion, added. "You remember the Burghoff Gardens in Fort Wayne? They had so many women working there in that town. We'd walk in the bar and almost every seat would be taken. But all these gals would start yelling, 'Come on over. Come on over.' So anyway, we went in, sat down, got a couple of drinks, and there's

Thatcher and Pratt. They had two or three women with them. They'd been drinking. Pratt had been drinking martinis and he'd had about five or six. He went to the rest room and he never did come back. Finally, Thatcher says 'Oran, go check on Pratt.' We went into the rest room. Pratt was sitting on a stool in there – passed out. First we went back told Thatcher and he said, 'Go get a cab and take him back to the base.' I said, 'OK.' So we got him up and out of there, took him to the base and put him to bed. Never did say anything to him about it after that."

Pratt was eventually to become the 453rd Squadron commander after Travis and Lipscomb.

Williams said, "He didn't know the whole story, did he?"

They all laughed.

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William P. Zipperling



Benny O. Becker

Tex wrote, "U. S. Army ground forces had landed in North Africa and we began to speculate that we may not be fighting Japs after all – maybe we would be fighting Germans or Italians. We would not be long in finding out, because our aircraft had been repaired and we were ready to deploy overseas."

I asked Tex if William Zipperling had any problems because he was originally of German nationality.

"As far as I know," he replied, "his German ancestry didn't cause him any real problems. I have heard that he was under surveillance while we were at Ft. Wayne, IN, for a

while waiting for some of our new planes to be repaired from problems of leaking self-sealing fuel tanks. I also heard that Zip was aware that he was being followed. Zip was 100% loyal to the U.S. Everyone in the squadron liked Zip. There was one more combat crewman that was German-born. He was 'Beno' Becker who I believe came to the U.S. as an infant."

Zip's wife, Lillian, tells that he was offered a chance to go to another theater, in the eventuality of going to the European theater, but he said he wanted to stay with the group he had trained with. While in Fort Wayne, the 453rd Squadron took group photos of the officers and enlisted men.

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The Battle of Kasserine Pass, the first time in which Americans fought against German troops began on February 14th. The untried Americans had a very difficult learning experience and lost many casualties (about 1,800 killed and over two thousand captured), but learn they did, and soon, German General Rommel was very impressed. A few weeks later, he said he had never seen troops learn so fast. After this, General George Patton took command of the U.S. troops in Tunisia, and one of the first things he did was visit the hospital and tell the surgeon on duty that he would

have no victims of combat fatigue in his command. That started me wondering if generals ever got combat fatigue. I'm sure some of them did.

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March 1943

In early March, the Allied bomber command in England reported the first effective use of the 'Oboe' navigational aid, greatly improving bombing efficiency. In mid-March, the Germans renewed their U-boat campaign in the Atlantic and sank 27 American merchant ships in five days. The British asked us if we wanted help in how to deal with the U-boats, but we said we didn't need it. In the air war, the heavy bombers were definitely the stars of the show. They were very popular with the public. At this point, bomber command was so optimistic that they told the high brass they could win the war by themselves by bombing Germany into surrendering.

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April 1943

Still in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Gus announced, "That's when we got our new planes... brand, spanking new B-26s!"

Tex explained, "Our aircraft was one of the B-26C models and was armed with eleven 50-caliber machine guns. It had a wing-span a few feet longer than the ones in which we flew in training but it still had the highest wing loading of any bomber in the U. S. inventory. Each square foot of wing surface had to lift more than 50 pounds when the airplane was fully loaded. It was theorized that because of our speed we would come in so low and fast that we could strike a target and be gone before the enemy could react."

But the new aircraft were different. They were built with out a co-pilot seat. The controls had also been removed. The intention was that the group would test a "single pilot concept" which many in the Air Force doubted the validity of. General Moench, in his research, could not find any reasonable excuse for this 'strategy,' except for saving weight, and stated that, "Marauder airmen would later assert that the persons responsible for the 'no Co-pilot decision' had no understanding respecting (nor consideration of) the other members of the B-26 aircrew." The men who had been training as copilots were reassigned to other units. The new planes arrived on April 1st and the Group left for Hunter Field in Savannah, Georgia.⁴

"So we kissed the girls at Ft. Wayne goodbye," Tex said, "boarded our new planes and departed."

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As the 453rd was starting the first leg of their journey to the war, Marauders on the other side of the globe were getting their first taste of combat. The 22nd Bomb Group at Garbutt Field in Australia attacked the Japanese held airdrome at Rabaul in New Britain. They had to gas up at Seven-Mile Drome near Port Moresby to make the trip.⁵

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Gus said, "We had to fly the southern route from North America down through South America and cut across to North Africa because our planes couldn't carry enough gas. We went from Baer Field at Fort Wayne to Georgia."

Gus's enlisted record indicates that he left the United States on April 9th, 1943. Captain Travis, the squadron commander, decided to fly with Lt. Gene Edwards as squadron navigator and he had Gus and Willie and a crew chief as crew. Apparently, C. J. Ketcham (radio/gunner) and Lt. R. J. Baker (bombardier/navigator) flew with Lt. Haller (Tex's pilot). It's possible that Lt. Satterwhite flew with the Travis crew also.

⁴ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 30.

⁵ Perret, *Winged Victory*, 96.



Above the clouds, a 453rd Martin Marauder in flight; this plane would eventually named *Smokey/Wyoming's Dirty Boy* #41-31831 (Photo courtesy of W. L. Brainard).

The standard directive was that each crew would let two men off the ship while taking on their crew chief [the plane's chief mechanic] for this flight. The displaced crewmen would fly overseas in transport planes. The squadron arrived at Morrison Field, West Palm Beach, Florida on the 4th of April. Tex and crew flew in their plane, which they had christened the *Egg Crate*.

Tex notes, "The top turret gunner, the bombardier, and myself were taken off of the B-26 at West Palm and taken to Miami, Florida, where we spent the night. The pilot, radio operator, a navigator and the crew chief remained as crew for the B-26. I was roused at 4:00 AM on the morning of April 9 and taken to the Miami Airport. There I was given sealed orders that were not to be opened until I was out of the continental limits of the country. We boarded a C-47 cargo plane and took off. After departing the U.S., I opened my orders and discovered that I was on my way to England!"

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The next stop was Borinquen Field, Puerto Rico.

Gus said, "Puerto Rico was a beautiful place, nice place to visit, but that's all. We stayed there about two days. Then, we went to Trinidad, Port au Spain [the 453rd flight schedule says, Atkinson Field, British Guiana]. We stayed there overnight... in a doggone swamp. The whole place was a big swamp. Then we stopped at Belem, Brazil, on the ninth, to get some gasoline. From there we went to Natal, Brazil on the next day, where I met some Portuguese people. They lived in huts. Oh, what a stinking place that was. In fact, our tents, were better than their huts. I could talk French which is close to Portuguese. If you know one language it helps to understand another, in this case. The Portuguese people are a mixture. They use the river like we use a road and if you went to one of their huts everything there would be yours. They weren't prejudiced. They didn't care if your skin was yellow or red. They didn't have much but were willing to give what they had. They didn't expect favors in return because that was considered an insult. They were great people. I'd like to go there and see the same kind of people again. You know, from what I've seen, I don't think South Americans are approached properly."

Gus remembered, "The way it was arranged, the whole crew would help check the plane, so we did. The crew chief took one engine and Willie and I took the other. There were 36 spark plugs

in each engine, and we forgot one. Later, the pilot couldn't figure out how come one engine was pulling harder than the other one. We made it all right, but it took all the way to the Sahara Desert to find out what was wrong. The crew chief decided to take another look. There was a brand new spark plug, laying right in the bottom of the cowling. He says: 'No wonder it didn't run very smoothly.'"

Willie added, "We think it must have popped out when we landed. We must have put it in finger-tight and then missed tightening it with a wrench. I don't know who's fault that was. To this day I don't. There were three of us looking at that. Now I thought I had touched every damn one of them. That's what Travis said too. 'It's nobody's fault. You guys did what you thought was right.' I must have had it in tight enough so that when you touched it, it didn't wiggle. We just thought it was tight... but it needed a torque (laughing)... pretty damn lucky!"

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While the 453rd Squadron was just getting en route to the war in England, the Marauder was already being phased out! On April 26th President Roosevelt and Glenn L. Martine visited the Glenn L. Martin-Nebraska Company at Omaha, Nebraska. After that it was decided to phase out the Marauder in favor of the B-29 Super Fortress.⁶

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Charles J. Ketcham

The next leg of the journey was across the Atlantic to Ascension Island. Gen. Moench notes that such a long flight over water with limited navigational skills was a near disaster for the 453rd Squadron. Lt. Baker, navigator/bombardier for the Satterwhite crew, noticed that the Squadron was flying on the wrong course. Four Navigators had gotten the flight path wrong. Although the flight had been warned not to use radio directional bearing since enemy submarines sometimes gave false information, Sgt. Ketchum, also of the Satterwhie crew had located a radio beam off their starboard wing. All the planes in the squadron turned to the right, due south, and the red fuel lights came on fifteen minutes before they got there.⁷

Ketcham had saved the squadron! Gen. Moench notes that the popular saying among the men regarding this trip was: "If you miss Ascension, your wife will get a pension." During that flight Lt. Mark Sprague, a pilot with whom Willie would fly all of his missions, got separated from the rest of the squadron. Mark Sprague had a similar experience when he was separated from the squadron by some storm clouds. He also used radio direction finding to locate Ascension Island.⁸

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Once safely in Africa, Gus and Willie tried to relax and visit the area.

"We went into town in Dakar, Africa, south of the Sahara on the east coast," Gus said. "There were these giant guys 6 feet 5 inches tall, all dressed up in beautiful uniforms, except they didn't have any shoes. You walked into town, saw uniformed persons barefoot, stomp, stomp, dust flying. They had guns. They were soldiers of the French army as far as they were concerned. Stood up in line, real pretty, but no shoes. On the beaches, the girls were all naked. The first one I saw was when I jumped over a log; she was taking a nap."

"Dakar interested me," said Willie. "The native black people were described as Caucasians, but they were black. So I looked it up and Caucasian is not a description of a person's color. It has to do with their bone structure. They were very tall, even the women were five-nine to five-ten. So you can imagine how we felt; we were just short little guys. They were beautiful people. I don't

⁶ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 30.

⁷ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 31. Postwar comments of Richard J. Baker.

⁸ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 31. Postwar comments of Mark A. Sprague.

understand why we were supposed to stay away from them. It was taboo. We weren't supposed to go over to the 'gook' village."

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"Well, we were in the middle of the Sahara Desert," Gus said. "Captain Travis came out and he says, 'Well, Willie and Gus, you aren't going to find anything to drink around here.' 'Who are you kidding?' I didn't say that, but I was thinking it. So we were out in the middle of the desert and we had to sleep on the ground. Well, a little ways off was a French Foreign Legion post. The barracks were down below with the Arabs and the canteen was up above. So I told Willie, 'Let's take a walk up to the canteen.'"

"Everybody Frenchie talked [French] to," Willie related, "thought he was from mainland France because his accent sounded like a Parisian. That's unusual for a Canadian. I'll say one thing about Frenchie, by God, he'd talk with everybody. I didn't talk so much then as I do now (laughing). The place was full of French merchant sailors who came in on a freighter. They were bringing in supplies. They were the first ship to come into the Port of Dakar in a while. When we got there, the shops in the town had been all deserted, but after that ship came in there was stuff to sell in the shop windows. We had been doing training patrols, flying up and down the coast. We had some depth charges on board, so if we saw anything that looked like a submarine we dropped on them. We hit something once – could have been a whale for all we knew, but we wanted to think that we hit a sub. At least we felt like we were doing some good, scaring the Germans away. We think that's how the French ship made it into the port. Frenchie was jabbering away with them... having a great time."

This was probably the first time Willie got to see Gus in his 'other element,' his French element. They tried to get a drink.

Gus said, "Of course, I got across to the bartender what we wanted. 'No,' he said, 'it's all buried.' They had had a bad storm and the whole wine cellar had caved in. Well, I told him, 'How about if we dig it out, and take what we want?' 'Go ahead.'"

"Those French sailors were looking for liquor too," Willie added, "so we were quite a bunch digging out that wine cellar. But Frenchie was having the best damn time talking to those guys and they were all laughing. Afterwards, we were sitting there and there I was, straight from the hills of Montana, and I didn't know what the hell was going on. We were drinking, 'course we were always drinking."



Richard J. Travis
Captain, 453rd

Lewis Williams, (at the reunion) interjected, "You knew how to drink though, didn't you?" Everybody laughed.

"Then we had to haul it back to the plane," Willie sighed.

I could just visualize Gus and Willie traversing the sand dunes under a bright desert midnight moon, with gunny sacks full of wine bottles, like a scene from *Beau Geste* – except they had gunny sacks instead of rifles.

"So the next morning," Gus continued, "there's Willie and me with wine in the back – that's what it was - a wine cellar in the back of the plane! Travis said, 'No,' he says, 'I don't believe it.' I says, 'You don't have to believe it. It's right there.' 'Impossible,' he says, 'we're miles away from civilization (laughing).' Look you gotta remember one thing. We were only 18 or 19 then but never forget, what you want to do you can do. That's what the Captain didn't understand. We could do it. Beautiful runway, it was like a rock garden."

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"Well, we left there and went to Marrakech," Gus resumed. "That's in the northern part of Africa towards Algeria. Here, we landed out on a sand strip."

This is where Tex and the other crewmen who flew over in transports were reunited with their planes.

“After departing from Dakar,” Tex related, “we flew in a two engine transport 1300 miles across the Sahara desert to Marrakech in French Morocco. There was nothing but sand as far as the eye could see until we reached the snow-capped Atlas Mountains. We crossed the mountains just before making our descent for landing at Marrakech. The top-turret gunner and I were reunited with our aircraft and our pilot and radio operator here. The crew chief was removed from the crew here and we gunners were put back on for the rest of the trip to our destination, England.”

Unfortunately the 453rd received another SNAFU here and they were grounded while they waited for some radio equipment to arrive, which didn’t bother most of the guys. They were in exotic Africa and the place needed exploring.⁹ The 454th Squadron arrived right behind them; the 455th and 456th squadrons had flown the northern route.

Gus said, “We used to sleep underneath the plane ‘cause there weren’t any barracks. We stayed overnight. We had to borrow somebody’s place to stay. The way it used to be, they’d have some boys there, and they would keep ‘em there for ninety days, see? Then, they’d rotate. So we used their place.”

Willie explained, “We stayed in a place called ‘the castle.’ It had marble floors and beautiful courtyards. It’s a famous palace. They gave us mattresses but the marble floors were still pretty hard. I’ve seen that place in pictures and on TV.”

Gus continued, “The Captain says, ‘Where are you guys going?’ Of course, we were on our way right off. ‘Well, we’re going into town.’ He answered, ‘It’s 5 miles off.’ I says, ‘All right. We don’t care about 5 miles, 4 miles.’ And we ended up in a real off-limits deal - what they called the Medina. Well, it’s a trading place (laughing).”

“Why was it off limits?” I asked.

“Because there was too much opium going around and there were a lotta things to it. Ha! Of course, Willie and I go into the Medina; we knew we shouldn’t be there, but we did.”

“What was in there?” I wanted to know.

“Everything. You name it. They had it. But Willie and I came out of there in a hurry. I’ll tell you about that. We went in there and Willie wanted to go into a house of ill fame, you know? I says to him, ‘Willie, gee whiz, we’re stretching our luck a little bit.’ ‘Ah,’ he says, ‘It’s all right. We’ll go.’ So I says, ‘Okay, your way.’ So I go in with him.”

“I deny it all!” Willie said. “I never went into places like that!”

Then he gave up.

“Oh, it probably was my idea. Frenchie wasn’t a lot like that. He was having a drink and talking to the madame that ran the place. He didn’t grab the girls like I would – if they were willing. He was kind of strict about that. Of course, me, I was looking at this young girl.”

Gus said, “So we got in there and, geez, I looked downstairs and here comes the M.P. I says, ‘Willie, let’s go!’ Up we go, up over the roofs!”

Willie said, “A couple of MP’s came right in there, and you know what one of those MP’s did? He picked up that young girl. ‘She may have syphilis,’ he said. They didn’t want us to use the front door. ‘That way,’ one of them said, and he pointed to a door that went out to the roof. We were out on the roof in a flash. Then he yelled, ‘Get your asses out of here and don’t come back!’ I think they just wanted the place to themselves. Those MP’s weren’t perfect you know.”

“Well, the way the Medina is made, the houses are all joined together,” Gus resumed. “You can run from one roof to another - all the way to the other end of town. So we got out of that one all right.”

Willie continued, “We came down off the roof into a courtyard with eight or ten foot tall adobe walls. It was full of camels and camel-drivers. I don’t know how we got in that corral to be

⁹ Moench, Marauder Men, 32. Postwar comments of Col. Roscoe R. Haller.

honest. Maybe there was some stairs or we jumped, I don't know. Here we were in the corral and all these guys were sittin' around a fire with their heads all covered up. They were cooking. It was very mysterious. Frenchie sat down with 'em and he got to yacking with 'em ninety miles an hour. They were smoking opium. We didn't want any damn opium, we wanted something to drink. So Frenchie got them to direct us to a place that might have some whiskey. There was a store nearby and that's where we got a hold of some raisin whiskey. We came into the front door of our barracks... that Moroccan palace... singing our heads off and carrying a case of whiskey, and everybody was asking, 'Where did you get that?' Raisin whiskey. It was drinkable, but it wasn't that good. It was OK considering that nobody could find very much to drink around there. The guys crowded around and we shared it with them. We really enjoyed that whiskey."

Willie began to philosophize.

"Stop and think back over it, we weren't being very useful at the time we were there. That wasn't really my fault (laughing). Frenchie didn't have to let me do it. After all, he was the boss, you know (laughing). He was older than me."

My aunt Martha really wonders about who it was that had all the bright ideas in this Gus and Willie partnership. I think we pretty much agree that it was Gus that was leading the charge.

* * * * *

Gus continued, "Then a little while later, we were in town there. When they close a door on a shop, it's an iron gate, they lock it. We came out of a bar... like I was saying, when they slam a door, they really mean it; an iron grill! From the Medina we got to touring the bars. Then we looked for a cab. So we got this poor little old Arab. He had a beautiful carriage. The taxi drivers didn't have gas, so they had a horse in front of the car."

"You mean they had a real car, with a horse in front of it?" I asked.

"Ya, so we ran across this guy with a regular horse buggy, with two horses, real pretty, nice fenders, etc. By that time we had gathered up about eleven of us there. Of course, eleven guys in a five-passenger deal, you're gonna squeeze something. The poor guy had to walk. We had 4 miles to go. There's the Arab driving his horses, walking, and he's cussing. Between Arabic and French, you know. 'Go ahead and sass, all you want!' Well, finally, we got to the gate at the base and he says 'so much' for a price. 'Baloney, we'll give you this much and that's all.' Well, he started hollering for the M.P.s. An M.P. comes up. I explained to him, 'The guy's all wrong. He offered us a ride.' 'Well, the cop says, 'He's gotta be paid.' 'All right,' I says, 'So a couple of bucks is enough.' So the M.P. tells the Arab to take off, 'Get out of here,' he says, 'You're causing too much trouble (laughing).'"

"That same night one of the boys slept in town," Gus continued, "in a place that they called a community dormitory. They stole his stockings, but left his boots on! Now can you figure that out? The Arabs over there were always 'last-price-first'. So they took the 'last price' and took his stockings. I still can't figure how it could be done. He got up in the morning, he had his shoes on but no stockings!"

"Did they take anything else?" I asked.

"Nope. All they wanted were his stockings."

"We went back to the ship one night," adds Willie, "to pick up something. We didn't know it, but our planes were guarded by native soldiers. Frenchie said, 'Be careful, we got guards on the planes,' but I just charged right in and one of them jumped us. He grabbed me... a big hand grabbed me by the shoulder... tore off a button trying to get at my dog tags. The German tags didn't have that. They got paid extra to kill Germans. He was about 6' 5" with a red jacket, shorts, bare feet, and a small funny hat [a fez], with a big curved knife in his belt. I saw that big knife come around to the front of my throat. They could feel for that 'notch' on the American tags.

That's what he was going for. They spoke French, these guys and Frenchie was jabbering at him as fast as he could, and I think that helped. I guess you know we were sober as judges after that!"

* * * * *

Finally, England bound:

Tex said, "On the 24th of April we departed on a short flight to Port Lyautey located on the Moroccan coast where we landed on a perforated-steel runway and spent the night. The next morning, which was Easter Sunday, we departed for England. Our aircraft was heavily loaded. We had auxiliary fuel tanks in the front bomb bay and special tools stowed in the rear bomb bay. We gunners were each given 150 rounds of ammunition for our guns because we would be flying adjacent to German occupied France and well within range of Nazi fighter planes. The flight, however, was uneventful and we landed in Newquay located on the southwest tip of England."

"When we flew up along the French coast we kept looking out, wondering if anybody would show up," Willie noted. "We needed target practice. Frenchie and I – we were only supposed to carry 150 rounds per gun, but I found out where they kept the ammunition. Being an old scrounger, I got a hold of some extra belts to put over my shoulder, put on my overcoat over 'em, and took 'em out to the plane and handed 'em up to Frenchie and he tucked them away in the back bomb bay. Then I went back for another bunch and packed them away in the tail gun spot. I had enough room right to here and here (on each side) to pack in 50-100 rounds on each side. But what you do when you pack in extra weight, you make the trim job on the airplane a little bit different. So the pilot notices it."

Uh oh, Satterwhite again?

"Well, anyway, we took off, went through Algiers and headed for England," Gus resumed. "We're coming in, and I don't know if you know anything about planes, but a red light tells you your gas tanks are getting pretty darn low. So we pulled into Wales. And that was on Easter Sunday. I'll never forget that. The old red lights were blinking to beat heck. And most of the aircrafts had the same trouble, so we landed there. Of course, Easter Sunday, you figure on a decent meal, you know. But what did we have? Mutton! You know what mutton is? Dried-up lamb. And we had potatoes, mutton and potatoes!"

The fact that after the war, Gus never again ate any kind of meat that came from a lamb or sheep testifies to what an impression it made on him.

* * * * *



Casimier V.
Sochocki

About that same time, on the 25th of April, the 453rd ground crews left Myrtle Beach for the ETO. Casimier Sochocki describes their send-off in a small diary he kept. "Left Myrtle Beach – 1:30 P.M. – 4/25/42. Arrived Camp Kilmer – 12:30 P.M. – 4/26/42." They stayed there about a week before moving on.

* * * * *

May 1943

Sochocki and the ground crews left Camp Kilmer at 5:15 P.M. on May 4th. By this time they knew they were heading overseas for sure.

"When we left Camp Kilmer," he wrote, "we were figuring on a band to see us off, but all they had was a truck which played a few pieces for us on a record. Then, on second thought, we decided that it was the best because we didn't want anyone to know we were coming. We pulled in at the Lackawanna Station in New Jersey about 8:20 P.M, and all piled onto the Lackawanna Ferry, went across the Hudson River to Pier 40 at Manhattan Island. Boarded the Queen Elizabeth at 9:05 P.M. 5/4/43. Fifteen minutes before we boarded the Queen, the Red Cross women came around and passed out one pack of Old Golds [cigarettes] and a Hershey candy bar. Later, other women came around with coffee and doughnuts, were we ever hungry!"

The ship left New York at 8 A.M. the next morning.

“I had stateroom number 25 on B-deck – with 8 other guys. We nine would have the room for 24 hours, then nine other men would sleep in our room for 24 hours. That went on for six days. We were packed just like sardines, the approximate load on the Queen was about 18,000 troops. It had 32 life-boats which looked to me to hold about 70 men and 2,000 life rafts which would hold 30 men to a raft. It is also known that it would take 7 torpedoes (well-hit torpedoes) to sink the Queen so we were on a damn good boat.”

“The first day at sea, we were escorted by three Navy blimps and a few B-25s. Second day, we had a few Catalinas on our port and starboard sides. Third, fourth, and fifth days we were on our own. We dodged a few subs here and there and it was said that we also were missed by a torpedo. The Queen can outrun anything on sea. It can do about 35 knots and hour. It can do between 40 and 45 knots but there is no need for such tremendous speed (only in emergency). The sixth day was actually a day of happiness for us when we sighted land, passed the northern part of Ireland, and then went through the Firth of Clyde and dropped anchor.”

“Our Squadron was the first to get on the landing boat, and a General named Phillips, a Colonel, a Capt. W.A.A.C. and a 2nd Lt. W.A.A.A were the first to hit Scottish soil. I was the 4th man in our Squadron to get on Scottish soil. The trains we got on in Gaurock, Scotland, sure did look funny but boy, could they ever go. We rode through Scotland in three hours and forty-five minutes and I’ve never seen more beautiful country in all my life – clean, and very good farming land, more pretty rabbits hopping along the railroad tracks and through the fields. We stopped at Carlisle, England, and got coffee and a package full of sandwiches and cakes. They tasted out of the ordinary but damn good. I couldn’t sleep at all on the train - it gets dark here about 10:45. They shoved the watches up 2 hours ahead of time to save light. We only have about 6 hours of darkness, that is in the summer and fall, but in the winter and spring it will be more dark than light. At 8:00 A.M. on the 12th we were told to put our packs on and at 8:15 we finally arrived at Diss, England. We were welcomed by 12 British Spitfires traveling about 450 miles an hour at about 60 feet height – they sure did look pretty. We were taken to Horham Field, station 119, by British and G.I. trucks.”

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Just as the 453rd ground crews reached Horham Field, the aircrews also arrived in England. Tex said, “From Newquay we flew to Bury St. Edmunds where the 322nd Bomb Group was based. They were the first Marauder group to arrive in England but had not yet begun operations. The reason for us going to their station was that our airfield was not quite ready for occupancy. I enjoyed the deployment over but I must say I was glad it was finished. Within 16 days I had been in four of the six continents of the world!”

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Hitler’s reinforcements to North Africa at the expense of other theaters didn’t help. General Rommel’s German and Italian troops finally surrendered on May 13th, ending the three-year, see-saw desert campaign. The war was over in Africa and the Allies were now free to invade Sicily.

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Gus recalled events at Bury St. Edmunds.

“We got in there and we met boys from another outfit,” he explained. “We were the 323 and they were the 322. Two days later they went on a mission.”

Tex remembers, “Our host, the 322nd Bomb Group planned their first mission, which was to destroy a power plant at Ijmuiden (pronounced ‘eemoyden’), Holland. This attack was launched on May 14 using delayed action bombs in order to give the Dutch workers a chance to evacuate before they exploded.”

This was the first Marauder mission launched from bases in England. On the 14th of May, twelve Marauders, led by Colonel Stillman, took off at 0950 hours, each plane loaded with four 500lb bombs. One aircraft was damaged by flak and was forced to return to base without reaching the target. In another aircraft, the pilot was killed when he attempted to bail out (the rest of the crew made it). Every aircraft but one had received battle damage. The survivors were alarmed about the amount of damage they had received, but the real let-down was when air reconnaissance photos revealed very little destruction to the target. Everyone was severely disappointed. It was determined that another attack would be made on the same target.



A B-26 Martin Marauder takes off (*Photo courtesy of W. L. Brainard*).

Tex recalls, “The aircraft returned from this raid badly damaged from enemy anti-aircraft fire. One of the badly shot-up planes crashed after returning to the station while attempting to land. The Marauders had received a ‘bloody nose’ but the worst was yet to come – a real catastrophe. Photo-reconnaissance revealed that the power plant had not been destroyed so three days later the 322nd attacked the plant with ten B-26s.”

On the 17th of May ten planes were ordered to make the same run. In spite of adamant objections by their CO, Colonel Stillman, against making the same attack so soon after the first, the mission was pushed forward by Command. Stillman believed the mission was utter foolishness. When leaving, he insisted on saying, “Goodbye,” rather than “See you later.”¹⁰

The return time from the mission was estimated to have been 1250 but finally by 1330 it was obvious that no planes would return. All ten had been lost. The depression and despair the men felt could not have been more complete. Everyone looked for something or someone to blame. Some even thought an enemy spy had given away the mission details, and many blamed higher command. Others blamed the B-26.¹¹

“We all went out on the flight line to await their return,” Tex remembers. “None of the ten planes ever returned. What a blow to our morale this was!”

¹⁰ Freeman, *B-26 At War*, 52.

¹¹ Freeman, *B-26 At War*, 54.

No doubt every aircrew in the B-26 fleet in England was thinking, “We may be next.”
“We found out that low-level flying wasn’t our cup of tea,” Willie said. The Germans had 40mm’s on forty-foot towers, so when we came in at treetop level they had no trouble shooting us down.”

Gus said, “They had told us before, ‘we don’t need you right away.’ Well, they needed us after that!”

* * * * *

Things were very bad, but just when it seemed that the situation could not have been worse - it got worse. Col. Thatcher was informed that the 323rd would be next to fly the same mission. He replied that he would do it but he would not order any one to follow his lead. General Longfellow, whose constant ranting had earned him the nickname “Screaming Eagle,” threatened him with dismissal from duty but he still wouldn’t back down.¹² Subsequently, and fortunately, it was General Longfellow who was replaced by a West Point graduate named Anderson and to the beleaguered Marauders General Anderson was nothing less than a godsend. Once in command he began to discuss the possibilities of attempting medium level bombing, which the Marauder was originally designed for, a fact long forgotten by the Press.¹³

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In May 1943, the American public didn’t have much going for it – at least on the Air Force end of things. The only morale boost in this period was the fact that the *Memphis Belle* and its crew were the first ones to hit the coveted twenty-five mission mark. As Perret wrote, “When in May 1943 the crew of the *Memphis Belle* of the 91st Group completed the first twenty-five mission tour of any plane in the Eighth, they were immortalized in American folk lore for miraculously overcoming impossible odds.¹⁴ I saw the real *Memphis Belle* in its place on the banks of the Mississippi River in Memphis, Tennessee. It was nothing short of beautiful. It deserves every honor. The movie is great too, if not historically accurate, it still catches the flavor of the experience of the heavy bomber crews.

* * * * *

Finally, the 453rd’s new air base was ready.

“Then we went to Horham,” Gus said. “That’s a nice name for a town, isn’t it?”

Gus, Willie, Tex, and the others joined the ground crews at Horham Field, in Suffolk County. The facilities were barely adequate and so spread out that bicycles were needed to get around the base.¹⁵

I asked Gus, “Where did you guys get your bicycles?”

“In the bar,” he said. “The first one cost me \$65.00 dollars.”

Tex remembered a funny story involving Col. Wood and his bicycle.

“Many of us rode our bicycles to the combat crew mess hall. Col. Wood rode his up there and parked it beneath a large chestnut tree. When he came for his bicycle, after eating, it had disappeared. Someone had put a rope on it and lifted and tied it way up in the tree. Col. Wood finally spotted it and had someone climb up and bring it down. He was good-natured about it and just laughed about the episode.”

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¹² Moench, *Marauder Men*, 42.

¹³ Perret, *Winged Victory*, 254.

¹⁴ Perret, *Winged Victory*, 253.

¹⁵ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 36.

June 1943

“General Thatcher, now, was Colonel Thatcher then,” Gus explained, “after that group had lost those planes we’d been grounded. They grounded every B-26 in Europe. They were afraid that that type of plane was ineffective in combat.” Things were not looking good for the B-26 in general, having been removed from service in the Pacific Theater, along with the failure of the Ijmuiden missions. Now rumors that the Marauder might be pulled from service in Europe as well meant that the morale of the men who had committed themselves to “keep them flying” was at an all-time low.¹⁶

Tex described his feelings at this time, “We, who flew this airplane, still had confidence in her. Some of the ‘brass’ decided that the problem was that the B-26 just wasn’t being used properly. They believed this airplane could be effective if flown at medium altitudes with fighter escort. It was decided to give this concept a try. We retrained for operations at medium altitudes of 8,000 to 12,000 feet.” While the commanders and politicians in Washington D.C. deliberated the value of the B-26 Bomber, the 323rd group crews back in England were not idle. The planes were refitted with the new Norden bombsight and they began to retrain for medium altitude missions. Everyone was very serious. This was contrary to all their training up to this point. It was like starting all over again especially for the pilots and bombardiers.¹⁷



Jack L. Boling

“Our First Sergeant, Jack Boling, was a bombardier even though he was an enlisted man,” Willie said. “He was one of the first guys ever trained on a Norden bombsight. He was our lead bombardier for a while. He was good, but he had a hell of a lot more practice with that bombsight than any of those officers. He’d been with it since it was experimental, so he knew that bombsight inside out. Boling was a real quiet guy. One day he came back from a trip to London. He had a pup – one of those English bulldog pups – he became our squadron mascot. He was one of those big-ole’ slobbery things. But they’re gentle. One time a B-17 crew was forced to land at our base, and when they left, our dog was missing. We thought they took it. Boling went over to their airbase and everywhere else trying to find that dog.”

* * * * *

Gus remembered one of the ‘characters’ in his barracks, “George - Oh! Ha, ha! George, beautiful George! We called him ‘beautiful’ because he looked in the mirror all the time. He stole a full-length mirror to look in. And Ole George, when he got that mirror about the size of the door there - he’d be standing in front of it saying, ‘Boy, aren’t you beautiful? Aren’t you lovely?’ He’d be tidying up his clothes, you know, getting all ready to go out. He had the mirror in the corner in such a way that only he could use it really.”

“One night, this was at the first base. We came in and it had rained. There was this big puddle right in front of the barracks, well ...Quonset hut. George came in from town. It was dark and that little spotlight on the bike doesn’t give you much light. He comes sliding in, smack into the barracks. Naturally, he fell off the bike. I mean what else are you gonna do? He said, ‘You doggone...’ He got madder than heck at his bike. So he picks up the bike, throws it against the barracks - bangs it all up... stove it all to heck. The next morning when he got up, he asked, ‘Who stove up my bike?’ I answered, ‘George, go take another look in your mirror. You might recognize who the guy is.’”

* * * * *

Willie’s troubles with the pilot, Satterwhite, finally came to a head.

¹⁶ Freeman, *B-26 At War*, 56.

¹⁷ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 58. Postwar comments of George B. Weaver, Jr., 99BW Training Officer.



Walter L. Woods



Lawrence Nusser

Willie said, “Lt. Satterwhite decided he could get a promotion quicker if he transferred me to another crew. He was like that. He wanted those promotions... a real brown-noser... so me and Frenchie were separated.”

Tex had a different opinion, “As for me, I had the utmost respect for Satterwhite. He was the oldest pilot we had in the Squadron and that’s why he had the nickname ‘Pappy.’”

Gus appeared to remain neutral on the subject and Willie was transferred to another plane: #41-34687, called *Pub 13*, piloted by 1st Lt. M. A. Sprague. “Sprague didn’t mind a joke now and then,” Willie said. “He could take a joke.”

There was no co-pilot on this crew either. The bombardier was 2nd Lt Donald A. Nelson. Besides Willie, the enlisted crew consisted of radio-gunner Lawrence C. Nusser and turret gunner Walter L. Woods. “Woody, our turret gunner, was from somewhere in Texas,” Willie continued. “He was a pretty quiet guy. He didn’t party with us much. We used to have a few drinks together now and then but that’s all.”

“Larry Nusser, the radio operator, was from Hershey Pennsylvania. He seemed to me to be the kind of kid who didn’t get very far from home. His time in the service was the most far away. He was an older guy, I think he was married then and had one or two kids. He went to the big town [London] with us one time. When he tagged along with me he was just as happy as a clam. He couldn’t get over how I went there and I went everywhere. You know,

your Dad and I just didn’t stop. Hell, if there’s forty bars, you’re supposed to visit ‘em! Frenchie was a year older than I was. He was an old guy – that’s why he was the ringleader. He’d ask, ‘What do you think about going to that place?’ ‘Let’s go.’ I’d say. I was the ‘let’s-goer’ (laugh). He’d come up with an idea and I’d say, ‘Let’s do it.’ Anything was better than sitting around.”

“What did ‘Pub 13’ mean?” I asked Willie.

“I don’t know,” Willie replied. “Bar 13, the 13th bar. That plane never flew straight. It flew along like a dogleg over to the side. Sprague loved it. It helped him to stay in formation. The tail was working toward the plane he was flying on, so he just had to keep it trimmed up and the plane itself kept him in close. More people who were flying that plane would taxi it around, getting it all ready for take-off, and they would abort while they were going down the runway. All of a sudden, they had the brakes on and they would pull off down by the end of the runway. I remember one guy came back and said, ‘What the hell is wrong with this airplane?’ Of course our crew chief would say, ‘There’s nothing wrong with it.’ He’d get it up there... take that plane, taxi it out, get it running down the runway 50-60 miles an hour, to test it. He couldn’t see anything wrong with it. ‘Oh,’ he says, ‘you got to use a little more left rudder. Sprague, first time he took off in it, he was worried about it. Came in for a landing and it worked OK. After that, when he got in a ‘straight’ plane, he wasn’t quite sure if it was flying right or not. It was a pretty good plane. Some pilots refused to fly it when they were assigned that plane, ‘Oh no, you don’t. You ain’t putting us in that.’ They didn’t want to fly in it.”

* * * * *

“Willie and I were separated,” Gus said. “He was in one crew and I was in another. So we were out of it as far as being together was concerned... unless we happened to have the same time off, which wasn’t too often.”

“You mean the only trouble you got into was with Willie?” I asked.

“Right! (laughing).”

“One time, Willie and I were out on the same trip. We used to go to this little bar every night. But we were allowed only ‘so-much’ liquor; everything was rationed. So Willie and I used to go to this little place about eleven miles from the base.”

“What did it look like?” I wondered.

“Well, it wasn’t too bright. So I couldn’t tell you what it looked like. The inside was just... call it a pub. Anyway we had an arrangement made with this guy that he would save half of his ration for us - which he would do. Naturally on the way back, we weren’t exactly sober. You see that spot of light there?”

“Ya (very small).”

“All right, that’s what we had for a headlight on the bike... on one bike, just a spot, just a stinking little spot. We had regular flashlights but had to have them covered so that only a spot showed on account of the blackout. Well, they had this traveling circus that came through. We went and took a look at it and afterwards, we headed out of town and Willie drives into this ditch about six feet deep. He’s right behind me and we’re going down this long hill. I knew the hill and he knew the hill. He says to me, ‘I’ll meet you at the bottom.’ ‘Okay, go ahead,’ I replied. We take off. I go down and I’m waiting... looking around... I couldn’t find Willie. Finally I hear a yell, ‘Hey, Frenchie, where are you?’ ‘I’m in the road.’ ‘Oh,’ he says, ‘I’m in the woods.’ He missed the turn. So I had to go back halfway up the hill to get him out. Well, I finally got him out and we started back.”

“Was he all right?” I asked Gus.

“Oh yeah, he wasn’t a bronco-buster for nothing,” Gus replied.



Gus and Willie – always trouble.

Willie said, “Every time the damn road turned, that light disappeared and I went straight off it. Frenchie was just as bad off as I was, but he never fell off his bike (laughing). He could stay on a bike even when he was drunk. I couldn’t.”

I could just visualize Gus and Willie riding along an English country road on a dark night. Just shapes zipping along on bikes and suddenly, you can’t see it happening, but you can hear Willie going into the bushes and yelling for help.

“We hadn’t been stationed at that base for very long,” Gus continues, “so when we got back, I’ll be darned, we couldn’t find the barracks! We get driving around the perimeter almost all night long. We were going for the water tower... I dunno, maybe it moved. Well, anyway, when daylight came we finally found the barracks.”

“Frenchie and I always drank cognac if we could get it,” Willie said. “We’d be sitting there drinking, and eventually his eyelids would start to droop, and then I knew that pretty soon I’d be out of the conversation ‘cause he’d start talking French. His eyelids would be almost shut and I would ask him a question and he would answer me in French. I didn’t know what was going on the first time it happened! I got so I’d just keep talking to him in English and he kept talking in French. He couldn’t speak English when he was drunk. The guys would ask me, ‘Brainard, you speak French?’ ‘Hell no,’ I’d say, ‘I’m just talking to him in English, I think he’s answering me (laughing).’ Then we’d come back to the base on our bikes, hollering and singing. My problem was I liked to sing. We’d come down the street on the base at two o’clock in the morning and I’d be singing my heart out. The MP’s would tell us to shut up. Every time we went by a Quonset hut people would be yelling, ‘Shut up!’ Didn’t matter to us.”

“Satterwhite drank and smoked but not partying like we did,” Willie added, “riding bicycles, hollering at each other. He was out taking in the scenery, drinking quietly by himself (little pinky in the air). That’s how he thought it should be.”

Willie and Satterwhite – like oil and water!

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The Allied air command in England announced a new coordinated air offensive with the USAAF flying ‘precision’ missions by day while the RAF flew ‘saturation’ missions by night. This revealed a profound difference in bombing strategy between the Americans and the British. The Americans wanted to destroy military targets, as difficult as that was, and the British wanted retaliation for all the civilian suffering that had been inflicted by the Germans during the Battle of Britain. They wanted to destroy military targets too, but if civilians got in the way, so much the better. The new ‘coordination’ actually meant that they couldn’t agree on basic strategies – they had simply agreed not to agree.

* * * * *

The theme song for the Army Air Corps was written in 1939, before the war began. General Hap Arnold wanted a theme song for the Air Corps, one with a strong flavor to it. He organized a committee to sponsor a contest for the best song and Robert Crawford's entry won. Later, the title was changed to the Army Air Force. Here it is:

The Army Air Corps

Off we go into the wild blue yonder,
Climbing high into the sun;
Here they come,
zooming to meet our thunder,
Attaboys, give 'er the gun
Down we dive
Spouting our flames from under
Off with one terrible roar
We live in fame or go down in flame,
Boy, nothing can stop the Army Air Corps

(Spoken): Clear! Clear! Contact! Contact!

A toast to the host of those who love
the vastness of the sky,
To a friend we'll send a message
of his brother men who fly
We drink to those who gave their all of old;
Then down we roar,
to score the rainbow's pot of gold
A toast to the host of men we boast,
the Army Air Corps!

Off we go into the wild sky yonder,
Keep the wings level and true.
If you live you'll be a gray-haired wonder
Keep the nose out of the blue!
Flying men guarding the nations borders,
We'll be there followed by more!
In echelon we carry on,
Boy nothing can stop the Army Air Corps!

Alvino Rey, Bill Schallen & the Four King Sisters, Vocals (Crawford) 1942.



Technical Sergeant Casimier V. Sochocki
323rd Bomb Group, 453rd Bomb Squadron
USSAF 1941-1945
(Photo courtesy of Casimier Sochocki)



Technical Sergeant Richard H. Inman
323rd Bomb Group, 453rd Bomb Squadron
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(Photo courtesy of Richard Inman)